

**The Indian EXPRESS**

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**RAMNATH GOENKA**

IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## Too much distrust, Iran-US must extend ceasefire

**T**HE TWO-WEEK Iran-US ceasefire came to an end on April 22. The steps taken towards de-escalation during this time may seem to have been undone over the past weekend. Less than 24 hours after Iranian foreign minister Abbas Mousavi announced on social media that the Strait of Hormuz was open to commercial vessels, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) intervened to close it again. Since then, the US has seized an Iranian cargo vessel attempting to bypass the blockade. Iran has vowed swift retaliation, having already fired on three commercial ships, including two Indian-flagged vessels. Amid renewed escalation, there is little clarity on Tehran attending the second round of talks in Pakistan, even as a US delegation reportedly heads to Islamabad. The narrow window for de-escalation opened by the pause of hostilities in Lebanon appears to be closing unless both sides decide otherwise.

For the reciprocal, step-by-step exchange of concessions in diplomacy, what is vital is the space for negotiations. For Tehran, the ceasefire in Lebanon (its precondition for talks) and Donald Trump's assurance that Israel would be "prohibited" from further strikes appeared sufficient to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. But when the US continued with the blockade, the IRGC reversed course, signalling the possibility of escalation. The episode suggests that the hardline IRGC overruled the civilian leadership on the Strait. A deepening divide between the hardliners and those open to diplomatic overtures could complicate matters. Trump, on his part, has reverted to his familiar flip-flop rhetoric, warning on social media that the US would strike "every single power plant, and every single bridge" if Iran refuses a deal, even as his representatives are going to Islamabad for negotiations. Both sides are thus seeking leverage to strengthen their bargaining positions.

Decades of hostility and mistrust between the two warring sides, and the structural obstacles that have accumulated, cannot be resolved over a single weekend even after 21 hours of direct negotiations. While after the breakdown of talks in Islamabad the last time around, both sides kept the door to dialogue ajar, recent escalations across the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman threaten to shut it. The ceasefires in Iran and Lebanon are also intertwined. Failure on one front risks derailing the other. Tehran and Washington must give diplomacy a chance. For this, the ceasefire must be extended — and sustained — across all fronts. The alternative — a return to intense conflict, disrupted energy supplies and soaring prices — is reason enough.

## Reform agenda matters more than ranking

**A**CCORDING TO THE IMF's latest World Economic Outlook, India has slipped to sixth place in the world GDP rankings, with Japan and the UK overtaking it in terms of nominal GDP in current US dollars. For 2026, the IMF has estimated the Indian economy at \$4.15 trillion, up from \$3.92 trillion the year before. In comparison, the size of the UK's economy has been pegged at \$4.27 trillion and that of Japan at \$4.38 trillion, marginally edging out India.

There are two main reasons why India has slid on these rankings. The first is a change in how GDP is estimated. Under the new methodology from 2023-23, the government has made a whole host of methodological changes and incorporated newer data sources. The new GDP estimates released in February-end provide a more accurate picture of the economy. However, this update also found that the outgoing series was overestimating India's GDP by around three to four per cent — in 2025-26, India's GDP was reassessed from being Rs 357 trillion to Rs 345 trillion. The second reason is the exchange rate. Since the IMF compares economies in US dollar terms, the exchange rate of any domestic currency vis-à-vis the US dollar becomes a crucial factor. Over the past year, the Indian rupee has weakened by almost 10 per cent against the US dollar — first due to the imposition of US tariffs, and later, to the uncertainty around a trade deal. What made this weakness even worse is the fact that it has happened during a period when the US dollar itself has actually weakened against most other major currencies. The net effect has been that when calculated in dollar terms, India's GDP, already pegged down in rupee terms, falls behind that of Japan and the UK.

Notwithstanding the slide, the IMF projects that India will overtake the UK and Japan in 2027 and then become the third-largest economy by overtaking Germany in 2031. That should not, however, draw away from the need to push forward aggressively on the domestic reform agenda, especially in the more politically contentious areas such as electricity and fertilisers. Considering the series of shocks that the Indian and the global economy have recently been subjected to — from the Covid pandemic to the wars in Ukraine and Iran — it would be prudent for policymakers to factor such risks into their strategies.

## Jhalmuri, a Bengal campaign story

**O**F COURSE I had to be Jhalmuri. Which other snack could so perfectly echo the heat and pungency, the high decibel levels and hurly-burly on the West Bengal campaign trail? The culinary symbol of the hotly contested state assembly polls may still be the Bengalis' beloved *maach-bhaat* — it is now, more than ever before, a symbol of fierce cultural identity, sought to be claimed by more than one side. Yet the Prime Minister's stopover at a Jhalmuri shop in Jhargram offers a different lens through which to view the electoral spectacle. Consider how the Jhalmuri is made, the flour with which a range of ingredients — puffed rice, lime juice, onion, tomato, peanuts, chana-chur and mustard oil, to name a few — come together to form an exciting new whole. The result is not necessarily harmony; a melange of such strong, contrasting textures and tastes, so many degrees of crunch and crunch, could hardly be that. Indeed, a well-made Jhalmuri does battle with the body, making the eyes water and the tongue smart. Yet its very aggression of its flavours becomes the greatest source of its appeal. Served in a humble paper packet, to be carried away or eaten on the spot, the purpose of the Jhalmuri is to satiate an empty tummy; it is to bring alive senses that may have been numbed by the routine and to alert them to new possibilities.

The analogy isn't straightforward, but then, the best of food and the most exciting of politics are arrived at through circuitous routes and unexpected connections. And a Jhalmuri in its humble complexity may just be the metaphor to speak for the tumultuous multitude that is Indian politics.

# Worker unrest shows cost-of-living crisis can no longer be ignored



HIMANSHU

**O**NE OF the major demands of workers in the recent protests across states has been to raise the minimum wage. Most workers complained of their inability to meet the basic cost of living from the wages they earn. This was despite many of them working overtime, when inflation has been climbing rapidly, with food inflation moving faster. While the trigger for the workers' anger may have been the rise in cooking-gas prices, the situation has been worsening for a period of time.

At the heart of the matter is the inability of wages and earnings in a majority of the sectors and across categories of workers to meet the latter's basic needs. But none of this should have been surprising. Data from different sources have been showing evidence of declining or at best stagnant real wages, with the recent spell having been the longest in India's independent history. Data from the Labour Bureau on rural wages suggest a near-stagnation in agricultural wages, while non-agricultural wages are actually declining. But the biggest fall has been in regular wages, which have seen a steady decline since 2011-12. Data on regular wages are available from the Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) and the Employment-Unemployment Surveys (EUS) of the National Statistical Office (NSO). Regular wages in urban areas declined by 1.2 per cent per annum between 2011-12 and 2022-23 with a corresponding decline in rural areas of 0.6 per cent per annum during the same period. Compare that with an increase of 4 per cent in urban areas and 3 per cent in rural areas between 2004-05 and 2011-12. The NSO shifted to reporting the PLFS with calendar year references from 2022 and these suggest a marginal recovery in real regular earnings with regular wages increasing at 1.2 per cent per annum between 2022 and 2023, the last year for which the information is available. But even with this recovery, real regular wages are lower than the level in 2011-12. The same Periodic Labour Force Surveys also suggest a decline in real terms for casual workers, with the earnings of rural male casual workers declining by 3 per cent per annum between 2022 and 2023 and those of their urban counterparts declining by 0.2 per cent per annum.

The situation among the self-employed is no better and their earnings have also shown a real decline since the PLFS started reporting them from 2017-18. Even estimates based on national accounts for farmers' income suggest a decline in real earnings at 0.6 per cent per annum between 2016-17 and 2023-24. The situation of unorganised-sector workers is also worrying. More than 310 million workers are registered on the E-shram portal. Among these, 94 per cent report earning less than

Rs 10,000 per month. Even the latest Annual Survey of Unorganised Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) for 2023 reports a monthly average remuneration of Rs 10,376 in rural areas and Rs 13,012 for urban workers in these enterprises. All of these are less than the inflation-adjusted minimum wages applicable for unskilled workers. Perhaps the biggest evidence of distress in the economy is the demand for work under VB-GRAM G, which has remained high despite the fact that the wages it offers are almost two-thirds of the market wages in many states. Almost one-third of households in rural areas have worked under this scheme despite the low wages.

The cost-of-living crisis is partly a crisis of inflation making it difficult for an average worker to spend on essentials. It is largely a crisis of stagnant earnings across a spectrum of workers. This has affected regular workers in the organised sector as well as millions of informal workers in the unorganised sector. The same goes for those self-employed in tiny enterprises in the unorganised sector.

None of this is surprising. This situation has persisted for almost a decade. Even the hope of a revival after the pandemic is belied by the data available after 2022. This was also acknowledged by the Economic Survey, which highlighted the declining incomes of regular and self-

employed workers. Unfortunately, the situation is likely to become worse given the trend of rising inflation in recent months. While some of this is a result of the geopolitical uncertainty and the consequent rise in energy prices, it is likely to spill over to other areas affected by the global uncertainty. The India Meteorological Department predicts a deficient monsoon this year, and if this is accompanied by declining agricultural production, there is likely to be even more pressure on food prices.

The distress in the economy has wider implications. The low earnings among the majority of workers are also responsible for the low demand in the economy, which has impacted private investment. While the government may be in a position to regulate and control prices in the short run, a long-term solution for the crisis requires interventions to raise workers' incomes, which have stagnated for a long time. It may also require the government to intervene and regulate working conditions. It is necessary to raise incomes not just to protect millions of workers from falling into poverty but also for the economy's revival through demand generation. It is for the government to decide the way to do it. But it is clear that the cost-of-living crisis can no longer be ignored.

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The low earnings among the majority of workers are also responsible for the low demand in the economy, which has impacted private investment

## Uncertainties of Iran war, compounded by US politics



SUMIT GANGULY

**N**OTWITHSTANDING the escalations across the Strait of Hormuz in the past 48 hours, there are a series of imponderables at various levels that could undermine the fragile ceasefire between the United States and Iran. US President Donald Trump, with his propensity for hyperbole, had announced that Iran had agreed to hand over its entire stockpile of enriched uranium. He also asserted that this process would not involve the use of American troops. Within a couple of hours of this claim, Iranian authorities categorically denied that they had agreed to any such arrangement. To muddle matters further, at least one reliable American news site, Axios, reported that Iran had agreed to hand over the enriched uranium in exchange for \$20 billion in frozen assets. Trump, in turn, stated that no such agreement has been reached.

Meanwhile, in the US House of Representatives, an effort to rein in the administration's war-making abilities, invoking the post-Vietnam era War Powers Act, failed by a single vote. This, however, may change, as according to reports in *The New York Times*, a small number of Republicans in the House have some qualms about granting the President *carte blanche* to continue this war that began nearly two months ago.

Their concerns, with marked exceptions, do not stem from questions involving constitutional proprieties. Instead, many who are coming up for re-election in the November mid-terms have their sights firmly set on spiralling prices and the President's declining poll numbers. With large numbers of Americans reeling from the price of gasoline, which has reached a national average of \$4 per gallon, inflation spikes are already underway. Consequently, if this war resumes, President Trump may not be able to prevent them from invoking the War Powers Act. However, given their abject fealty to Trump, this cannot be a foregone conclusion.

It is also worth bearing in mind that Secretary of War Pete Hegseth is scheduled to testify before the House Armed Services Committee on April 29. It is already known that he is expected to seek a dramatic increase in the defence budget, asking for the unprecedented amount of \$1.5 trillion.

**Iranian authorities initially stated that they had opened the Strait of Hormuz after a ceasefire was announced in Lebanon. However, for some utterly inexplicable reason, Trump has sustained the naval blockade**

Democrats, without a doubt, will subject him to much scrutiny. They may also not be swayed from sharply questioning him despite the predictable attempts from Republicans to portray them as weak on defence issues. Most Republicans, however — because of their ideological beliefs as well as their loyalty to President Trump — are likely to sound sympathetic to the request to increase the budget.

Hegseth, for his part, is likely to make two arguments. First, he will emphasise war wastage and the consequent need to rebuild the arsenal. Simultaneously, he is likely to invoke the unwillingness of American allies to bolster the common defence against a range of enemies. If Hegseth and Trump have their way and receive the supplementary funding that they have been seeking (in addition to the dramatic increase in the defence budget), it would be unwise to rule out a reprise of the attack on Iran based on some flimsy and dubious pretext. The war, which has now been paused, could well return with full force.

Other issues also add uncertainty to the situation. Iranian authorities initially stated that they had opened the Strait of Hormuz after a ceasefire was announced in Lebanon on April 16. However, for some utterly inexplicable reason, Trump has sustained the naval blockade. With that flout in place, should some Iranian statement or demand pique him, Trump could well resume the conflict.

In the meantime, with the April 22 ceasefire deadline approaching, Pakistan's Field Marshal Asim Munir has been trying to facilitate an end to the conflict. According to reports, a US delegation is making a return to Islamabad despite the deadlock that emerged in the initial round of talks earlier this month, but Iran has refused talks in the face of Trump's blockade and threats.

Obviously, given the widespread adverse economic repercussions of this ill-conceived war, it is in the global interest that it ends as soon as possible. That fervent hope aside, it would be downright foolish to predict its imminent end given the many imponderables involved.

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## It's about better representation, not more MPs



SRIINIVAS GOLI

**I**NDIA'S POPULATION is projected to peak in early 2060s at slightly more than 1.6 billion before beginning a long decline. Yet, proposals to raise the Lok Sabha from 543 to 850 seats, tied to a new Delimitation Commission using the 2011 Census, are being discussed as if limitless expansion were the only future. This combination of near-term demographic peaking alongside a potentially permanent institutional expansion forces a harder question than "more people, more MPs." But this is where public debate is getting trapped.

We are treating "people per MP" as the sole measure of representation and assuming that the only way to achieve a higher ratio is to add seats. As a demographer, I want to pose a simpler question: Do we actually need more MPs to better represent Indians? The case for expanding the Lok Sabha is often framed as the simple representation problem: Average population per constituency is large and unequal across states. But acknowledging the strain of disproportionate representation is not the same as accepting an across-the-board expansion to 850 seats as the inevitable or best solution.

Start with what has changed since 1971. Representation is not only a matter of headcounts; it is a matter of access. In the early decades after Independence, access depended heavily on physical distance and slow communication. That world no longer exists. The 1971 "service capacity" of an MP cannot be assumed to be the right benchmark for 2026.

More importantly, a key question is not whether representation should be equitable, but whether large, irreversible increase in seats is being justified primarily on a demographic arithmetic that is already approaching its crest. Even our recent projections indicate an earlier population peak than the UN suggests.

Even if India's average constituency size is large, the policy question is what mix of institutions should carry representation and service-delivery burdens. India already has vast democratic architecture closer to citizens than Parliament: Over 250,000 panchayats and around 3,700 urban local bodies. The representation challenge is not a lack of elected offices but the distribution of authority, finances, and problem-solving capacity across tiers. A second justification sometimes offered for increasing seats is the hope of improving women's representation. Yet in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, 71 women were elected, 13.6 per cent of MPs, a decrease from the previous House. Comparative figures underline the gap: Women are 46 per cent of MPs in South Africa, 35 per cent in the UK, and 29 per cent in the US. India's problem is not population arithmetic capacity but empowerment and political choices about nominations and winnability.

A practical alternative is to deepen democratic effectiveness where the numbers are already large, in local bodies. If the concern motivating delimitation is representation and responsiveness, strengthening the tier with 3.2 million elected representatives, including 1.5 million women, should be part of the solution. Expanding the Lok Sabha is, in effect, a one-way door. Seats, once created, become entrenched. If the principal rationale is a temporary peak in population size, are we confident that the long-run institutional trade-offs are worth it? Proposals to expand the Lok Sabha risk locking in a permanent fiscal and federal redesign for what may ultimately be a temporary population moment.

The writer is a demographer at the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai. Views are personal

If the concern motivating delimitation is representation and responsiveness, strengthening the tier with 3.2 million elected representatives, including 1.5 million women, should be part of the solution

## 40 YEARS AGO

April 21, 1986



## Iranian FM walks out

**T**HE NIGHT-long concluding session of the oil-aligned coordinating bureau was marred by a protest walk-out by the Iranian foreign minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, even as the conference made an appeal to Iran and Iraq to end their six-year war.

## Reservoir bursts in Sri Lanka

**A**T LEAST 100 people were feared killed when a giant irrigation reservoir burst its embankment, unleashing torrential flood waters that inundated a town. Many residents of Kantalla, 209 km northwest of Colombo, were sleeping when the embankment gave way at 4 am. Government

officials in Trincomalee estimated that 18,000 people had been rendered homeless. Refugee centres have been set up at two schools.

## Kerala CPI-M to probe dissent

**M**ARKIST LEADERS are concerned about the penetrability of the proverbial iron curtain around their party organisation arising out of the action taken against 10 senior party members for advocating an alternative political line. At the Kerala state committee level this week, the Kerala state committee decided to try to plug the leak in the organisation and simultaneously discipline the rebellious elements. Three specific measures announced by party bosses at

the meeting are clear pointers to this mood of alarm. As a first step, a three-man team, headed by secretary member Chandy, will be set up to guess or ascertain how sensitive or inconvenient information about party matters is fed to newspapers. K K Chellappan and P N K Gurdassan will assist Govindan in nabbing the culprits

## Thar DIG interrogated

**T**HE DEPUTY INSPECTOR-General of Prisons, A B Shukla, was interrogated by the police in the case of the escape of Charles Sobhraj and some others from New Delhi's Thar Jail. Shukla was interrogated by detectives of the Crime Branch at Thar itself.

# The Ideas Page

TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 2026

13

## India needs a new compact — political, economic, and cultural



**DESKHAAL**  
 YOGENDRA YADAV

**T**HE JUSTIFIED relief over the defeat of the cynical move to disguise the distortion of India's electoral map as women's reservation carries a grave risk. We might forget that the deeper and more serious issues involved in this farcical debate cannot be postponed for long. Suhas Patshikar rightly names what is at stake — federalism, nationalism and the meaning of India (in BJP's fits, federalism & nationalism, not *nari shakti*, were at stake). *IE*, April 20.

Simply put, the Indian union needs a new compact. This may not be a classical Western-style federal compact enshrined in the Constitution. Unlike the "coming-together" federations like the US, the Indian "union of states" is an outcome of "holding together" by political units within a nation. Yet, we have an unwritten compact implicit in our Constitution and the ideological consensus during our freedom struggle. This compact needs to be renewed.

Three principles inform this unwritten compact. The first and foremost principle is that of non-dominance, which applies both to the relationship of the states of the union with the Centre and with one another. This central principle is tempered by two other overarching principles: Justice among and within the units of the Indian Union and context specificity, which respects local customs, practices and needs.

These three principles must shape the new compact across multiple domains. The aborted debate on delimitation touches only one domain, namely that of the distribution of political power across the states of the Indian Union. It must involve two other dimensions — sharing of economic resources and respecting cultural identity. We need a comprehensive one-time settlement that covers all these dimensions in a package deal. This would require what Shashi Tharoor aptly calls a "great national conversation," a protracted negotiation involving give

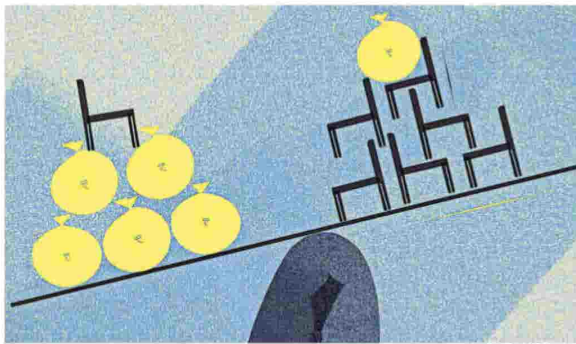


ILLUSTRATION: C. SAKSHIWAR

and take from all sides. Here is a suggestion about what such a compact could look like. It's a fair and sustainable bargain, involving give-and-take for everyone.

On political representation, the parliamentary debate was less than honest. The Home Minister kept oscillating between two contradictory claims — that it was necessary to change the share of seats of different states and that the government was committed to retaining the existing ratio. Shorn of this duplicity, the argument in favour of a reallocation of Lok Sabha seats is straightforward and not without merit. The democratic principle of "one person, one vote, one value" enshrined in our Constitution requires that changes in population should be reflected in proportionate changes in the number of seats across and within states. The question is not whether this is a valid principle or not. The real question is whether this is the only valid principle relevant to this case.

The Opponents fell back on the easy but flawed argument that this amounts to punishing the states with lower population growth for the successful implementation of the family-planning programme. The argument is factually weak, as government policy is not the principal determinant of population growth. Besides, characterising faster population

growth of any territorial or social group as a national burden goes against the principle of social justice.

A simpler and more honest argument draws upon the principle of non-dominance. The share of the "Hindi heartland" in our Parliament is already overwhelming. Any further increase in its share of seats would ensure its near majority, and could render the non-Hindi states politically irrelevant. This flouts the unwritten social contract of the Indian Union. Therefore, in this instance, the principle of non-dominance must trump the normal democratic principle. This could be operationalised by adopting the Vajpayee formula of 2001 as a permanent arrangement. While the boundaries of Lok Sabha and assembly constituencies would be regularly adjusted to reflect the latest Census, there would be a permanent freeze on the number, or at least the ratio, of seats for each state in the Lok Sabha.

The second part of this bargain is about the sharing of economic resources. In *A Sixth of Humanity*, Devesh Kapur and Arvind Subramanian have meticulously documented how inter-state economic inequalities have grown, especially since the "liberalisation" of the Indian economy. The per capita income of Gujarat is six times that of Bihar. This gives rise

**We already have three potential fault lines that largely overlap. We simply cannot allow a fourth one**

to a tension that we must be alert to. Rathin Roy points out that India is perhaps the only large country "where political power and the majority of the population live in economically deprived areas".

So far, the political consensus has been to transfer a greater portion of the national resources to poorer states. Of late, this policy has come under stress. There has been a demand for a more "balanced" distribution of central funds in proportion to their share of tax revenue, that is, for more funds to richer states. Such a demand again goes against the principle of non-dominance as well as the principle of justice. It also ignores the truth that the more developed states could become so based on access to cheap labour and an open market from the rest of the country, besides hidden transfers by way of national policies like Minimum Support Price and Freight Equalisation. So, the second part of the new deal could be to enact a law that incribes the existing practice of recognising population and under-development as principal criteria for the fund transfer formula for any future Finance Commission.

Finally, the new compact could reiterate the broad consensus of our freedom struggle on acknowledging and respecting deep cultural diversities. This would mean a firm assurance on non-imposition of Hindi and equal respect for all the official languages in the Eighth Schedule and state protection for all the non-scheduled languages. Non-imposition of Hindi must not mean imposition of English. Instead, it should be a state recognition of the multilingualism that characterises our civilisation. This needs to be duly incorporated not just in the language policy, but also in educational policy and all the official symbolism of the Indian state, all of which are being bent towards an officious and artificial Hindi.

A new compact along these lines is not an optional exercise. Let us not forget that India is among the very few deeply diverse countries that have survived as a unified political entity. We already have three potential fault lines — geographic, linguistic and economic — that largely overlap. We simply cannot allow a fourth one, a political fault line, to coincide with and activate the existing cracks. We cannot postpone a new compact for the Indian Union.

*The writer is member, Swaraj India, and national convener, Bharat Udo Abhiyan. Views are personal*

## Punjab's sacrilege law is electioneering in legal clothing



MANPREET SINGH BADAL

**I**N APRIL 1929, a 19-year-old carpenter walked into a publisher's shop in Lahore, pulled out a knife, and stabbed the man behind the counter. The publisher died on the spot. Had this been an ordinary crime, history would have forgotten him entirely. But Malhotra was no ordinary victim, and Ilm Din was no ordinary killer. Malhotra had published a book about the Prophet Muhammad (PBH) deemed deeply offensive to Muslims, was tried in court and acquitted, dragging large sections of Muslims across colonial Punjab. When Ilm Din was arrested, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, persuaded by Allama Iqbal, entered the case at the appellate stage as defence counsel. The Lahore High Court was unmoved. Ilm Din was hanged.

History rarely constructs its ironies so precisely. Among those who led Ilm Din's funeral procession was a progressive poet, Muhammad Din Taseer, broadly sympathetic to the Muslim grievance. Decades later, in 2011, his son Salman Taseer, serving as governor of Pakistan Punjab, would himself be killed by his bodyguard for speaking out in the name of the same cause, against Pakistan's blasphemy law. There is a footnote worth recording. By a remarkable symmetry, Malhotra's son Surendra Nath went on to serve as governor of Indian Punjab, while Taseer's son governed Pakistani Punjab.

Almost 50 years later, again in the month of April, as if the Subcontinent runs on a grim seasonal calendar, a group of Sikhs upset at Nirananki chief Gurbachan Singh arrived at his headquarters in Punjab. The confrontation turned violent. Thirteen Sikhs and three Niranankis were killed, setting Punjab on a spiral of bloodshed that would consume the state and the nation for two decades. The lesson Punjab never learned is the same one that Punjab's new anti-sacrilege law ignores. Laws passed without institutional discipline do not remove religious grievances. They institutionalise them. A century on, we are still grappling with the same unresolved question. Where does religious grievance end, and the law begin?

When colonial administrators found themselves unable to convict Malhotra under existing law, Section 295-A was inserted into the Indian Penal Code in 1927, criminalising deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage the religious feelings of any class. The Punjab of 2026 is grappling with something more visceral: Sacrilege. The physical violation of the sacred itself. The question is whether the law can channel that fury, or is designed to divert attention from a government that failed to address it for four years running. With elections due

in 2027, it arrives not as a considered legislative remedy but as a political manoeuvre. If AAP was genuinely committed to addressing sacrilege, it had four years to demonstrate that commitment. It did not. When the Punjab Police SIT sought approval to proceed against accused persons under Section 295-A, that approval took two-and-a-half years to arrive. Of 597 sacrilege cases recorded across the last decade, convictions were secured in only 44.

One genuine advance deserves acknowledgement. The Punjab Police has issued a unified investigative protocol for sacrilege cases, covering forensic handling and digital evidence certification. But procedure cannot compensate for a law that lacks safeguards. A law with punitive teeth but no conscience hands that machinery to whoever files the first complaint. In a country as vast and religiously diverse as India, where faith runs deep and grievance runs faster, a fabricated video depicting desecration can inflame an entire district before anyone has verified whether the footage is real. The law must be able to respond. But the question is never whether to have guardrails, it is whether they will protect people, or become weapons in the hands of those they were designed to restrain.

Pakistan offers the most sobering answer. Before 1986, fewer than 15 blasphemy cases had ever been registered. Three decades later, the number stood at over 1,500. Since 1990, 62 people have been murdered over such allegations. Organised criminal networks have been documented filing false complaints to extort money from the families of the accused, a pattern documented by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. Under Pakistani law, there is little or no prosecution for filing a false blasphemy allegation. India need not travel Pakistan's road. But this law offers the same combination that has always proved lethal. Genuine religious sentiment, legislative haste, political calculation, and an absence of safeguards. This is not legislation. It is electioneering in legal clothing.

*The writer is former finance minister of Punjab*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### What lies ahead

THE FORECAST of a weaker monsoon is a timely reminder that resilience is not built overnight ("Build resilience, account for costs", *IE*, April 20). Grain warehouses and oil caverns may seem costly, but they are shields against shocks that range from droughts, to the last photograph of Earth taken by Voyager-1 from a distance of over 6 billion kilometres — our planet a barely visible dot in the infinity of space, "a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam" — have never felt more resonant.

*K Chidhan and Kumar, Bengaluru*

THE EDITORIAL makes a sound case for strategic stockpiling, but the equally important question is distribution efficiency ("Build resilience, account for costs", *IE*, April 20). Large buffer stocks mean little if procurement delays, storage losses, and last-mile failures persist. India has seen grain rot in godowns while hunger persists in certain districts. Resilience must extend beyond accumulation to actual delivery systems. Additionally, with a below-normal monsoon forecast, state governments need advance warning to activate contingency crop plans.

*S.M. Jeeva, Chennai*

### Workers' protests

NIKHIL DEY has highlighted how the Noida workers' protests reflect a yearning for human dignity rather than law-and-order defiance ("Workers' protests are not law and order issues, but a cry for dignity", *IE*, April 20). The sketch of the turbaned labourer staring into an empty thought-bubble symbolises the despair of countless toilers who build the economy yet lack security and respect under present conditions of exploitation and insecurity. True dignity cannot rest on rhetoric; it demands a material foundation. Treating protests only as policing issues pushes grievances underground and widens the gap between producers of wealth and its controllers within the existing capitalist relations of production.

*Manu Kant, via email*



SATYAM VISWANATHAN

THE IRONY is so bitter it makes pure vinegar seem palatable in comparison. The Artemis II sent us pictures of our aching beautiful planet from space, while here on Earth, murderous madmen are hellbent on bombing us into oblivion. Carl Sagan's unforgettable words, on the last photograph of Earth taken by Voyager-1 from a distance of over 6 billion kilometres — our planet a barely visible dot in the infinity of space, "a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam" — have never felt more resonant.

"The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood split by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and in triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds... Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves."

In this latest iteration of human insanity, Western hegemonic hubris, victims-of-genocide-turned-

## Our planet, beautiful from space — not so on Earth

perpetrators and murderous authoritarian clerics have come together to bring us to the brink of Armageddon. Words have lost all contextual meaning. The terms "murderers", "rogue states", "war criminals", "despoils", and "agents of ecocide" could apply equally to all parties involved. Economic warfare in one narrow corner of the planet is creating even more pain for the poorest people all across the world. "Globalisation", once a word that signified abundance and prosperity, has now been weaponised to create scarcity and despair.

In *Orbital*, Samantha Harvey describes the experiences and emotions of six astronauts as they view our planet from space. "When we're on that planet, we look up and think heaven is elsewhere, but here is what the astronauts and cosmonauts sometimes think: Maybe all of us born to it have already died and are in an afterlife. If we must go to an improbable, hard-to-believe-in place when we die, that glassy, distant orb with its beautiful, lonely light shows could well be."

**But to be alive on this third rock from the Sun is to be hyper-aware that we are surrounded constantly by the possibility of happiness, beauty, and pleasure, no matter how momentary**

If we are living in an afterlife, then there is no doubt that humans are solely responsible for destroying our planet. Certainly, no civilians in Gaza, Tehran or Lebanon, no prisoners in Delhi, Cairo or Beijing, are experiencing this Earth as

anything but suffering. You just have to look out of your air-conditioned car at the vast number of humans existing without water, electricity, nutrition, and sanitation in the slums and encampments of Mumbai, Nairobi or San Francisco to know that mankind, market- and policy-induced hell is very much a place on Earth.

But to be alive on this third rock from the Sun is to be hyper-aware that we are surrounded constantly by the possibility of happiness, beauty, and pleasure, no matter how momentary — a possibility that makes life unbearably precious. Despite the chaos and pain that mankind inflicts on our lonely planet, we live in a state of perpetual enchantment. Every day we are awed by moments of joy and beauty — music, art, dawn, dusk, trees, the use of our miraculous bodies, chat, samosa, a kiss, a joke, a smile, the sound of laughter, an act of kindness, and most of all the embrace of nature and the love of our fellow living beings. The only hope we have to overcome the "filth of human conceits" exposed by images of our microscopically tiny world from space, as Sagan said, "to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

*The writer works in the social sector*



KINJAL GOYAL

IT BEGAN, as many unsettling ideas do, at a lunch table. Someone mentioned a new face cream so effective that a friend had "accused" her of getting Botox. The word accusation lingered. Another person responded immediately: "Why should anyone feel defensive about choosing to look the way they want? If a procedure exists, if it is safe, if it improves how someone feels, why must it be cloaked in discomfort or secrecy?"

The conversation moved on, but I did not. As a psychologist, I have learned to pay attention to moments like this that reveal shifts in how we think about beauty, choice,

and what it means to feel well in our skin.

There was a time when cosmetic procedures were an exception. Today, they are increasingly becoming an expectation. The language, tone, and perhaps most importantly, the age at which this begins has changed.

Research in cosmetic dermatology shows that individuals seeking procedures such as Botox and fillers often begin with higher levels of body dissatisfaction and appearance-related anxiety. Many patients report improved satisfaction in the short term after the procedure. But human psychology adapts quickly. The new face becomes familiar, and soon, the enhancement becomes the expectation. What follows, for some, is the desire for another adjustment. This cycle is driven less by desire and more by pressure.

Scroll through any social platform and a

pattern emerges. Lips are fuller. Skin is smoother. Jawlines are sharper. The variability that once defined faces is narrowing into a template. This has psychological consequences. Adolescence and early adulthood are periods of identity formation. When appearance becomes a central metric of worth, it can crowd out other dimensions such as competence, curiosity, creativity, and resilience.

Studies in social psychology show that repeated exposure to idealised images increases body dissatisfaction. They are peers.

**When a generation moves toward the same aesthetic, we must ask whether this is independent choice or a shared influence**

and influencers who feel accessible now and hence, the comparison becomes personal. This is where the language of freedom becomes complicated. On the surface, the argument is compelling: If a person chooses to alter their appearance and it makes them feel better, that is their right. But autonomy exists within context. When a generation moves toward the same aesthetic, we must ask whether this is an independent choice or a shared influence.

There is another shift that is equally significant. In the early years of cosmetic interventions, psychological screening and counselling were built into the process. Today, as procedures have become more accessible, that question is asked less often. In clinical practice, this absence shows up in subtle ways. A young person does not present saying they feel pressured by beauty standards,

They present with anxiety, self-doubt, and a persistent sense that something about them is not enough. When probed further, appearance often sits at the centre.

Returning to that lunch table, I think about the word "accusation". Why does it carry weight? Because it implies that something has been done that requires explanation. The pushback against that word is valid. And yet, the discomfort may also point to something else: A recognition that these choices are no longer entirely personal.

Cosmetic procedures are not inherently harmful. But they are not a substitute for self-worth. For the younger generation, the challenge is not to reject these options, but to reclaim the space to choose them freely.

*The writer is a psychologist, author, and podcaster*

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## LAW Priyadarshini Mattoo case: Can a life convict walk out of jail?

Amaal Sheikh  
New Delhi, April 20

THE DELHI High Court last week criticised the Sentencing Review Board's (SRB) latest rejection of the premature release plea of Santosh Kumar Singh, convicted for the 1996 rape and murder of Priyadarshini Mattoo.

Justice Anup J Bhamhani said the board appeared to be "proceeding on public perception." Singh is serving life imprisonment and has spent nearly three decades in custody. This is the second time the board has rejected his premature release plea.

The court, which had set aside the first rejection in July 2025 and sent the matter back for fresh consideration, is now seized of the second one and has clubbed it with several other cases where the SRB has similarly shut the door.

### What is premature release?

Premature release allows life convicts to be released early if they are deemed to be reformed, rehabilitated and no longer a threat to society. Powers of clemency are derived from constitutional and statutory frameworks.

Articles 72 and 161 of the Constitution empower the President and the Governor of the state to grant remission in appropriate cases. Such powers are also with state governments. Laid down in the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), Sections 473 and 474. The statutory form for consideration is 14 years of actual imprisonment. For offences where death was a sentencing option, as in Singh's case, Section 475 of BNSS makes the threshold mandatory.

Eligibility does not guarantee consideration.

The SRB, comprising senior state officials, including the DG of Prisons, the Police Commissions, and the Chief Secretary, must first examine each case and pass its recommendation to the government. The nature of the offence matters, but cannot be the only consideration.

The legal framework for remission was carved out by the SC in its 2015 judgement in *UOI vs V Sriharan*, arising from the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. It

requires mandatory judicial consultation, reasoned orders, and must be guided by a range of factors, such as the convict's conduct, age at the time of offence, psychological profile, and rehabilitation prospects.

### SRB report

The board's November 2025 order stated that a police report submitted to it described Singh's crime as heinous and that his presence in the area, if released, "will affect public peace and tranquility." The board noted that Mattoo's brother and five others had opposed the release in writing, as had the president of the All India Kashmiri Samaj and a BJP spokesperson and former Delhi MLA. Rejecting the release, it also noted that the offence was premeditated.

The Delhi HC last week said it was dealing with "worse cases", including a convict who had spent 41 years inside, where the SRB was rejecting pleas on grounds of heinousness alone, even when jail authorities had recommended otherwise. The court also acknowledged the Mattoo family's position. "What he did was unacceptable, and the system punished him. He got life imprisonment."

Mattoo was a 25-year-old law student. Singh was her college senior who had been stalking her. The son of a senior police officer, he was acquitted by the trial court, generating huge public backlash. The case then went to the Delhi HC, and Singh was finally convicted in 2006.

In remission matters, the SRB tends to be cautious in cases that draw sustained public attention, and recommendations for release are relatively rare. Advocate-on-Record RHA Sikander told *The Indian Express*, "There is always a concern about how such decisions will be viewed," adding that in many cases the final call eventually comes through the courts.

## WAR IN WEST ASIA

# West Asia disruptions prompt fuel supply shift



ANIL SASI

THE WEST Asia war that began on February 28 has not just caused the biggest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market, but also emerged as a key stress test: how a 50-kilometre stretch of waterway, commandeered by a few hundred men with guns, can hold the \$117 trillion global economy hostage.

In a little over a month and a half, the crisis has already sparked a change in energy consumption patterns. The events have parallels to the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant incident, triggered by the earthquake in Japan, which forced a worldwide shift away from nuclear power.

### Energy shifts

According to Fatih Birol, the Executive Director of the International Energy Agency (IEA), the trend of greater coal use rather than natural gas and a push towards renewables is already visible in Asia.

The agency further forecasts a potentially strong push for nuclear power in most countries, including efforts to extend the lifetime of existing nuclear power plants. A realisation has sunk in that the Gulf states are acutely vulnerable to such geopolitical events, and that other major countries in the gas supply chain, including Russia or even the US, could be unreliable partners. It may also prompt a shift towards electric vehicles.

Then there is the IEA's grim prognosis about the timeline for the war to end. The best-case scenario, the end of May, now appears optimistic by most yardsticks. Even then, the 100-odd tankers loaded with oil and LNG stuck on one side of the Strait of Hormuz might reach the markets weeks after the cessation of hostilities.

Reaching pre-war levels of oil and gas production in West Asia could also take several months. The IEA's latest internal assessment, based on monitoring oil fields, pipelines and refineries, is that over 80 facilities have been damaged, with more than a third severely impacted. They will need months, if not years, to be up and running.

### Flows to Asia

About 80% of oil and oil products transiting the Strait of Hormuz in 2025 were

## DIRE STRAITS: HORMUZ TRAFFIC NOW A TRICKLE



Tankers anchored in the Strait of Hormuz off the coast of Qeshm Island, Iran, on April 18.



destined for Asia. In addition, about 93% of Qatar's and 96% of the UAE's LNG exports transited through the strait, representing almost one-fifth of global LNG trade. There are no alternative routes to bring these volumes to markets, the IEA noted in its April 2026 note, "The Middle East and Global Energy Markets".

Most LNG from Qatar and the UAE goes to Asia. In 2025, almost 90% of the total volumes exported via the Strait of Hormuz were destined for the Asian market — accounting for more than a quarter of the region's total LNG imports. Just over 10% went to Europe.

The other issue pertains to the reliance on natural gas, which, while being an incredibly useful fuel for segments of the global economy, is more prone to geographical constraints than perhaps oil. Countries, including India, are already discussing replacing the West Asian fuel supply.

This comes after yet another development underscoring just how vulnerable

### Clear crisis

The war has revealed the limited role big powers are willing to play in such crises

Reaching pre-war levels of oil and gas production in West Asia could take months, thanks to the damage dealt to oil facilities

trade in this region. US President Donald Trump stated that US Marines have taken custody of an Iranian vessel after it attempted to bypass their blockade. A Navy guided missile destroyer reportedly intercepted it after a warning.

### Long way out

The options to end the conflict remain limited, even as another round of talks gets underway.

Two solutions appear to be on the horizon: a deal that looks remarkably similar to what Iran was willing to consider before the war, or an expanded conflict with no clear endgame, according to Dennis Citrinowicz, a West Asia National Security and intelligence expert and a nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council.

"The war seems to have been futile thus far... considering what the Iranians were reportedly agreeable to in Oman (prior to the February 28 US-Israeli strikes). If you believe they were going to keep their word...

Asia's dependence on the Strait of Hormuz and a lack of clarity about the war's end are prompting a re-think of fuel sources

the US reneging on the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal that was negotiated by the Obama administration) and the attacks of June 2025 have eroded their Iranian trust. That's all the more the case now," a shipping and strategy expert said.

"Having started this war, and the Iranians bullish at having foiled the US, there is a greater risk that they will go after nukes once sanctions are lifted, whatever they may sign up to. Even if they don't enrich it, maybe other countries are willing to supply them with enriched uranium (including possibly Russia). In the current situation, perhaps the only way the Americans can secure their goal is by knocking out Iran's oil exports and maintaining sanctions... eventually forcing change in Iran's behaviour over the long run," he told *The Indian Express*.

Finally, he said, the outcome would boil down to the Strait of Hormuz. "That is the single lever — apart from whatever (Iranian) capacity remains to fire missiles and drones at everyone. It is hard to understand why, having gone so far, the US is now stopping short of taking on what should have been a highly likely operation to undertake," he said.

Amos Hochstein said in a post on X that misunderstandings among negotiators put the Americans "in a worse position." "My concern is no matter how the war ends — the Iranians now have a card they never had before in practice," he said, referring to the Strait.

American economist Paul Krugman said on Saturday that "the US has basically lost this war, and that the original aims — achieving regime change and possibly taking Iran's uranium — are both ostensibly unachievable." "What's worse for the Americans is that two months ago, gas prices were \$2.80 a gallon, and the Strait was open. It is now \$4.06, and the US Navy is having to resort to firing on ships to keep the channel closed."

In addition, the Iranian regime is now more hardline than before, and the country has demonstrated the ability to shut global maritime traffic as a strategic leverage.

Meanwhile, the Iranians have instituted a process to allow "free passage" of ships by basically allowing passage for vessels that stay close to the Iranian coast and pay a toll. In practice, this could be a strategic defeat for the US, but something that the Trump administration could try to spin as a victory, Krugman argued. But to get that, they have to deliver on some version of a deal, which is the problem now.

## POLICY

# Marine Spatial Plan: Odisha's bid to strengthen climate resilience

Sujit Bisoi

Bhubaneswar, April 20

THE ODISHA government last week signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR) under the Union Ministry of Earth Sciences to launch a Marine Spatial Plan (MSP) for integrated coastal and marine planning in the state.

Sustainable ocean planning has been underway in India since 2019, through a collaboration between India and Norway. In the first phase, it was undertaken in two Union Territories, Puducherry and Lakshadweep. Odisha has become the first state in the country to implement the MSP in the second phase.

### Marine Spatial Planning

According to the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO, MSP is a public process of analysing and allocating the spatial and temporal distribution of human activities in marine areas to achieve ecological, economic and social objectives specified



Flamingoes at Chilika Lake. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

through a political process.

It is a tool for sustainable and integrated ocean management aimed at boosting the blue economy and strengthening climate resilience. MSP helps with the sustainable utilisation of marine resources in energy, and economic activities like developing ports, setting up industries, and to formulate policies accordingly.

Experts analyse the coastal region and specify areas for human activities in mar-

### Need for conservation

Odisha has a huge coastline of more than 550 km, featuring lagoons, mangroves and estuaries

Increasing developmental activities in this region call for the scientific management of the marine ecosystem

ine areas to achieve ecological, economic and social objectives. The goal is to ensure the utilisation of marine resources so that marine ecosystems remain healthy.

### Odisha's context

Odisha has a huge coastline of more than 550 km, featuring lagoons, mangroves and estuaries. According to Chitira Arumugam, additional chief secretary, science and technology department, Odisha, the NCCR will study the components of the water in the entire ocean adjoining Odisha's coast as part of the MoU.

"They will map the vegetation below the water, which is called benthic mapping. The NCCR will study the kind of water — its salinity, temperature and other aspects and prepare parameters like areas suitable for tourism activities, fisheries, growing seaweeds and, and to take up economic activities," she said.

The state government can thus formulate appropriate policies. The initiative will aid the development of multiple economic sectors and stakeholders in many coastal areas of the state.

Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi said the state's coastal and marine regions are rich in biodiversity and play a vital role in livelihoods, economic growth and environmental balance.

"Due to increasing developmental activities, environmental impacts, and rising sectoral demands, there is a need for scientific management of the marine ecosystem. MSP is a timely step in this direction. It will help meet the needs of fisheries, tourism, ports, ocean energy, and other sectors while ensuring the protection of marine ecosystems," said the chief minister.

### Other initiatives

In August 2025, the Odisha government launched the Odisha Marine Biotechnology Research and Innovation Corridor (OMBRIC) to promote the use of biotechnology for marine environmental protection and economic development.

The OMBRIC also aims to support the growth of marine biotech startups and enterprises and help in the field of research, ecology protection, scientific tourism and livelihood support to the coastal population."

## GLOBAL

# 'Trump has cultivated more of a madman image than most other world leaders'



ROSEANNE MCMANUS

PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

AS THE two-week ceasefire between the US and Iran comes to an end on Wednesday, US President Donald Trump's statements and actions about how such decisions will be viewed, adding that in many cases the final call eventually comes through the courts.

Rosanne McManus spoke to Abhinav Chakraborty about how Trump seems to have put it into practice.

In the framework of the "madman theory", how do you place Trump's statements and actions during the course of the war in West Asia?

Exactly what it means to be a "madman" is not always clearly defined, but in my research, I argue that two types of "madness" can give leaders' threats more credibility. The first is unpredictability, meaning that the leader might do anything. The second is extremism, meaning that the leader is insensitive to the consequences of war, including casualties.

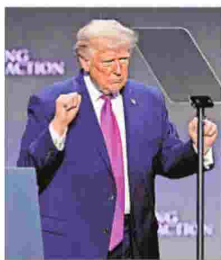
Trump's statements and actions during the war could lend support to perceptions that he has both types of madness. His inconsistent statements about the goals of the war and vacillation between threats and more conciliatory rhetoric give the impression of unpredictability. Additionally, Trump's willingness to

shatter norms and experience domestic and global backlash for making extreme threats, such as to destroy an entire civilisation, suggests an unusual indifference to the consequences of his actions.

How has Trump's approach differed from that of former US presidents Richard Nixon and George W Bush? Or even other world leaders like Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un?

Overall, Trump has cultivated more of a madman image than most other leaders. According to private records, Richard Nixon desired to cultivate a reputation for madness. Yet he was not consistent enough at acting madly to make others believe it. The Soviets not only did not believe he was mad, but they considered him their favorite US president to work with.

George W Bush was called a madman by some critics who used the term for general disparagement, but I don't think he either sought or had a reputation for either



US President Donald Trump.

type of madness that I identified above. He was viewed as a hawk, but not necessarily unpredictable or extremist. Vladimir Putin developed a madman

image after invading Ukraine, and he sought to convince the West that he was insensitive to the costs of using nuclear weapons. However, his reputation for madness faded a bit when he never did use nuclear weapons, despite getting bogged down in the Ukraine War.

Kim Jong Un probably developed the strongest reputation for madness of any of the leaders mentioned. With extreme threats and surprising actions, such as executing his own uncle and brother in dramatic ways, he came to be seen as both extreme and unpredictable. He is probably the closest analogy for Trump.

Today, when every action and statement is decoded and dissected, what are its limits to this approach?

One limitation of the madman theory relates to the difficulty in establishing a reputation for madness. It is necessary to consistently project an image of madness. Even Nixon struggled with this, but a larger number of information sources exacerbate

this challenge.

Another challenge is that even though perceived madness can boost the credibility of threats, it can also undermine the credibility of commitments to peace. Not trusting a perceived madman's commitment to peace can lead an adversary to resist his demands, believing conflict is inevitable regardless. This may partially explain why Iran dragged its feet on negotiating with the US.

What is the impact of Trump's approach on the US's foreign policy and global standing?

Madman theory is intended to be a crisis bargaining strategy, and it may have some benefits in crises. Outside of crises, however, having a leader who is perceived as a madman will cause the US to be perceived as a less reliable partner for cooperation. It also reduces the US's image of responsibility and competence. Thus, I ultimately expect it to decrease the US's standing in the global order.



## A plan of change

The BJP achieved its aim of leading Bihar after a long waiting game

Samar Choudhary was sworn in as the 24th Chief Minister of Bihar, on April 15, 2026, becoming the first-ever politician from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to hold the office. His elevation follows a pattern that the BJP has mastered for its growth — outgrowing regional partners and inverting the hierarchy in its favour. The ground realities in the State had shifted in the 2020 Bihar election when the BJP won 74 seats, overtaking the Janata Dal (United), which unexpectedly slid to 43 of the 243 seats in the Assembly. In the 2025 Assembly elections, the BJP won 89 seats while the JD(U) won 85. The BJP waited a little longer before easing out JD(U) supreme Nitish Kumar, who was elected to the Rajya Sabha after two decades as Chief Minister. Mr. Choudhary's elevation follows yet another pattern of the BJP's flexibility in handing over the top post to recent entrants into the party. He was in the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the JD(U) before joining the BJP in 2017. Mr. Choudhary belongs to the Koeri Kushwaha caste and has been the OBC face of the BJP. The BJP-JD(U) alliance, along with other smaller parties, has dominated Bihar politics by mobilising the upper castes, the non-Yadav OBCs and the Extremely Backward Classes (EBC). While the upper castes have limited options other than the National Democratic Alliance, the EBCs can be volatile in their party preferences.

The BJP waited six years even after overtaking the JD(U) in numerical strength, precisely out of fear of unsettling the EBC voters who trusted Mr. Kumar. Mr. Choudhary's appointment as Chief Minister is the BJP's direct bid to reach into the OBC-EBC base that it used to negotiate through Mr. Kumar. This transition could potentially open up new social alignments within the BJP and the JD(U). The fate of the JD(U) itself, now that Mr. Kumar is no longer at the helm, is uncertain. Mr. Choudhary has become Chief Minister on the strength of the BJP central leadership's confidence in him, but the task of winning the confidence of party workers and voters rests entirely on his shoulders. Bihar also carries a considerable governance deficit that needs urgent attention. The State has a dynamic and young population, yet its education and health sectors remain in distress. Mr. Choudhary will have to show vision and commitment to build on the marginal gains that the State has made in recent years and focus on human development, in the absence of which any amount of infrastructure investment will be suboptimal. Bihar's progress would have a multiplier effect on the entire country and its new Chief Minister must consolidate quickly and marshal all available forces towards that end.

## The price of negligence

Human involvement in hazardous industries must be minimal

In yet another gruesome explosion at a fireworks unit on April 19 in Tamil Nadu's southern Virudhunagar district, 25 workers were killed and eight others injured. The number of injured went up to 20, including policemen and firefighters, after another explosion occurred at the unit later. In the past four years, at least 134 people have died and 89 have been injured in such explosions in the district, which is known for its concentration of fireworks units. It is an outright misnomer to describe this type of explosion as an accident, as any preliminary investigation would reveal. Accidents are associated with elements of surprise and unanticipated occurrence. But in the case of Virudhunagar, it is known to every worker — even if no separate sensitisation course is conducted — that the firecracker industry is hazardous and that any negligence of safety norms can result in disaster. Moreover, such explosions have occurred at regular intervals in the district, claiming the lives of scores of workers, most of whom come from economically weaker sections of society. Beyond expressing condolences and announcing solatium, the authorities at the Union and State levels have done little of substance to reduce, if not eliminate, the risk of such explosions. What they should and could have done is intensify meaningful monitoring, the absence of which is now and then felt in the form of explosions.

The Virudhunagar incident has brought into focus the role of law enforcement authorities in ensuring proper supervision, as the unit in question was operating on a Sunday — observed as a holiday by the fireworks industry — apparently without permission. Contrary to the norms specified in the licence issued by the district authorities, which allow only a dozen people to work in any fireworks unit at any given time, 40 people were present at the unit at the time of the explosion on Sunday. These two aspects, judging by the frequency of such explosions, are not unique to this particular fireworks unit. Official inspections may have taken place but they would have been carried out more as a ritual than as a meaningful exercise. There, of course, been reports of a manpower shortage within the monitoring authorities. While coming down heavily on wrongdoers, including unlicensed units and those working regularly in violation of safety norms, the officials should also ensure that, in the name of tighter supervision, legitimately functioning units are not subjected to harassment. They should also not gloss over the economic reality of the district where the industry provides employment to lakhs of people in a region that is largely arid and dependent on rain-fed irrigation. Sober elements in the industry should consider ways to increase the use of automation and reduce human involvement.

# The strategic vulnerability in India's LPG supply model

India's Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) problem is not a passing shortage. It comes from a gap that has grown too wide to ignore. India consumed about 33.15 million tonnes of LPG last year, but domestic production met only about 40% of that need. The remaining 60% had to be imported. Put plainly, India's total LPG demand is now about 250% of indigenous production, while annual LPG imports are equal to about 150% of domestic LPG output. That is not a minor balancing gap. It is a significant mismatch between what India produces and what its kitchens consume.

This matters because LPG in India is overwhelmingly a household fuel; commercial LPG accounts for less than 10% of national consumption. So, the imported molecule is not mainly feeding a flexible industrial user that can cut runs or switch feedstock. It is going into domestic kitchens. This is what makes India's LPG dependence more serious than a normal product-import issue. A petrochemical plant can slow down. A household kitchen cannot.

**No longer a dependable corridor**  
The crisis now has exposed this sharply. About



**Shrikant Madhav Vaidya**

Former Chairman of Indian Oil Corporation Ltd. and an energy strategist

India's LPG use is mainly household-based, heightening import vulnerability

90% of India's LPG imports normally transit the Strait of Hormuz. India must now accept that the Strait of Hormuz cannot be treated as a routinely dependable corridor for household fuel security. Even if the present tensions ease, the old assumption of uninterrupted normality will not return easily. The risk attached to this route has now entered the strategic calculation in a lasting way.

Import dependence alone, however, does not tell the full story. Japan imports a larger share of LPG than India does. China and South Korea also import large volumes of LPG. But what matters is not only how much a country imports. It is where the molecule goes, what alternatives households already have, and how much storage supports the system.

### Lessons from Japan

The table shows why raw percentages can mislead. Japan appears more import-dependent than India on LPG. Yet, Japanese household vulnerability is far lower — LPG serves only about 40% of households. Electricity accounts for about 55% of residential final energy use, and city gas also has a large residential base. More importantly, Japan has about 108.3 days of LPG stock through national and private reserves.

Japan imports more, but it cushions that dependence with alternatives and storage. China and South Korea are different again. In China, a large share of its LPG demand is driven by the petrochemical sector. In South Korea, household energy is supported much more by natural gas and electricity.

India's position is more exposed because the imported molecule goes overwhelmingly into domestic kitchens. India's problem is not that it imports LPG — many countries do. India's problem is that it imports LPG for the one use that is hardest to defer and also the hardest to replace quickly.

India's storage position also needs to be seen clearly. The Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell reports about 15 days of LPG tankage cover in the broad operational sense across import locations, bottling plants, refineries and fractionators. But visible underground cavern-based deep storage is only about 140,000 tonnes — 60 TMT at Visakhapatnam (Andhra Pradesh) and 80 TMT at Mangalore (Karnataka) which is equal to only about 1.5 days of national demand. The first number shows that the system is not empty. The second shows that reserve-style protection is still very thin for a country of India's size and import dependence.

There is another point that deserves attention. India is not buying LPG in a loose, neutral global market. The exportable pool is not large, and it is already heavily claimed by a few Asian buyers. Just four Asian countries absorb a little over

half of the world's exportable LPG pool. And the rest is not sitting idle waiting to be redirected. Much of it is already tied up in petrochemicals, household cooking and heating, and autogas. This is why any sustained loss of dependable Gulf supply can quickly tighten the market.

### What India should do

How can India reduce its vulnerability?

First, it should stop treating all LPG molecules as one pool. During the present disruption, India has already directed refiners to prioritise propane and butane for cooking LPG rather than for petrochemical or gasoline-blending use. That logic should continue. Domestically produced LPG and refinery-origin C3/C4 (propane/butane) streams should be reserved first for household fuel security. Petrochemical users should increasingly arrange their own feedstock imports. The government should not have to defend domestic kitchens and industrial feedstock demand from the same protected pool.

Second, India should build a deeper LPG buffer. An initial goal of two to three weeks of protected cover for the household pool would be a sensible start. At current demand levels, that means about 1.3 million tonnes for 14 days and 1.9 million tonnes for 21 days. This is a large jump from the current cavern capacity, but it is the minimum scale at which India can begin to claim meaningful resilience.

Third, India needs a sustained campaign for electric cooking in urban and semi-urban India. This cannot be a one-season appeal. It has to continue over the years. Households with reliable power, adequate wiring and access to induction cooking should be encouraged to shift their primary cooking load away from LPG. A 'Give it up 2.0' plan should be launched.

The aim is simple: reduce the number of homes for which the LPG cylinder remains the first and only kitchen fuel. Piped Natural Gas (PNG) should expand where density supports it, but electricity is the broader lever.

India's LPG vulnerability will continue to persist unless policy addresses a basic mismatch: demand that is too high relative to domestic production; imports that are too concentrated in a single corridor; and excessive dependence concentrated in household kitchens. The answer is not simply to buy more LPG cargoes. It is to reserve domestic molecules for kitchens, separate petrochemical demand, build more storage, and steadily reduce the number of homes that rely on LPG alone.

India's LPG problem is not a passing shortage. It is an enduring mismatch between what the country produces and what its kitchens consume. This is why India's asymmetric LPG demand will remain a lasting vulnerability — unless the design of the system itself changes.

## Why India is more exposed

High household dependence and tight global supply make the LPG risk sharper

### A household LPG vulnerability matrix

Country	LPG import share of total demand	Total LPG demand as % of domestic production	LPG imports as % of domestic production	Household kitchen criticality of LPG	LPG cover / storage position
India	60%	250%	150%	Very high	15 days operational tankage cover (PPAC); ~1.5 days in cavern-based deep storage
Japan	70%	333.3%	233.3%	Low	108.3 days
China	40.4%	167.7%	67.7%	Low to moderate	No clear public LPG-days figure verified here
South Korea*	~74.5%	~391.7%	~291.7%	Low	15-30 day stockholding obligation framework

\* Indicative, based on publicly available market data

### Who absorbs the global exportable LPG pool?

Country	LPG imports used for comparison	Share of global LPG exports*	Main use of LPG
China	36.7 MMT	26.3%	Mainly petrochemical-driven at the margin
India	19.89 MMT	14.2%	Mainly household cooking fuel
Japan	9.8 MMT	7%	Mixed: household/commercial + chemicals
South Korea*	~7 MMT	~5%	Mixed, with strong industrial/petrochemical role
Total	73.39 MMT	52.5%	-

\* Using global LPG exports of 139.8 MMT. South Korea is indicative

# The price of a war far above the ground

Recently, at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, a departure board quietly transitioned from "On Time" to "Delayed," and then to "Rescheduled." The official explanation — rerouting due to airspace restrictions over West Asia — barely concealed the deeper reality of the Iran war steadily redrawing the economic and operational contours of global aviation. What appears as episodic inconvenience is, in truth, an outward manifestation of a structural disturbance whose implications extend far beyond delayed departures.

Airspace closures across critical corridors have forced airlines into circuitous routes, often extending flight durations by two to eight hours depending on the routes, inflating fuel consumption and compressing already slender operating margins. Simultaneously, jet fuel prices surged to nearly \$195-\$197 a barrel. Given that fuel constitutes between 25% and 40% of total airline operating costs, such increases could destabilise the industry in which net margins rarely exceed 3% to 5%.

The impact is already visible: ticket prices have increased by 10%-20% in several markets, fuel surcharges risen by over 30% in certain cases, and thousands of flights cancelled globally, especially along the Europe-Asia axis. Yet, to dwell excessively on these symptoms is to risk overlooking a deeper question, which is what trajectory this disruption is likely to assume in the near future.

### The new normal

The risk of sustained tensions between the United States-Israel and Iran is likely to persist over the medium term. A probable outcome is the gradual normalisation of inefficiency. Rerouted flight paths, once conceived as temporary adjustments, may become embedded within airline operating models, permanently altering route economics. In such a scenario, the industry would witness a sustained elevation in cost structures driven by higher fuel burn, increased crew costs, extended turnaround times, and reduced aircraft utilisation.

Over time, this would lead to rationalisation of airline networks, with marginal long-haul routes, particularly those linking secondary cities,



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**Sohom Banerjee**

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The Iran war and geopolitics will reshape global aviation economics

becoming economically untenable. The geography of global aviation itself may undergo a subtle, yet significant, reconfiguration. An outcome of this may be traditional West Asian hubs ceding some of their pre-eminence to alternative transit points in Turkey, Southeast Asia, or even India. For Indian carriers, however, the implications are more acute. Their structural dependence on West Asian air corridors for connectivity to Europe and North America renders them particularly vulnerable, creating a persistent imbalance between rising costs and the constraints of a price-sensitive market.

A more disquieting possibility lies in the prospect of escalation within or after the ceasefire period. Such a scenario may lead to wider airspace closures and sharper energy market disruptions; the consequences could assume a systemic character. Fuel prices, already volatile, may become both elevated and unpredictable, further amplifying operational uncertainty. Flight networks could contract, particularly across high-density intercontinental corridors, while elevated fares and geopolitical anxiety dampen demand. Unlike the COVID-19 pandemic, where demand collapsed due to health concerns, this would constitute a cost-induced contraction, wherein airlines continue to operate but under severe financial strain.

### Handling the disruption

For India, such a scenario would be especially onerous. Aviation turbine fuel (ATF), already burdened by high taxation, would reflect the full force of global price shocks, compounded by currency depreciation. The sector could find itself confronting a confluence of pressures, escalating input costs, weakening demand, and constrained pricing power, potentially precipitating consolidation or strategic retrenchment among carriers with limited financial resilience.

Yet, crises, even of this magnitude, are not without possibilities of bearing latent opportunities.

A third trajectory — less immediate but strategically consequential — lies in adaptive reconfiguration. Faced with sustained geopolitical

uncertainty, airlines and policymakers make a strategic decision to recalibrate. This could appear in the form of a diversification of routing strategies, reduced dependence on any single geopolitical corridor, alongside investments in ultra-long-haul aircraft capable of bypassing traditional transit hubs altogether. The emergence of alternative aviation hubs outside conflict-prone regions could gradually redistribute traffic flows, while policy interventions, particularly in markets such as India, may address structural inefficiencies, including the rationalisation of ATF taxation and the renegotiation of bilateral air service agreements. In such a scenario, India's current vulnerability could, with strategic foresight, be transformed into opportunity, positioning the country as an alternative node in the evolving architecture of global aviation.

### This is a challenge

Amidst these future possibilities, one conclusion asserts itself with increasing clarity: geopolitics should no longer be treated as an exogenous shock to the aviation sector; rather, it should be seen as an intrinsic variable shaping its economics and operations. The long-standing assumption of predictable skies, upon which the industry's finely optimised networks were constructed, has probably been irreversibly unsettled.

Airlines must now internalise uncertainty, embedding scenario planning, dynamic pricing and strategic flexibility into the core of their operations. Possibly, for airlines, this is the equivalent of a 'Covid-shock' of global supply chains and an opportunity to re-strategise and recalibrate. For India's aviation sector, already navigating the complexities of high input costs and price-sensitive demand, the challenge is particularly formidable.

What is unfolding is not merely a transient disruption, but the gradual emergence of a new aviation order, one defined not by the efficiency of open skies, but by the exigencies of a fractured and uncertain geopolitical landscape. The question is no longer whether turbulence will persist, but whether the industry possesses the strategic agility to navigate it.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Cracker factory blast

It is saddening that fire disasters continue unabated in Tamil Nadu's Virudhunagar district. (Front page, April 20). The gruesome incident is a clear testament to the gross

negligence of officials and agencies in discharging their mandated responsibilities. Standard operating procedures appear to be observed more in breach than in compliance. The time has

come to mechanise various processes involved in the manufacture of fireworks, rather than relying heavily on manual labour. Meanwhile, an in-depth scientific study could be undertaken to rework the

composition of the chemicals used in this hazardous industry. **V. Johan Dhanakumar,** Chennai

The time has come for us to stop celebrating our

festivals with crackers. I have never understood the "enjoyment" people derive from the ear-piercing sounds of exploding crackers. Unless we change the way we celebrate, the firecracker industry will

continue to flourish, and poor workers will remain vulnerable. **Sukumaran C.V.,** Kongad, Palakkad, Kerala

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

# Puzzle of missing urgency around learning

India, like many other developing countries, has been in the midst of a learning crisis, as evidenced by Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER), notwithstanding the marginal improvements seen in the last few years. Yet, the absence of learning outcomes, especially Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), has failed to generate urgency on the ground, despite policy backing and unprecedented funding.

Why does a crisis of such magnitude not result in immediate action? The answer may lie in a concept often overlooked in public policy: salience. Systems change not merely when policies are well-designed or resources are abundant, but when enough people recognise a problem, believe it matters, and act on it.

## The necessity of salience

Vietnam provides a useful example. Researchers from the RISE Programme at the Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford, found that Vietnam outperformed far richer nations in learning outcomes despite having no significant advantage with respect to spending or infrastructure. The explanation was disarmingly simple yet profound: Vietnam improved learning outcomes because it wanted to. The 'wanting to' reflects salience — a shared recognition that learning matters. In India, this salience remains weak at the field level.

However, there is no dearth of policy intent. The National Education Policy, 2020 clearly identifies FLN as an urgent national priority, with the NIPUN Bharat Mission mobilising administrative machinery and financial resources. The Prime Minister himself has emphasised the importance of fluency in oral reading to enable children to transition from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn'. Yet, this policy intent has not fully translated into field-level urgency. Across schools and communities, learning outcomes often remain



**Latain Goyal**  
Civil Servant of the DANICS cadre, presently posted in the UT of Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu

secondary. Conversations in school management committees or parent-teacher meetings tend to focus on buildings, toilets, and teacher vacancies, rather than the fundamental question: can children read and understand a basic text?

## Myriad factors

The gap can be explained by the following reasons. First, learning is inherently difficult to observe. Unlike a pothole or missing rations, poor learning is intangible. A child copying from the blackboard can create the illusion of learning. Further, the concept of oral reading fluency — where reading becomes effortless enough for cognitive effort to shift from decoding words to understanding meaning — is not widely understood. As a result, findings from surveys such as ASER, which show that many Grade 5 children cannot fluently read a Grade 2 text, often seem exaggerated and are dismissed.

Second, power asymmetries weaken accountability, particularly in the education sector. Children have no voice, and their parents may lack the tools to assess learning. Teachers and administrators, by contrast, occupy positions of greater authority and social capital. Decision-making and teacher accountability remain centralised, while local institutions have limited influence. The exit of the middle class from public schooling further reduces bottom-up pressure, a key determinant of salience in a system.

Third, the scale of the crisis is under-recognised. When a senior official was briefed by the author that fluent reading in Grade 5 had improved from 20% to 65% in the Union Territory of Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu, his first reaction was one of alarm: "What do you mean 35% of children still cannot read?" His reaction was valid but revealing. It shows how even well-intentioned actors may not grasp the scale of the crisis.

Fourth, there is a fundamental

disconnect in how responsibility is perceived: schooling is seen as the state's responsibility, while learning is often implicitly seen as dependent on the child's ability or family support. This undermines the role of systemic factors such as pedagogy, teacher support, curriculum design, and accountability mechanisms that are critical to shaping outcomes. Fifth, acknowledging the problem is difficult. Accepting that millions of children are in school but not learning is deeply unsettling for educators who have spent their careers expanding access and enrolment. For political actors, openly acknowledging the scale of the crisis carries political risks. Yet, this failure is not the result of any single political dispensation or bureaucratic actor, but of a long-standing systemic neglect of learning outcomes.

Finally, a sense of fatalism often prevails. When systems appear entrenched, it is easy to assume that change is unlikely. However, change is important and possible.

## The way forward

Over the last two decades, large-scale assessments have moved learning outcomes to the centre of policy discourse. There is now growing evidence that improving foundational learning at scale is both possible and cost-effective, with approaches such as 'Teaching at the Right Level' and structured pedagogy demonstrating disproportionate gains across contexts. Importantly, salience can be built through personal experience by conducting village-level assessments. When parents or officials see first-hand that a child cannot read, the issue ceases to be abstract, it becomes immediate and impossible to ignore. The path forward lies in making learning visible, communicating the scale of the problem, and demonstrating that solutions exist. It also requires creating conditions where those responsible for delivery are compelled to act.

# Collectors race for investments

The CM will assign ranks to districts depending on how much capital is created

## STATE OF PLAY

**V. Raghavendra**  
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At the recent Collectors' Conference in Andhra Pradesh, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu exhorted District Collectors (DCs) to play a proactive role in attracting investments to supplement the efforts of the State Investment Promotion Committee, the State Investment Promotion Board (SIPB), the AP Economic Development Board and other agencies. At the district level, there are District Industries Promotion Committees which have DCs as their chairpersons.

These Collectors have their work cut out for them as the CM has decided to assign ranks to districts on the basis of how much investment and employment has been created, and based on the Speed of Doing Business (SoDB). These DCs are not only expected to hold meetings with prospective entrepreneurs but also convince them to set up units in their districts. Further, the CM wants DCs to focus on giving prompt regulatory clearances in order to set a benchmark when it comes to SoDB.

## On proper execution

The CM's plan bodes well as Collectors will have a thorough knowledge of the strengths of their districts; they can help in identifying and promoting specific areas where entrepreneurs can invest. Rayalaseema, for instance, has already emerged as a hub for renewable energy companies due to the relatively low cost of land compared to coastal areas. However, DCs should be careful to hand over the sites in a comprehensive manner, that is, they should

submit the Industrial Entrepreneur Memorandum.

## Ambitious plans

The CM, taking a step in the right direction, told the DCs to promote IT, MSMEs and tourism in places where they can't attract big industrial projects. He has also decided to give discretionary powers to the Collectors to allot up to five acres of land to projects, especially in the tourism sector, through the AP Industrial Infrastructure Corporation Limited. This is expected to help Collectors in quickly onboarding those keen to set up tourism facilities.

Post bifurcation, the Chief Minister has pivoted from single-city dependence to region-anchored industrialisation, building sectoral hubs across the coastal, delta, and Rayalaseema regions. The decriminalisation of minor offences in the purview of various departments, for which the AP Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2026 has been passed, is intended to help in achieving the desired SoDB.

The DCs have time till the next Collectors' Conference to be held in June/July to apprise the CM to what extent they have succeeded in mobilising investments. According to official sources, the government has tied up with 771 companies for investments amounting to nearly ₹20.35 lakh crore across 12 departments, a vast chunk of it in the Energy, Industries and Commerce Departments, since June 2024.

These projects are in different stages, and the government is eager to translate all proposals into reality at the earliest. It is in this context that the DCs are expected to compete for getting fresh investments, and rightly so — as efforts at the grassroots level will make the State prosper.

# Minorities have been underrepresented in Bengal Assembly

Despite its reputation as a progressive State, women and Muslims have sparsely held power in West Bengal

## DATA POINT

**Sabir Ahmed**  
**Ashin Chakraborty**

The election in West Bengal is approaching fast, amid an ocean of uncertainty over who will ultimately be able to cast their votes. In its final list, the Election Commission (EC) has placed nearly 60 lakh citizens under adjudication. While a supplementary list has been published, the fate of 27 lakh voters remains uncertain. The entire SIR exercise has created mayhem both in the administration and among citizens, and has pushed the issue of human development and social justice to the margins.

As most political parties have announced their candidates, it is worthwhile to assess their social group and gender composition. These candidate lists offer an important lens to assess the extent of commitment towards India's pluralistic social fabric. However, what about the present composition of the State's legislature? By conducting a critical assessment of the composition of the 17th West Bengal Legislative Assembly, one aims to evaluate the representation of various social groups in the State's highest policymaking body. As State governments bear the bulk of the responsibility for designing, adjusting and implementing welfare policies effectively, the composition of the Assembly is crucial. Having representatives from various social groups ensures that policy priorities address the needs of everyone in society.

## The politics of presence

Anne Phillips' theory of the politics of presence makes the case for inclusive institutions in order to fight against unfair exclusion. Representation is more than a symbol; it decides whose voices are heard in decision-making. It has been largely known that the representation of MLAs has been

skewed towards the upper castes and males for a few years now. But the Sabar Institute's report, "Diversity and Representation in the Seventeenth West Bengal Legislative Assembly: An Analysis of Gender and Social Group Presence" shows that the gaps are even more significant inside the committees of the State's Legislative Assembly. These committees are spaces where policies are discussed and consequential decisions are made. It is only fair that all voices find an equal footing to ensure that such decisions are fair and equitable.

The 2011 Census (despite being 15 years too dated) shows that Muslims make up almost 27% of West Bengal's population. However, their voices are mostly missing from places where policies are made. The study empirically documents this "conspicuous absence" in critical decision-making areas, despite their considerable electoral importance under successive regimes of both the Left Front and the Trinamool Congress. Muslims are still not well represented, both as MLAs and as heads of important committees (Chart 1).

The 17th West Bengal Legislative Assembly reveals significant gaps in representation with respect to the State's demographic composition. Muslims hold only 14.8% of unique committee positions. This share drops even more to 14.4% when you take out the Standing Committee on Minority Affairs, which has most of its members from minority communities for obvious reasons.

In West Bengal politics, this pattern of not having enough representation has been going on for decades. In 2011, 20.4% of MLAs were Muslim, but by 2021, that number had dropped to 14.7%, a difference of more than 12 percentage points with their population share.

## Equitable representation

The West Bengal legislature better represents Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Their

representation in the State Assembly is now about the same as or even greater than their share of the population. In 2021, SC and ST MLAs accounted for 34.2% of the Assembly, which is more than the 29.3% of the population they represent (Chart 2).

However, the representation of social groups among the Chairpersons of the committees has been skewed. While Muslims hold 18.4% of committee chairperson roles, there are currently no ST chairpersons. The Standing Committee on School Education has zero Muslim representation (Chart 3).

Although the importance of women in West Bengal politics has significantly increased in recent years, this has not translated into meaningful participation in heavy-weight committees where critical policy decisions are discussed. There are a lot of committees in the government, such as the ones on Finance and Planning, Higher Education, and School Education, which do not have any women. In 2021, the difference between women's population share and number of women in the Assembly was 36 percentage points (Chart 4).

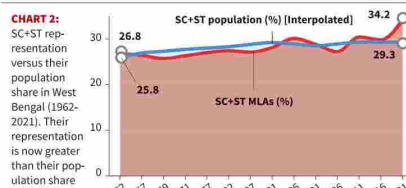
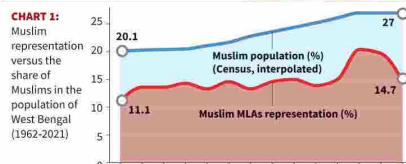
People think that the State of West Bengal is more progressive and hence more fair and inclusive than other States. But the truth is that a small group of people still have all the power to make decisions. To make a society abide by the idea of justice, we need to make sure that everyone's voice is being heard, especially people who have been left out for a long time.

The Assembly elections that are coming up in 2026 could have been a chance to fix these problems but when one looks at the lists of candidates from all the major parties, one can see that, in all likelihood, this will remain a distant dream.

Sabir Ahmed is Programme Director at Amartya Sen Research Centre, Pratichi, and also at the affiliated Sabar Institute. Ashin Chakraborty is with the Sabar Institute.

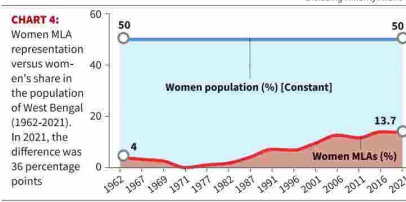
## Assessing representation

The data for the tables were sourced from RTIs filed by Sabir Ahmed, Ahmed and Ashin Chakraborty authored Sabar Institute's report, "Diversity and Representation in the Seventeenth West Bengal Legislative Assembly: An Analysis of Gender and Social Group Presence"



Category	Popula-tion Share	MLAs (294)	Committee mem-bers* (673 seats, 41 committees)	Chair-per-sons (38)
Muslim	27%	14.7%	14.3%	18.4%
SC + ST	29.3%	34.2%	28.4%	13.2%
Women	~50%	13.7%	13.1%	13.2%

\*excluding Minority Affairs



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 21, 1976

## British collector visits Madras after 30 years

Madras, April 20: One of the late entrants to the coveted Indian Civil Service, an Englishman who left India after Independence in 1948, feels that the Indian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure retain many good features.

While he served in the former composite Madras Presidency, Judiciary was not separate from the Executive. It was then an advantage to have both in the hands of the Collector particularly in the districts, Mr. J.C. Griffiths ICS (retired), said here today.

Visiting India after nearly 30 years, Mr. Griffiths was surprised at the more number of people speaking English, of a better type too, whether he was a businessman, a taxi-driver or a porter. Another feature in Madras was the absence of the "teddy boys and girls" hanging around street corners wearing long hair and sporting jeans — a common sight in most of the cities of the world. The thoroughfares in Madras were clean and the main roads were maintained well. But he was shocked at the traffic congestion near the Central Station. There were more factories but he could also see unemployment. The population explosion was perceptible. As one who had served as a District Supply Officer he was equally surprised that rationing still continued.

When Mr. Griffiths joined in Madras in 1937, Mr. C. Rajagopalachari the then "Prime Minister" interviewed him and wondered whether he could proceed to Salem as it was in that year that the experiment of Prohibition was being conducted there for the first time.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 21, 1926

## Parsi war memorial in Bombay

Bombay, April 20: Sir Jamshedji Jijiboy, Bart, performed the opening ceremony of the War Memorial column at the entrance to the Parsi Tower of Silence, on the Malabar Hill, created in memory of the members of the Parsi community who fell in the Great War. Sir Jamshedji in his speech said they had shown their loyalty to the King and country full well, and hoped the memorial would teach the future generation to stand by their rulers and to be patriotic.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**Persons arrested in Turkiye with suspected links to IS**

**90** Turkiye on Monday said it had arrested 90 people with suspected links to the Islamic State jihadist group, two weeks after a deadly shoot-out outside the Israeli consulate in Istanbul. A total of 198 people were detained a day after the April 7 attack in a nationwide sweep against "the terrorist organisation Daesh", another name for the Islamic State. AFP

**Percentage contraction in core sector output in March**

**0.4** in per cent. The core sector output contracted by 0.4% in March, marking the first decline in five months as production of coal, crude oil, fertilizer, and electricity fell, according to official data. In February 2026, the eight core infrastructure sectors had expanded by 2.8%. In 2025-26, these sectors recorded a growth rate of 2.6% as against 4.5% in 2024-25. PII

**Department of Post's revenue for the financial year 2025-26**

**15,296** in ₹ crore. The Dept. of Posts has clocked revenue of ₹15,296 crore for the financial year 2025-26, a 16% growth year-on-year, Communications Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia said on Monday. Announcing the revenue scorecard, Mr. Scindia said the year has been "historic" for the department. PII

**Share of candidates in fray in T.N. elections with criminal cases**

**18** in per cent. According to a report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), out of the 3,992 candidates analysed, 722 (18%) candidates have declared criminal cases against themselves. Of these, 404 (10%) have declared serious criminal cases. In 2021, out of 3,559 candidates analysed, 466 (13%) had declared criminal cases against themselves. PII

**Death toll from the Virudhunagar firecracker unit blast**

**25** With most bodies charred beyond recognition, identification remains difficult, police said on Monday, as the toll in the massive explosion at a fireworks unit near Kattannarpatti here rose to 25. The Virudhunagar district administration has announced ₹5.5 lakh *ex gratia* to the kin of the deceased. PII  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## U.S. power, Latin American resistance

The U.S.'s increasingly aggressive and coercive approach in Latin America echoes earlier periods of intervention and gunboat diplomacy; this stance is likely to fuel a resurgence of anti-imperialist thinking and resistance across the region

**WORLD INSIGHT**

Tony Wood

In Latin America, as in other parts of the world, the second Donald Trump administration has adopted an increasingly aggressive policy.

From drone strikes on purported drug traffickers to increased tariffs on imports, and from the blockade on fuel shipments and threats of invasion in Cuba to the January 3 military incursion into Venezuela, the U.S.'s more coercive approach to its hemispheric neighbours evokes an earlier period of U.S. foreign policy.

Many commentators have found echoes of the 1989 capture of Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega in the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Others highlighted the longer history of U.S. interventions in Latin America, stretching back through the Cold War. That includes the Nixon administration's support for the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende in Chile or the CIA-sponsored removal of Guatemala's elected president, Jacobo Arbenz, in 1954.

Yet as a historian of early 20th-century Latin America, I believe the Trump administration's approach to Latin America more closely resembles an older pattern of U.S. policy. Between 1900 and the mid-1930s, U.S. forces intervened in one Latin American country after another. This practice was often justified by the Roosevelt Corollary, President Theodore Roosevelt's addition to the Monroe Doctrine. In cases of "chronic wrongdoing," Roosevelt said in 1904, the U.S. would find itself compelled to exercise an "international police power" in defence of U.S. interests.

But crucially, how Latin Americans responded to the U.S. exerting its dominance in the early 20th century may hold some lessons for the present day. One of the major side effects of the U.S.'s so-called gunboat diplomacy was an upsurge of resistance and anti-imperialist thinking in the region's political life.

**The roots of anti-imperialism**

In the 30 years after Roosevelt asserted the U.S.'s right to intervene across the hemisphere, U.S. forces occupied Cuba three times – in 1906-09, 1912, and 1917-21. They also occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924. In Nicaragua, the U.S. deployed the Marines from 1912 to 1925 and then again from 1926 to 1933, waging a counterinsurgency in which it used aerial bombardment for the first time.

Across much of the region, then, this was a time when the U.S. was quick to resort to force, unburdened by any concerns for Latin American countries' sovereignty.

Yet this era of external intervention also coincided with a period of remarkable political ferment, which I describe in my recently published book, *Radical Sovereignty*.

In one place after another, from Buenos Aires to Mexico City and from Havana to Lima, movements sprang up that put forward sharp critiques of U.S. power. Many of them grew out of student organisations in the late 1910s, while others drew on the rising strength of labour unions and newly formed leftist political parties.

In 1923, rural workers in the Mexican state of Veracruz formed a Peasant League. From the outset, they saw local issues as closely interwoven with international ones, and they argued that



**In one voice:** A protester carrying a sign reading 'Trump, Latin America is not yours,' as demonstrators oppose U.S. actions in Venezuela. FILE PHOTO

there was a compelling reason for this. As the league put it, "Our internationalism is not the child of a crazed enthusiasm for empty phrases... but of the need to take preventive measures, to bolster ourselves against the enemy," which they identified as "the imperialism of North America."

Many of Latin America's radical movements at this time were inspired by the recent example of the Mexican Revolution. The new Mexican Constitution of 1917 had nationalised the country's land and natural resources, putting it on a collision course with U.S. companies and landowners. Others still were energised by the global repercussions of the Russian Revolution. This, of course, included several brand-new communist parties across the region. But at the time, many others in Latin America saw the Bolsheviks as part of a global anti-colonial wave.

**Mexico City as an activist hub**

My book explores the key role Mexico City played as a gathering point for these different political tendencies.

They included groups ranging from Mexican peasant leagues to the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, an anti-imperialist movement formed by Peruvian exiles. Many of these organisations converged under the umbrella of the Anti-Imperialist League of the Americas. Founded in Mexico City in 1925, it soon had chapters in a dozen more countries across the region.

Between them, these movements brought into focus the novel features of U.S. power. As the Cuban student leader and communist Julio Antonio Mella said in 1925 – at a time when his native country was highly dependent on the U.S. but formally sovereign – the U.S. was distinct. Unlike European empires, it largely refrained from direct control of territories, though it had pressed the Cubans to include in their 1901

constitution a provision allowing it to intervene in the island at will.

In Mella's view, the U.S. was clearly an empire, one that mainly exercised its dominance through commercial or financial pressures. For him, the dollar and Wall Street were as central to U.S. power as the halls of government in Washington, DC.

For Ricardo Paredes, an Ecuadorean doctor who founded the country's Socialist Party in 1926, a new term was required to capture Latin American countries' contradictory position. Formally sovereign, they were not colonies as such. Yet they were economically and politically subordinated to Washington and Wall Street – "dependent countries," as he phrased it in 1928.

For the Peruvian poet Magda Portal, a leading member of the anti-imperialist American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, U.S. dominance played out differently in different parts of Latin America.

In a series of lectures she gave in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic in 1929, Portal divided the region into zones. While countries such as Argentina or Brazil were mainly sites for U.S. investment, Mexico and the Caribbean were regularly subjected to U.S. military force. Or, as Portal put it, "Here imperialism wears no disguise."

Portal concluded her lectures with a phrase that combined her analysis of U.S. dominance with a resonant appeal for unity: "We have a single and great enemy; let us form a single and great union."

**United States of resistance?**

Yet while there was much Latin American anti-imperialist thinkers could agree on, there were also profound divergences between them. This included questions of strategy as well as issues of principle. What role should different classes play in their movement? How radical a transformation of society were they

pushing for? And what kind of state should emerge from it?

Over time, these differences turned into deep rifts that pitted revolutionaries against democratic reformists, internationalists against nationalists, and pro-Soviets against anti-communists. These disagreements played an important role in Latin American politics over the rest of the century. While many of these rifts became especially prominent during the Cold War, they developed out of earlier divisions over how best to counter U.S. dominance.

The anti-imperialist upsurge of the 1920s and '30s was formative for a generation of Latin American radicals. Several of those who entered political life during these years went on to play key roles in major events of the 20th century. Raúl Roa, for example, who served as foreign secretary for Cuba's revolutionary government from 1959 to 1976, was first politicised in the island's anti-imperialist movement of the 1920s.

The men and women whose political visions were formed in the interwar period carried those ideals forward into the Cold War era. In important ways, the 1920s and 1930s laid vital groundwork for later and better-known radical movements.

Past is, of course, not always prologue. It is impossible to predict what the long-term consequences of current U.S. policy in Latin America will be, especially given the rightward tilt that is currently unfolding across the region.

But looking at the region's anti-imperialist traditions does point to one possible outcome: The U.S.'s newly aggressive stance will, sooner rather than later, fuel a resurgence of anti-imperialist sentiment as the organising principle for a new generation of activists. (Tony Wood is Assistant Professor of History, Modern Latin America, University of Colorado Boulder. This article is republished from *The Conversation*)

**THE GIST**

▼ The approach resembles an older pattern of U.S. policy, justified by the Roosevelt Corollary and the exercise of an "international police power".

▼ Across Latin America, movements from student organisations, labour unions, and leftist political parties put forward sharp critiques of U.S. power.

▼ Over time, deep divergences over strategy and principle pitted revolutionaries against democratic reformists, shaping politics in the region.

BUILDING BLOCKS

# From light waves to quantum physics: the science behind smart washbasins

Invisible infrared waves are emitted by IR LEDs and detected by photodiodes to enable devices like remotes, automatic washbasins to function; this 'magic' is actually optics and condensed matter physics in action, where invisible light interacts with sensors, electrons to create automatic responses

Adhip Agarwala

**E**ven though phones now provide an inexhaustible source of entertainment, going to a nearby movie theatre to watch a film still has its own charm. The shared loud laughter, the annoying phone calls of neighbours, and even the endless paan-masala ads featuring fitness-enthusiastic Bollywood actors remind us of simpler times when only humans were sometimes called intelligent.

But even though movie theatres have transformed from having inedible food to unaffordable food, a few things have changed for good. For example, one of the most magical things in recent multiplexes, even if you ignore the thousand-crore-movies and the ear-wrenching Dolby surround sound, is the humble-looking washbasins. Incidentally, when you place your hand below the tap, it becomes self-aware and offers you water.

In fact, multiplexes (and even airports and metro stations) now seem to be aware. Doors open automatically, paused escalators start moving, and with a wave of your hand, sanitisers, dryers, and soap dispensers activate.

So, have you ever wondered how a washbasin detects you? In fact, even before magical wands became popular, you had some in your homes. Each of your remotes – be it for TV or AC – works like one. You point it from a distance, and suddenly the TV or AC comes to life.

Hiding behind all of this non-Harry-Potter-universe magic is, as always, some beautiful piece of physics. And this time, it is of a unique type of invisible light.

**What exactly is a wave?**

Before we go on to the invisible, the first natural question to ask is what is light? And the short answer is – light is a wave.

A wave is a disturbance that moves periodically, like a child on a swing. Now imagine a large playground with a thousand swings, all tied together. If you push just one swing, the disturbance travels through all of them until even the last swing starts moving. This moving disturbance is what we call a wave. Please note that no kids have been harmed in conducting this thought experiment.

A wave has a frequency, which depends on how fast the swing moves back and forth. If it does it once in a second, we call it one Hertz. Instead, if it does it 1,000 times in a second, we call it 1 kilohertz.

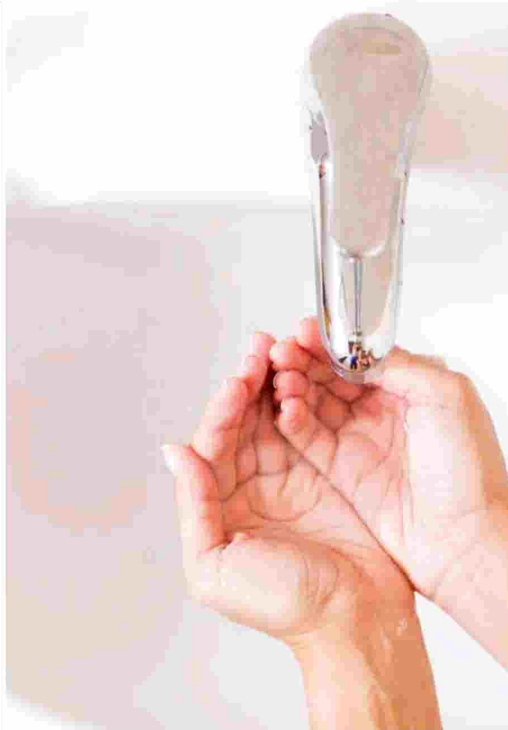
We see waves all the time – in ripples on water when a stone is thrown, or in sound when a car suddenly honks behind us in traffic. Those are sound waves. But light waves are a bit strange.

The reason is simple. In water waves, it is the water that moves after getting disturbed. Similarly, in sound waves, it is the air that has been disturbed by that car (also may be your mental peace).

But what moves in a light wave? After all, sunlight travels from the sun to earth through outer space, which has nothing to move. Light moves through a vacuum.

**Invisible light**

Light belongs to the family of electromagnetic (EM) waves – a wave in which electric and magnetic fields



GETTY IMAGES

oscillate. An electric field is generated by a battery, and a magnetic field by magnets. But here they are generated simultaneously and have to change with time. In nature, they can be generated in multiple ways, one of which is by electrons inside an atom when they jiggle close to the nucleus. The faster the electrons jiggle, more is the frequency of the EM wave they create.

When such waves fall on our eyes, we can see them – but only a very tiny window of such frequencies. These frequencies are between 400 and 800 terahertz. Just like a kilo-Hz means a jiggle 1000 or 10<sup>3</sup> times in a second, a terahertz means 10<sup>15</sup> times in a second – really, really fast. These ranges of EM waves are termed visible light.

In all of physics, the study of light and its properties remains one of the beautiful fields of study. This area of study is optics.

So, continuing, even if we do not 'see' all frequency waves, it does not mean they are not present. In fact, we are drenched in electromagnetic waves of various types. Radio waves (our FM radio) cannot be seen, but our radio transistors can pick them up. Similarly, microwaves are another type of electromagnetic wave.

Even within the light we do see, the different colours – from red to blue – have slightly different frequencies. The frequency of red is slightly lower than that of blue. The kind of waves that give the

remote magic are called Infrared (IR) waves. Here, 'infra' means lower than, because their frequency is just below that of red light. These waves, although like visible light, are actually 'invisible'. That is, our human eyes cannot see them.

Pick up a remote closest to you, maybe belonging to a (slightly older style) TV or an AC. If you see the front end, you may find a tiny bulb. This is actually an LED – light-emitting diode. It means it emits some light when switched on. Think of it like a torch. Now, if you press the on button, you may not see anything glowing and wonder if this LED is really working. Turns out, it is 'actually glowing', just that your eyes can't see it. Many of our modern smartphone cameras are sensitive to it. The other day, some students here taught me that if you point your phone camera at the LED and press the on button on the remote, you may actually 'see' this IR light. Did you?

Well, in fact, if our eyes were sensitive to IR rays, this world would look very different to us. We could also look very different to each other since our bodies also create IR waves. If you want to see how we would look, you can go to a website called cool-cosmos. This is run by IPAC, a physics centre at the California Institute of Technology, created by physics teachers to learn about IR waves. They have an IR Zoo, which has pictures of many animals and how they would

appear in IR.

Now, while you may agree that a remote creates IR waves, the TV or the AC needs to know about them. Here comes the second important actor – the sensor.

**Sensors as switches**

You may think of a sensor as a railway crossing manager. It allows the train to pass if it gets the correct torch signal from far. These sensors are called photodiodes. They conduct electricity if light falls on it. The torch is the IR-LED, the train is of electrons in any electrical circuit, and the crossing manager is the photodiode. When the remote is switched on (the LED is on), the IR light falls on the photodiode. The photodiode now allows for the current to pass and your TV or AC switches on. Otherwise, it is in the OFF state, and the current does not reach.

Just like for a train to pass, the manager needs to know which colour torch is the 'green signal'. Similarly, the sensor is only sensitive to the IR signals of the specific remote. Otherwise, your TV remote could switch on the AC and vice versa. You may now wonder how one creates the specific sensor. That is a different story, but a marvelous amount of material science and engineering goes behind this.

The physics subject which deals with the 'why' behind all of this, is called condensed-matter-physics.

**How washbasins detect hands**

So what really happens in that multiplex washbasin?

Here, an IR LED is kept and a sensor is placed just next to it. It is like having a torch that you are holding and pointing it in a vast dark space. Since you are holding the torch and are pointing it in front, the light will not directly fall into your eye. But now imagine that suddenly a big mirror comes in front of you. That mirror will reflect the torchlight from your hands right into your own eye and you will be able to tell – "Aha! A mirror must have appeared!"

Something similar happens when you place your hand in the basin. Usually, the IR light coming from the LED does not fall on the sensor and the water is not running. But when you place your hand, your hand reflects the IR light and now it falls on the sensor. The sensor thinks of it like a "green signal" and switches on the circuit. This circuit is tied to water and gets the water running!

**Quantum mechanics**

You may still wonder, how does a sensor work? How do electrons know the IR wave? How does the LED work? Much of this requires learning of quantum mechanics, condensed matter physics, and optics, something which one is taught in physics courses, for example, here at IIT Kanpur. If you are interested, you should consider studying physics.

So next time, when you go to watch a movie in a multiplex, and find that the multi-crore movie did not stand up to your expectations – do not be disheartened. Enjoy the ads and ambience, and then take a break to use the washbasin.

Another movie would be at play for you – with ultra-modern sensors, quantum electrons, invisible IR light, and four centuries of physics just to create the perfect magical moment.

(Adhip Agarwala is an Assistant Professor of Physics at IIT Kanpur)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

S. Upendran

"Haven't seen you for a while. Where have you been?"  
"It's been so hot. I don't step out of the house till 6:00 in the evening."  
"Yes, the weather has been terrible, hasn't it? How about having dinner with me at the new restaurant tonight?"  
"No, thanks. I went there with some of my friends. I had a bowl of soup and some noodles. It was really expensive."  
"I see. By the way, the 'ow' in 'b.o.w.' is pronounced like....."  
"...I know, I know. It's pronounced like the 'ow' in 'owl', 'fowl', and...."  
"...no, it isn't. The 'ow' rhymes with the 'o' in words like 'gold', 'bold' and 'old'.  
"Really? That's interesting. Since we are talking about pronunciation, how is 's.e.w.' pronounced?"  
"It's pronounced like the word 'so'.  
"But I have heard a lot of people pronouncing the 'ew' like the 'oo' in 'fool', 'cool', and 'pool'.  
"I know! But the word is pronounced the same way as 'so'.  
"If 's.e.w.' is pronounced like the word 'so', then how is 's.o.w.' pronounced?"  
"It depends on which word you are talking about?"  
"What do you mean by which word? I am talking about the planting of seeds."  
"...oh that 'sow'. It's pronounced like 's.e.w.' and 's.o.w.'"  
"So you have three words which are pronounced the same way! 'S.o.', 's.e.w.', and 's.o.w.' are pronounced exactly alike."  
"Not always. You see, a female pig is also spelt s.o.w. But the 'ow', in this case, is pronounced like the 'ow' in 'how', 'cow', and 'now'.  
"I see."  
"How is your father's case coming along? Do you think Venkat is really going to help him win the case? Rumour has it that he is not a man of his word."  
"What does it mean?"  
"It means someone who does what he/she promises to do."  
"Many of my classmates say that our Principal is not a man of his words."  
"The expression is 'a man of his word'. You cannot say 'my man of his words'.  
"I see. 'Principal is not a man of his word'.  
"My boss isn't a man of his word either."  
"One cannot expect a politician to be a man of his word."  
"Are you saying that my boss is a politician?"  
"No, not I was just giving an example."  
"Tell me, why did your father go to Venkat of all people?"  
"Some of my father's friends told him that Venkat is well versed with the rules and regulations of the..."  
"...well versed in."  
"What?"  
"You don't say 'well versed with', but 'well versed in'. Do you know what the expression 'well versed in', means?"  
"I think so. Doesn't it mean to know a lot about something?"  
"When you are well versed in something, you know a great deal about a particular subject. It could also mean that you are good at doing something."  
"My Principal goes around telling everyone that he is well versed in English literature. But he doesn't know a thing."  
"We are looking for someone who is well versed in automobile engineering."  
"I am looking for someone who is well versed in physics and chemistry."  
"Why?"  
"I want him to write my exams for me!"  
Published in The Hindu on May 9, 2000

## THE DAILY QUIZ

Test your knowledge of the Natale di Roma, the legendary foundation of the Eternal city, a mix of myth, ancient Roman tradition and centuries of evolving celebrations

Prathmesh Kher

**QUESTION 1**

According to tradition, on what exact date was Rome founded?

**QUESTION 2**

Which legendary figure is credited with the founding of Rome?

**QUESTION 3**

What animal is said to have suckled Romulus and his twin brother Remus as infants?

**QUESTION 4**

Which traditional Roman chronological term, meaning "from the founding of the City", originates from this date?

**QUESTION 5**

The twins Romulus and Remus were mythically said to be descendants of which Trojan hero?



**Visual Question:**

The coin shown here was issued by the Roman usurper Pacatianus and bears the inscription "1001". What does this number signify in Roman chronology? PUBLIC DOMAIN

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

1. Name the U.S. president who coined the phrase 'United Nations' in a 1942 Allied declaration. **Ans: Franklin D. Roosevelt**  
2. Which are the two languages, from among the UN's six official languages, that are not the national language of any permanent Security Council member? **Ans: Spanish and Arabic**  
3. The X in 1956 triggered the first 'Emergency Special Session' of the UN General Assembly. This is a procedure reserved for when the Security Council enters a deadlock, in this case caused by two permanent members vetoing resolutions against their own

**military action. Ans: Suez Crisis**

4. Name the principal judicial organ of the UN. It rules on disputes between states rather than prosecuting individuals, which is a distinction that sets it apart from the International Criminal Court. **Ans: International Court of Justice**  
5. Which country cast the Security Council's first-ever veto, in 1946, on a question about the withdrawal of foreign troops from the Levant? **Ans: Soviet Union/Russia**  
Visual: Name the body formerly hosted at these two buildings and which was intimately related to the birth of the United Nations. **Ans: League of Nations**  
**Early Birds:** K.N. Viswanathan | Erfanally Osmany | Tito Shiladitya | Sonali Das | Mohan Lal Patel

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

## Word of the day

**Jeer:** showing your contempt by derision  
**Synonyms:** taunt, mock, insult  
**Usage:** Even after the jeers, he continued his speech.  
**Pronunciation:** newsth.live/jeer  
**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /dʒɪə/

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

# Long UPSC prep cycles take a toll on aspirants' mental health

The psychological experience of preparing for UPSC examination differs from other competitive examinations, including JEE for IITs and NEET for medical education, because aspirants typically prepare for the exam for several years, which leads to chronic rather than short-term stress

Rohan Singh  
Neeraj Kumar Singh

For lakhs of young Indians, the national civil services examination is not just a test: it becomes part of who they are. More than 10 lakh aspirants take the examination every year. Many spend several years preparing, often relocating to coaching hubs such as Delhi and Hyderabad.

With only around a thousand positions on offer, the examination is among the world's most competitive. Experts are concerned that this prolonged, high-stakes process is also reshaping aspirants' sense of self.

For many aspirants, preparation is marked by long hours of study and constant anxiety about outcomes. One aspirant who requested anonymity said the uncertainty is worse than the workload: "My biggest fear is not performing to my full potential despite consistent effort."

## Hidden psychological cost

Passing the qualifying exam for the Union Public Services Commission (UPSC) comes with a sustained form of psychological strain. In a 2024 study involving UPSC aspirants, Madiha Fatima, PhD scholar and senior research fellow at the University of Lucknow's Department of Psychology, found that 70% of aspirants reported moderate to severe distress.

"The pressure of uncertainty whether one will qualify, the vast syllabus, fear of forgetting, and the ever-changing exam pattern all contribute," she said. Persistent self-doubt, she added, often leaves aspirants questioning whether they are capable or simply wasting their time. "Privileged students don't face the same stress. Underprivileged aspirants struggle to afford courses or materials. Some work part-time, reducing rest and study time," Ms. Fatima said.

Years of repeated failures also erode self-confidence, leading to avoidance and isolation that affects psychological health. She pointed to delayed answer keys, unpredictable paper patterns, and the vast seat-to-aspirant gap as structural stressors.

According to independent psychiatrist A.K. Mishra, such prolonged identification reshapes how aspirants perceive setbacks: "Aspirants often begin to anchor their sense of self-worth almost entirely around the examination."

## Chronic stress, burnout

The psychological experience of preparing for the UPSC examination differs from other competitive examinations, including the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for the IITs and the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for medical education. This is because aspirants typically prepare for the UPSC exam for several years, which leads to chronic rather than short-term stress.

According to Dr. Mishra, such protracted preparation shifts stress from an acute phase to a persistent background state of cognitive load, decision fatigue, and reduced recovery. He also said prolonged uncertainty can produce "chronic anticipatory stress", where repeated attempts without success diminish the individual's sense of control and also contribute to emotional exhaustion.



Civil service aspirants wait outside an examination centre as they arrive to appear for the UPSC preliminary exam, in Jammu, in March 2026. ANI

Abhishek Pathak, a psychiatrist in Lucknow, also said long-term preparation shares features with chronic stress and burnout. Prolonged uncertainty can lead to "anticipatory anxiety and identity fusion." However, he noted that the impact is bidirectional — it enhances risks in some people and promotes growth in others — and that early support can mitigate adverse outcomes.

Prolonged uncertainty is particularly challenging for young adults in their 20s, a phase typically associated with career formation and financial independence. When many years in this stage of life are instead devoted to a single exam, the stakes can become intensely personal.

## Why the dream endures

Psychology alone can't explain the toll that preparing for the UPSC exam takes. Sociologists have argued that the appeal of the civil services is rooted in India's social structure, where the bureaucracy has long held authority and prestige and families widely perceive the services to be a path to upward mobility.

South Asian University sociologist Sumedha Dutta traced this aspiration to the colonial origins of India's civil services. After independence, the prestige that came with a member of the civil services, including the high salary, job security, housing, and pension, remained intact. "Civil servants are part of the power elite," she said.

The yearning for government jobs didn't decline even in the post-liberalisation era even as the private sector burgeoned. "Private sector jobs, despite high salaries, do not match up in terms of stability, numerous perks, pension, power, and prestige," Dr. Dutta said.

She pointed to matrimonial advertisements where civil servants rank highly, plus the media's role in valorising successful aspirants, as factors that reinforce the exam's status in the collective imagination.

The aspirant ecosystem surrounding the exam in fact reflects this collective aspiration. Entire neighbourhoods in



The pressure of uncertainty whether one will qualify, the vast syllabus, fear of forgetting, and the ever-changing exam pattern all contribute

**MADIHA FATIMA**  
Senior research fellow at the University of Lucknow

Delhi and Prayagraj are dedicated to coaching institutes, libraries, and hostels, forming a parallel education economy.

Among them, coaching institutes — while they are central to this ecosystem — remain largely unexamined in shaping or mitigating psychological distress. The aspirant quoted earlier said, "Coaching centres benefit financially from prolonged preparation cycles. There is no accountability, no oversight."

Within this ecosystem, aspirants form tightly knit peer groups and share educational materials, attend lectures together, and discuss current affairs late into the night. While these networks offer support, they can also intensify pressure through constant comparison. As Dr. Dutta said, this in-group solidarity is also shaped by a sense of collective superiority.

"UPSC aspirants already envision themselves as part of the elite group which runs the administration of the nation state," she explained. "They believe other career pathways are 'mere professions' while civil servants are the ones who decide the fate of other professionals in many ways."

This shared imagination of a secure, prestigious future, she added, can also help aspirants navigate the hardships that come with prolonged preparation.

## Inside the system

Psychologists have stressed that while ambition and perseverance are valuable, preparation ecosystems must also recognise the emotional risks of prolonged uncertainty. Access to counselling, peer support, and realistic

career guidance could help reduce this burden.

Harivansh Chaturvedi, director-general of the Institute of Integrated Learning in Management, New Delhi, said that while many aspirants spend years preparing, doing so reflects individual choice within a highly aspirational system rather than a purely systemic failure. However, he acknowledged that unsuccessful attempts can still result in significant personal loss of time and effort.

To this end, he suggested faster evaluation, more frequent preliminary exams, streamlined selection, and specialised undergraduate programmes aligned with public administration.

Ms. Fatima said most research studies have been descriptive; they have identified problems, not solutions. She also argued that the scale of aspiration needs rethinking and suggested encouraging youth towards other professions or startups.

Dr. Mishra added that preparation could, over time, take a maladaptive form in some cases, particularly when it loses flexibility and proportionality. "Key indicators include persistent distress, neglect of alternative roles, inability to reassess goals, and compulsive continuation driven by fear of disengagement," he said.

At the same time, sociologists argue that the popularity of the civil services exam reflects deeper structural issues in India's employment landscape. Dr. Dutta said the UPSC ecosystem "unravels India's development inadequacies". Rising GDP hasn't matched jobs, the informal sector offers little security, and there is a major skill gap.

For many graduates, particularly from smaller towns, the civil services thus remain one of a few career options seen as both prestigious and secure.

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Sundarbans is the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

## Sundarbans may be less blue than it seems

Vasudevan Mukunth

Researchers from the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Kolkata, have reported that microplastics could interfere with the natural food web and alter the carbon budget of the Bay of Bengal.

As microplastics weather and break down, they leach dissolved organic carbon into the water; the microbes living on the plastic also create 'biogenic' carbon, the team reported in a paper due to be published in the May 2026 issue of the *Journal of Hazardous Materials Advances*.

The authors conducted a year-long study to understand how small plastic particles move through the ecosystem and how they might interfere with natural carbon cycles.

The Sundarbans is the world's largest contiguous mangrove forest. Because it sits at the confluence of major rivers like the Ganga and the Brahmaputra, a large amount of waste generated upstream is also carried into the delta.

**As microplastics break down in water, they release dissolved organic carbon, which can be food for bacteria to grow and multiply much faster than they would naturally**

While scientists have known that the area is polluted, they have lacked detailed information on how microplastics behave in the surface water across different seasons and how much carbon they contribute to the environment.

Between October 2021 and October 2022, the IISER Kolkata collected water samples twice a month from three locations near Sagar Island in the Mooranganga estuary, then used advanced laboratory techniques to identify the types of plastic and observe how the particles were breaking down.

"This way, the team uncovered a high concentration of microplastics, ranging from about 5 particles per liter to over 58 particles per liter. Their levels were around 40% higher during the monsoon season because, the researchers concluded, heavy rainfall washed plastic waste from the land and urban drains into the estuary. In these months, they also found a surge in what they called "colourless fragments" — likely older, weathered pieces of plastic being moved by surface runoff.

Around half of the plastics were fibres, likely from textiles, followed by fragments. The most common materials were polypropylene, which is used in packaging, and polyethylene terephthalate, used to make water bottles.

High-resolution imaging revealed that the microplastics were not clean but had cracks, pits, and grooves, suggesting that they were breaking down into even smaller nanoparticles. The researchers also found plastispheres, which are complex communities of bacteria and microbes living on the surface of the plastic.

Crucially, because the plastics are roughly 90% carbon, they were acting as a "novel carbon reservoir", the researchers wrote in their paper. As microplastics break down in water, they release dissolved organic carbon, which can be food for bacteria to grow and multiply much faster than they would naturally. The life-forms growing on the plastic were producing carbon of their own, called biogenic carbon.

Mangroves are blue-carbon ecosystems, meaning they are efficient at capturing and storing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. However, the authors added, the introduction of carbon in the form of plastics could render them less efficient. Microplastics in the Sundarbans are now a significant part of the ecosystem's carbon cycle.

## THE SCIENCE QUIZ

### Where rivers and cities meet

Vasudevan Mukunth

#### QUESTION 1

The name of this city in Arabic means "elephant's trunk" — which it earned because it is located in a peninsula shaped in this way, formed by the merging of the blue-green Blue Nile and the muddier White Nile. Which city is this?

#### QUESTION 2

\_\_\_\_\_ in Peru is the world's largest city that is inaccessible by road yet which is also not an island. It has a population of around 5 lakh. It is also called the Peruvian Amazon and lies at the convergence of the Amazon, Itaya, and Nanay rivers. Fill in the blank.

#### QUESTION 3

A major node in the trans-Saharan trade from the 13th to the 16th centuries, \_\_\_\_\_ lies at the point where the Niger river reaches its northernmost arc into the desert. Back then, it was where traders exchanged West African gold and salt; it also housed three large mosques and several Islamic universities. Fill in the blank.

#### QUESTION 4

The city of X lies 1,500 km inland from the Atlantic Ocean, at the confluence of the Negro and Amazon rivers. It grew rapidly during the rubber boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it briefly became one of the wealthiest cities in South America. Name X.

#### QUESTION 5

This city has been continuously inhabited since around 1200 BC. It lies on the west bank of a river, at the point where the river bends towards the north. This bend is significant in Hindu cosmology and the city has been a centre of religious pilgrimage throughout its history. Name it.



**VISUAL:** Name this iconic city of 32 million in China located where the Jialing and Yangtze rivers come together. DAVI0290 (CC BY-SA)

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

**Answers to April 16 quiz:**

1. Tree whose outer bark peels off at different times of year —

**Ans: Rainbow eucalyptus**

2. "Upside down" tree that excels at storing water —

**Ans: Baobab**

3. Property of Jaboticaba tree due to which its fruits grow on the trunk —

**Ans: Cauliflorous**

4. Colony of quaking aspens in Utah that is a single organism —

**Ans: Pando**

5. Tree with stilt-like roots that allows it to 'walk' —

**Ans: Walking palm**

**Visual:** Mithulash  
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Prem Nath Tiwari | Anmol Agrawal

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

## Snooping around

CCTVs with Chinese spyware must be weeded out

**A** recent report in this newspaper about hostile entities compromising Indian closed circuit TV networks has evoked considerable unease. These technologies seek to provide 'security', but often double up as spyware. Notably, reports indicate that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence recently accessed live visual feeds and information from key defence and police sites over a period of three months across Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Jammu and Kashmir via devices linked to EsecCloud — a Chinese software platform commonly used in surveillance equipment.



The larger truth is that India's national security and intelligence apparatus relies too much on China for technology. Over the last few years, India has been progressively tightening regulations on the use of foreign-made CCTV equipment. Effective April 1 this year, rules prohibiting the sale of CCTVs that fail to meet prescribed testing norms kicked in. Moving from loose governance to mandating 'Essential Requirements' for CCTV equipment was indeed long overdue. Currently, a vast majority of CCTVs sold, especially the cameras that come as part of the package, are sourced from China. Indian companies claiming increased market share remain tethered to Chinese supply chains for essential parts. The new norms, overseen by the Standardised Testing and Quality Certification (STQC) Directorate, require equipment clearance — for software, firmware and hardware. The testing in this regard will be done at STQC centres or labs accredited by the Ministry of Electronics & IT (MeitY). While this regulatory framework is a good first step, the most rigorous assessments could miss minuscule hardware implants. For instance, nearly a decade ago, intelligence authorities in the US purportedly discovered grain-sized hardware in a technology major's servers, used to clandestinely transmit information to China.

In the corporate sector, it is imperative that companies ensure their corporate networks are independent of, or if not, at least secured from, their security systems even if the two are integrated. Given that security infrastructure depends heavily on imported components, a 'trojan horse' — particularly in vendor systems servicing government or defence establishments — that infiltrates networks could prove disastrous. Even if the CCTV equipment itself is secure, the involvement of third-party service providers introduces risks beyond the government's purview. For example, the security of recordings uploaded to the cloud is contingent upon the provider's systems. Similarly, if integration service providers — who assemble products using components from various specialists — remain lax about security, infiltration becomes child's play.

For now, the CCTV policy seems a solo move in a sea of other dependencies. India needs to transition from assembling units to designing and manufacturing them locally. An indigenous semiconductor ecosystem and CCTV sector is a must. A roadmap of say three years, should be drawn up to this end.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH



"I think there was a data breach at our pet clinic. Snowy has got loan offers for a car, a home and a lot of cash!"



C RANGARAJAN  
N R BHANUMURTHY

**T**he world is entering an era of 'Might is Right'. It has always been so but with the two recent wars — Russia-Ukraine and US, Iran — this has become pronounced.

Even if there is some justification, relentless attacking of another country through air strikes is a violation of the principle with which the international order was built up after World War II.

In this new situation, in a world interconnected through trade, not only the nations directly involved but also other nations suffer. The world trade is shrinking. Interdependence has become a liability.

Earlier, unilateral imposition of high tariffs by US resulted in the weaponisation of tariffs. Tariffs were used to achieve non-economic objectives. Developing economies were allowed to levy tariffs on certain commodities because of the time needed to catch up with developed countries.

If this is to be reconsidered, there is a forum and method to do it. Unilateral actions on tariffs can only disrupt world trade. How should developing countries react to the emerging situation of wars and tariffs? What can be done to reduce their adverse impact?

**REVERSAL OF TRADE THEORY**  
The economic impact of the two wars has been severe. They have knocked out the very basis of international trade, the world order and its governance. International trade theory suggests that if there is free trade among countries, each country will produce that commodity in which it has a comparative advantage. The net result will be that the world will be a least-cost economy with welfare gains.

Of course there are certain caveats. When WTO was being set up, experts recognised that there is a need to provide certain concessions to developing countries as mentioned earlier. Benefits of international trade are also built on the premise that there are no impediments in the transport of goods.

Unfortunately, we see a breakdown of all these assumptions in the current situation. There is a blockade of Strait of Hormuz by both US and Iran. India depends on Gulf countries for crude oil to a large extent. Nearly half of India's oil imports are from Gulf countries. India's dependence on Gulf countries for gas is even greater. If there is no free passage through the Strait, we face an extremely difficult situation.

Overall availability of crude oil gets reduced and prices shoot up. Both US and Iran are ignoring the code of conduct laid down by maritime laws. Strait of Hormuz is not Suez Canal



REUTERS

# How two wars have upended the global order

**UNCERTAIN FUTURE.** Collapse of the rules based global trading framework will lead to a high-cost economic system. Creating ample buffer stocks of fuel and fertilizer is the way out

which was artificially constructed and where toll fee is permissible. Strait of Hormuz is a natural sea way. A modest toll fee may be permissible to take care of the maintenance of the sea way but not a heavy toll.

**SUPPLY DISRUPTIONS AND ALTERNATIVES**  
Supply disruptions affect the production processes. The supply chain linking many countries is an integral part of the production system now world over. With the Strait of Hormuz being restricted and breaking the supply chain, it has caused heavy risks on both growth and inflation across the countries.

What could have been done by India or any other country caught in this mess? First, particularly in the case of critical inputs, we should avoid dependence on other countries. This is not always possible. In the case of crude oil, it is nature's gift.

One thing we can do is not to rely on one group of countries particularly geographically aligned, but diversify the sourcing. India has moved in that direction. There are almost 41 countries

**For an import dependent nation like India, geographical diversification of sourcing, building strategic reserves of fuel and pushing the renewable energy agenda are the viable options**

from which India is importing. In fact, India's attempt to import from Russia also came under special attack earlier with US levying 25 per cent tax on imports from countries that had traded with Russia.

Second, if import is unavoidable can we hold an inventory lasting for several months? Data indicate that this has also been done, although not at the scale as suggested by International Energy Agency (IEA), which suggest Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) covering 90 days of domestic consumption. But this has a high cost. Expensive storage facilities will also have to be put up. One has to strike a balance here. We can look at how Japan has done, which reserves that can cover domestic consumption for more than 200 days.

Another way to do is to look at the option of having forward commercial storage agreements with source companies that will reduce the cost.

Third, India and other countries must look at alternative sources of energy. Use of coal was discouraged because of environmental considerations. Solar energy is a good option. Much has been done in recent years with its share in total installed power generation capacity increasing to about 25 per cent. But more should be done. On a mission mode expansion in the area must be undertaken.

The other alternative is nuclear energy. India has made progress in this area also. France is one major country where, based on some estimates, nuclear energy meets nearly 70 per cent of energy requirements with 57 nuclear

reactors in place. However, safety concerns related to nuclear energy cannot be brushed aside. Experts need to come together and provide a plan of action. These, however, are all medium-term objectives.

While a number of initiatives can be undertaken to take care of the present situation, one must take note that the world is moving towards a sub-optimal situation. We will have to live in a costlier system. In the emerging world of dominance of 'might', will defence need more attention? Will 'guns' take a lead over 'butter' in the allocation of resources?

Emerging economies like India need to create buffers for essential commodities to mitigate the exogenous shocks. Some of the essential inputs that we may have to focus could be food, fuel (including gas), fertilizer, and on the resources side, it is foreign exchange reserves and fiscal space. India has sufficient food and forex reserves. Forex reserves do not help always in the present case when, supply is disrupted. With prudent fiscal management, India has created a fiscal space to mitigate the risks. Fiscal prudence must continue to remain a major focus of the government.

With the changing world situation, the medium-term strategy must be to create buffers for fuel and fertilizers or any other commodity, which is critically important. We should also work towards an improved world environment of cooperation rather than confrontation.

Rangarajan is Chairman and Bhanumurthy is Director of Madras School of Economics, Chennai

## A ratings tweak that could enhance bank credit

RBI's proposal to alter rating-risk mapping can free up credit to the MSME sector

Venkataraman S

**I**n late 2025, as part of a draft paper put out for public comments, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) proposed certain modified norms for scheduled commercial banks, with regard to computation of capital charge for credit risk. If implemented, these guidelines can hugely impact the Indian banking sector as well as the loan-seeking corporate sector.

Currently, RBI requires Indian banks to keep a minimum level of capital according to borrowers' credit ratings by agencies like Crisil, ICRA, CARE etc. Such a capital charge follows the globally recognized regulatory standards developed by the Bank of International Settlements (BIS) — generally referred to as Basel Norms.

Maintaining minimum capital according to Risk Weighted Assets (RWA), in order to moderate the impact of credit risk is a central tenet of Basel norms, although the latter's scope also includes other aspects. RBI's recent proposal becomes significant in this

context. Credit rating agencies denote credit risk in ordered risk categories such as AAA, AA, A, BBB, BB, B, etc., wherein borrowers rated BB or lower, are generally considered to incur high risk. The current RBI norms for computing RWA apply graded weights ranging from 20-80 per cent from AAA to A, 100 per cent to BBB, and from 150 per cent upwards to credits rated BB category or lower.

For example, if a bank lends ₹100 to a company rated BB, applying current RWA norms, it is considered as effectively having lent ₹150; whereas if it lends the same amount to a AAA borrower, it is considered effectively as having lent only ₹20; and as ₹100 itself, if the entity is rated in the BBB category. Accordingly, the capital banks maintain have to be higher or lower.

Given this RWA approach, banks have to strategically choose how much and to whom they lend to. It has a direct implication on banks' ability to grow their loan book. By implication, this also impacts the credit availability for companies — especially for those that



RBI PROPOSAL. A game changer

fall in perceived higher risk categories, such as SMEs and MSMEs.

**WHAT'S THE BIG CHANGE?**  
RBI's proposal effectively shifts the rating-risk mapping by one step. That is, instead of 100 per cent risk weight being applied at the BBB category, it may now apply only at the BB category. The import of this single step-change however is staggering. One, this can release a huge amount of money for lending, as banks' capital charge effectively eases.

An Crisil estimate pegs this extra amount of the order of about ₹70,000 crore. Also, about 25-30 per cent of all rated companies fall in the BB category,

and they can all benefit from this change. With this move, RBI has prompted and also effectively enabled banks to now approach the SME segment with a lot more intent, and with less stigma.

But it also needs to be accompanied by appropriately stronger credit appraisal and monitoring by banks, to ensure prudent growth. The impetus for growth that this step affords to the important SME/MSME sector can be tremendous. Finally, the proposed norms, if implemented, will bring RBI's RWA norms to closer alignment with the Basel-III norms, the current norms being more conservative.

RBI's consultative paper has more to it beyond the change in RWA. This includes a mapping of ratings to Probability of Default (PD), a much-needed measure to enhance the quality of credit ratings. Nevertheless, this step change in the RWA dispensation can be a game-changer for Indian banking and SMEs.

The writer is Associate Dean and Associate Professor, IM Kozhikode

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### Fertilizer crisis

This refers to 'West Asia crisis and fertilizer management' (April 20). The intensifying geopolitical turbulence across West Asia has precipitated a structural dislocation in global fertilizer supply chains, severely exposing India's import dependence. Disruptions in natural gas availability — an indispensable feedstock for nitrogenous fertilizers — have escalated production costs and constrained supply, transmitting inflationary pressures onto an already distressed agrarian economy. This exogenous shock calls for diversification of sourcing geographies, augmentation of domestic manufacturing capacity, and incentivisation of bio-fertilizers

and sustainable agronomic practices. Furthermore, rationalising the subsidy regime and instituting strategic reserves, coupled with resilient bilateral procurement arrangements, are imperative to mitigate volatility and fortify long-term agricultural security.

**N Sathish Reddy**

Bengaluru

Bengaluru

Bengaluru

Bengaluru

Bengaluru

Bengaluru

Bengaluru

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Bengaluru

Bengaluru

Parliamentary seats did not cut ice with States as it was not written into the Bill. But the Opposition too must understand the need to revise Parliament seats given the rise in population.

On women's reservation, the government seeking political mileage by pushing the Opposition in a corner also must not be ignored.

**RV Baskaran**

Pune

Pune

Pune

Pune

Pune

Pune

Pune

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Pune

Pune

Pune

Pune

emphasize subsidies and cash transfers, DMK also addresses Chennai's urban needs — mini-buses, Metro completion by 2028, AI-enabled traffic systems, stormwater drain upgrades, and RO-purified water and surprisingly 'stray dog menace'. It also blends technology and culture, promising AI hubs, gaming and animation centres, and a world-class cultural facility under the "Davidian Model 2.0."

This dual strategy positions DMK as both a welfare provider and moderniser, distinguishing its manifesto from competitors who remain largely welfare-centric without comparable urban development plan.

**OPrasada Rao**

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

Hyderabad

### Systemic brutality

This refers to 'The tragic reality of police brutality' (April 20). The death sentence handed to nine policemen for the heinous torture and eventual death of a father-son duo in Tamil Nadu's Sattankulam draws attention to the deep-seated, systematic fault-lines in the country's police force. This incident would have been forgotten but for the huge public outcry which sparked an enquiry and the subsequent court prosecution. Unless fundamental Police reforms are implemented, beginning with entry-level candidate screening, and it is protected from external pressure, the episode is unlikely to be the last of its kind.

**Kamal Laddha**

Bengaluru

Bengaluru

Bengaluru

Bengaluru

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# A major health challenge

Holistic care needed to treat metabolic disorders

MV Ramana

Metabolic disorders sit at the centre of India's non-communicable disease burden, driving many of the country's most serious health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, stroke, kidney failure and long-term disability. Conditions such as diabetes, obesity, hypertension and lipid disorders disrupt the body's ability to regulate blood sugar, fat metabolism and energy balance. When left unmanaged, they progressively lead to complex and costly complications.

The scale of the challenge is unprecedented. A 2023 Lancet study estimated that more than 100 million Indians are living with diabetes, with over 130 million more at high risk due to pre-diabetes. In effect, nearly one in four Indians is affected by significant metabolic dysfunction. Equally concerning is the demographic shift underlying this trend: metabolic risks are appearing earlier in life, progressing faster, and leading to complications during individuals' most productive years.

In this landscape, an integrated care ecosystem is not a philosophical shift; it is a clinical and systemic necessity. **THERAPEUTIC TOOLS** Scientific progress has equipped us with powerful therapeutic tools. Advanced therapies targeting key hormonal pathways have demonstrated meaningful improvements in glycaemic control, weight reduction and cardio-metabolic parameters. However, their true impact depends on accessibility and affordability. Importantly, metabolic disorders are chronic, progressive and interlinked conditions that evolve over years, and their effective management requires continuity of care, patient adherence and coordinated clinical support. While a prescription can initiate change but without sustained engagement and structured follow-up, the benefits are often diluted. Fragmented care and late diagnosis continue to undermine long-term outcomes.

A 360-degree approach and the creation of a cohesive integrated care ecosystem must become the standard of care. Early detection embedded within primary care settings is the first step. Today, many individuals enter the healthcare system only after complications have developed. Equally important is the



**INTEGRATED CARE.** A clinical and systemic necessity

establishment of robust, evidence-based treatment protocols. As awareness and access to advanced therapies expand, strong clinical governance is essential. Clear algorithms, physician education and defined monitoring frameworks ensure that innovative treatments are used appropriately and responsibly. Evidence-based protocols safeguard patient safety, optimise outcomes and preserve trust in therapeutic advancements.

Institutional capacity is another critical pillar. Dedicated metabolic centres of excellence can serve as anchors of this ecosystem by bringing together endocrinologists, cardiologists, nephrologists, bariatric specialists, nutritionists and behavioural experts within a unified, protocol-driven model. Such centres can generate India-specific evidence, standardise best practices and strengthen training in comprehensive diabetes, obesity and other metabolic cares.

Nutrition and behavioural science must be embedded within metabolic management, not treated as secondary considerations. These conditions are profoundly influenced by dietary patterns, muscle mass composition and sustained lifestyle behaviours.

Digital interventions make metabolic care more proactive and personalised. Real-time tracking of diet, activity and glucose patterns helps patients stay on course, while behavioural nudges support sustained lifestyle change.

India today has the medical expertise, digital capabilities and a new generation of advanced therapies needed to transform the management of obesity, diabetes and related metabolic disorders. However, meaningful progress will depend on coordinated action across the healthcare ecosystem.

The writer is Chief Executive Officer-Global Generics, Dr. Reddy's

# Real-time metric for factory output

**RELIABLE.** Electricity can provide early pointers for manufacturing GVA, as ASI comes with a lag and IIP coverage is sketchy



ASHISH KUMAR  
PAYAL SETH

More than ten years after the launch of Make in India, manufacturing continues to sit at the core of India's development strategy. The objective, to increase manufacturing's share in GDP from 15-16 per cent to 25 per cent, has been consistently reaffirmed through policy frameworks, industrial corridor initiatives, and Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes across 14 sectors. Substantial fiscal resources and regulatory focus have been committed to achieving this target. Yet, a fundamental contradiction persists: the country still measures manufacturing activity with considerable delay.

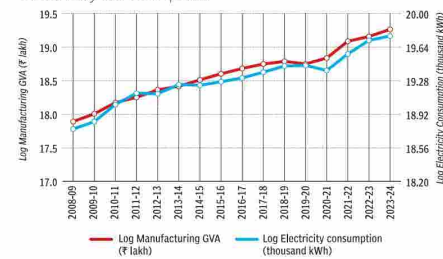
India's most detailed manufacturing dataset, the Annual Survey of Industries (ASI), is released with a lag of 18-24 months. Manufacturing Gross Value Added (GVA), as reported in the National Accounts Statistics (NAS), becomes available nearly a year after the reference period and is subject to multiple revisions. At the State level, these estimates are published even later. While the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) provides monthly updates, it remains an imperfect proxy due to limited coverage, high volatility, and persistent measurement concerns. For a country aspiring to be globally competitive in manufacturing, this creates a significant information deficit.

At the same time, India already collects a high-frequency, reliable indicator that spans States and sectors: electricity consumption. The relevant question is no longer whether electricity can serve as a proxy for manufacturing activity, but whether it can be systematically integrated into economic measurement.

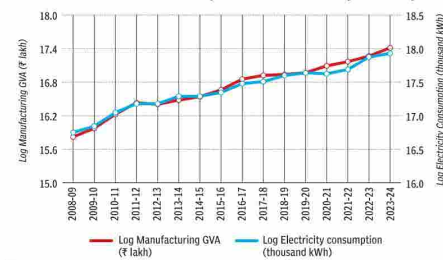
**A CLEARER SIGNAL.** Manufacturing is inherently energy-intensive. Electricity powers machinery, assembly lines, and production processes. Unlike variables such as labour utilisation or capacity use, which are difficult to observe directly, electricity consumption is continuously metered, difficult to misreport, and available at high frequency, often monthly or even daily, with granular geographic and sectoral detail.

This relationship is supported by global evidence. During the Covid-19 pandemic, studies across Europe demonstrated that electricity demand closely tracked economic contraction and recovery when official data lagged. In China, sectoral electricity consumption mirrored factory shutdowns during lockdowns and rebounded ahead of official statistics during reopening phases. Similar

## All India: Manufacturing output & electricity consumption



## NIC 10: Manufacture of food products & electricity consumption



Source: ASI Microdata 2008-09 to 2023-24. Correlation: 0.99 in both cases

findings emerge from developing regions: studies in West Africa, including Nigeria, show a statistically significant long-term relationship between electricity use and industrial output.

**THE EMPIRICAL CASE FROM INDIA** Indian data reinforce this global pattern. Over the past 15 years, manufacturing GVA and electricity consumption at the national level have moved almost perfectly together, with a correlation of 0.99. This relationship remains robust across policy shifts, economic cycles, and even the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

However, moving beyond correlation to real-time estimation requires a

**Make in India is ultimately about building factories, creating jobs, and enhancing competitiveness.** Continuing to measure manufacturing performance with a lag of nearly two years is no longer viable

structured econometric approach. Electricity consumption data, particularly from industrial feeders and high-tension manufacturing connections already recorded by State discoms, can be mapped to industries classified under the National Industrial Classification (NIC). Aggregated at weekly or monthly intervals across States and sectors, and adjusted for scale, industrial composition, and long-term trends, such data can form the basis of a model that generates early signals of manufacturing activity, well before official GVA figures are released.

**STATE-LEVEL PATTERNS** This relationship also holds at the subnational level. Gujarat, with its strong manufacturing base, reliable power supply, and dense industrial clusters, provides a clear example, showing correlations close to 0.96. Similar patterns are observed in other manufacturing-intensive States such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh, where correlations remain around 0.9.

**SECTORAL INSIGHTS** At the sectoral level, the relationship becomes even more compelling.

Industries such as food processing, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, chemicals, rubber and plastics, machinery, and fabricated metal products show correlations exceeding 0.9.

Food processing offers a particularly strong case. As a labour-intensive sector closely tied to agriculture, it plays a critical role in employment, inflation management, and exports.

Here, electricity consumption closely tracks output trends over time, including during the recovery phase after the pandemic. Under Make in India, the PLI scheme allocates ₹10,000 crore to food processing to expand capacity and boost production in segments such as ready-to-eat foods, processed fruits and vegetables, and marine products. For a policy agenda focused on jobs and value addition, this is especially relevant.

In contrast, electricity consumption is a weaker indicator in sectors like repair and installation services, where output is more service-oriented.

**WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE NOW** Leveraging electricity data as a real-time proxy for manufacturing requires coordinated institutional action. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) should lead this effort by establishing an expert group to design the measurement framework, including data architecture and standardised indicators.

This initiative must involve the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) and State discoms, which already collect detailed consumption data but do not maintain systems designed for statistical integration.

Clear, standardised guidelines from the CEA would enable consistent mapping of electricity usage to industrial activity (by NIC classification) and ensure comparability across States.

States would also need support to link electricity consumption data with administrative factory records maintained by Chief Inspectors of Factories. Over time, such integration could strengthen the ASI sampling frame and improve coverage of smaller and under-represented enterprises, particularly MSMEs.

As India transitions towards cleaner energy systems, efficiency, electricity intensity may evolve. Nevertheless, electricity demand will continue to reflect industrial cycles. In this context, the direction and timing of change are often more important than absolute levels.

Make in India is ultimately about building factories, creating jobs, and enhancing competitiveness. Continuing to measure manufacturing performance with a lag of nearly two years is no longer viable. Faster, data-driven signals are not just desirable — they are essential.

Kumar is President, and Seth is Head, Center of Data for Economic Decision-making (CoDED) at Palih India Foundation

thehindubusinessline.

## TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 21, 2006

### 12,000: In double quick time

The BSE Sensex crossed 12,000 points on Thursday, covering the last 1,000 points in a mere 15 trading sessions, its quickest run for that distance. Reports of oil discovery by index heavyweight Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) and good earnings announcements from IT players propelled indices to record highs. The benchmark BSE-30 Sensex closed at 12,039.55 on Thursday.

### Govt proposes licence fee on courier companies

In a bid to regulate the largely unorganised ₹3,500-crore courier industry, the Government has proposed to bring in a slew of measures, including imposing a one-time registration fee ranging between ₹25,000 and ₹10 lakh on private courier companies and setting up an independent postal regulator and a dispute settlement tribunal.

### Reliance Petro issue subscribed by over 47 times

Reliance Petroleum Ltd's public issue created a record in the IPO market by generating a demand of over ₹1.32 lakh crore worth of shares, beating ONGC's IPO in 2004, in which the investor bid was to the tune of ₹73,000 crore. The IPO for 45-crore shares was oversubscribed by over 47 times.

# US open to helping UAE financially if needed

Hadriana Lowenkron

**T**he US is willing to assist the United Arab Emirates in case the war in Iran worsens its economic outlook, though a currency-swap line most likely won't be necessary, President Donald Trump's top economic adviser said. National Economic Council Director Kevin Hassett was asked Monday about a *Wall Street Journal* report about talks between the UAE central bank governor and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent about financial lifelines,

including a currency swap. "The UAE has been an incredibly valuable ally throughout this effort, and I'm sure the Treasury secretary will make every effort to help them out, should that be necessary," Hassett said on CNBC, while also noting Trump's previous assessment that US-Iran talks had been "moving forward very positively." "I think that it probably won't be necessary," Hassett added. The adviser said he had not spoken to Bessent about the issue. UAE Central Bank Governor Khalid Mohamed Balama raised the prospect of a currency-swap

line with Bessent and Federal Reserve officials during meetings last week in Washington, the *Journal* reported. Balama reportedly told US officials his country may still need financial backing even though it had so far escaped the worst economic effects of the war. While Hassett expressed doubt about the need for such a move, it has happened before. Last fall, the US inked an economic stabilisation agreement in a bid to boost the Argentine peso ahead of a key midterm election in the country that ultimately helped dictate the fate of Argentina

President Javier Milei, a Trump ally. Despite a two-week ceasefire, tensions flared up again between the US and Iran over the weekend after American forces seized an Iranian cargo ship and Tehran closed the Strait of Hormuz, causing oil to climb and futures to drop. Iran has expressed reluctance to send diplomats to Pakistan for a second round of peace talks, but is reviewing a US proposal delivered during a visit by Pakistan's army chief Asim Munir, Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei told reporters. [@COMBING](#)

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2662

**EASY**

**ACROSS**

- Melted together (5)
- French country house (7)
- Building designer (9)
- Scarlet (3)
- Control and make use of (7)
- Perceive by listening (4)
- Ship's skipper (7)
- Open a parcel (4)
- Distended (7)
- Bluminous substance (3)
- Pasta in string-form (9)
- Replace (7)
- Strap, whiplash (5)

**DOWN**

- Household cleaning device (7,6)
- Free from danger (6)
- Carriageway from gate to door (8)
- Starting-signal (3)
- Painting, sculpture etc (4)
- Worked for wage (6)
- Informal agreement (13)
- Satisfies fully, gluts (5)
- Glance-off of bullet (8)
- Loves greatly (6)
- Blind drunk (6)
- Scandinavian capital (4)
- Higher primate (3)

**NOT SO EASY**

**ACROSS**

- Was loudly put to a purpose as the circuit blew (5)
- Natter about it being water in France that produces wine (7)
- Each trick endlessly worked out to a T by Wren, say (9)
- Looking embarrassed at being always less than reversed (3)
- Arrangement of straps North and South have to share out (7)
- Be aware of it being repeated in approbation (4)
- Abe's brother, liable to be taken in as an officer (7)
- Unwrap piece of ground opened up (4)
- It's bigger than the normal lens owl needs (7)
- Not completely sour, viscous material (3)
- Foodstuff pig eats with the unfinished mixture (9)
- Put back the others to get some seaweed (7)
- Leather strap as used by Goliath on guard (5)

**DOWN**

- Thus free trade may be used to remove a film (7,6)
- Make it fast as rescue is carried out (6)
- Verd adaptation of manner for use by Carmen perhaps (8)
- Parking sign precedes its action for a snooker player (3)
- Such liberal studies as radiotelephony is concerned in (4)
- Longed for one to be topless as one deserved (6)
- Comprehension of it is beneath looking for a seat (13)
- Fully satisfies the requirements for a Tessa (5)
- Skip from the choir, etc, as it breaks up (8)
- Loves a party with almost all the others that follow (6)
- Shot bolt, to get absolutely drunk (6)
- Capital song for single singer getting second first (4)
- Will do as another primate (3)

**SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2661**

**ACROSS** 2. Tonic 5. Sake 7. Isle 8. Tinkered 9. Canoodle 11. Bush 12. Crossed the bar 15. Pact 17. Stressed 19. Turn back 21. Seek 22. Weep 23. Ended

**DOWN** 1. Despair 2. Tie 3. Noted 4. Concert 5. See 6. Keeps 10. Onset 11. Brews 13. Ensnare 14. Ageless 16. Abuse 18. Raked 20. Nip 21. Sad



## The world of Mythos

Structures need to be created for governance and regulation

The recent release of Claude Mythos Preview (CMP) and the decision of its creator, Anthropic, to restrict access to the new model highlights a qualitative jump in artificial-intelligence (AI) capabilities and the new opportunities and dangers those capabilities create. CMP can autonomously audit all kinds of software, including operating systems and legacy programmes. It can identify bugs and vulnerabilities at an unprecedented scale and has reportedly discovered thousands of unknown flaws in commonly used operating systems. It could, in theory, be deployed to exploit such "zero-day" vulnerabilities, again at an unprecedented scale. It could also be used to preview and audit new programmes for vulnerabilities to ensure they are bug-free and secure.

When Anthropic realised the capability of the new model, it acknowledged CMP was too dangerous for general release. Access to CMP is now restricted to a limited group of vetted organisations under what is called Project Glasswing. Under the project, Anthropic, Apple, Broadcom, Cisco, CrowdStrike, Google, and other information-technology (IT) companies will collaborate to test and deploy CMP but the model will not be released to the general public. Central banks and government institutions too may access the model, which is cause for concern since governments do indulge in cyberwarfare. The caution signals that AI now falls within the narrow category of technologies that require not only regulations but stringent governance structures and access restrictions. As with nuclear energy, aviation, and certain military technologies, safety, control, and oversight must be established before any large-scale deployment of CMP.

CMP alters the way the software industry works. In future, cybersecurity cannot be about defending systems against bad actors. It basically becomes the management and control of AI, which can autonomously discover and exploit vulnerabilities. The ways in which systems are debugged change completely. Instead of individual humans reviewing code, line by line, and occasionally finding a bug that could be patched or exploited, CMP can review entire operating systems five million times within a week. Finding bugs is no longer a major problem under the new paradigm. Cybersecurity at this pace and scale is entirely about AI deployment. Both attack and defence will be performed by AI and scaled through computational power. Anthropic suddenly becomes one of the world's most important cybersecurity companies, being pitched into an entirely new role. The IT industry has always released "beta" software and reviewed user-feedback to improve performance and security of the software. That also changes. Project Glasswing indicates new AI models should now undergo rigorous testing and face continuous monitoring instead of being deployed "as is" for the world at large to discover capabilities and flaws. This is how, for example, aviation works, because of the obvious dangers.

However, CMP also demonstrates that new models and software can be quickly and rigorously tested for flaws. Management theorists would call this a move towards anticipatory governance, and Project Glasswing repositions the collaborators in the project as risk managers rather than as just tech providers. Another deeper, broader concern is systemic. Every sector and industry is vulnerable to CMP, or some similar model. AI developers, security researchers, regulators, and industries must now collaborate. Since CMP exists, similar models will soon be developed elsewhere. Structures must be created to ensure the governance and regulation of such models before they start being deployed at scale, as is inevitable.

## Reservations about quotas

Universities should eliminate faculty ward quotas

Reservations in educational institutions are typically designed to deliver social justice and correct historical inequalities. When deployed as a compensatory mechanism for suboptimal remuneration or work conditions, however, they become an asymmetrical benefit. Yet Jawaharlar Nehru University (JNU), India's premier institute of social-science teaching and research, has chosen the latter course by introducing a 5 per cent supernumerary quota for wards of its regular employees with effect from the 2026-27 academic session. This marks an extension of the provision of a limited number of seats reserved for children of the non-teaching staff. Candidates applying under this quota will, however, still be required to meet minimum eligibility criteria and qualify through national entrance processes such as the Common University Entrance Test for undergraduate programmes or the University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test for research fellowship or PhD admission. Although a 5 per cent quota does not sound excessive, especially since it is supernumerary in nature and many central universities follow a similar policy, the question is whether such a quota is warranted and whether it serves the purpose of equity in a dysfunctional higher education ecosystem.

India has one of the largest higher-education systems globally with about 50 million enrolled in some form of tertiary education. Of those, about 700,000 are enrolled in central universities. Despite these impressive numbers, few of the institutions they attend can claim to be of global quality. In the annual QS World Rankings by Quacquarelli Symonds, it is mostly the Indian Institutes of Technology that rank in the upper ranks. But the IITs cater to just 18,600 B.Tech seats annually. In the social sciences, JNU maintains a strong academic reputation in international rankings, figuring in the top 100 in several subjects. In the 2026 QS World University Rankings by subject, JNU ranked 26th in development studies. It offers 3,000 to 4,000 seats for admission across various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Given the paucity of quality education in India, it would perhaps have served the cause of equity better for the university to have expanded capacity and offered more regular seats for those seeking admission on the "merit-cum-means" scholarships — for which the institution has an honourable record.

It may be argued that the quota acts as a perk of sorts for faculty in the absence of other key benefits. Admittedly, there is a significant difference between compensation paid to social sciences academics and those in the IITs. The latter can also count on performance-linked incentives and consulting income from industry to augment earnings. They also enjoy better work conditions — including air-conditioned cabins and regular water supply. These are not necessarily basic facilities in even elite central universities. In the light of these glaring disparities, then, a quota for faculty wards can be regarded as a benefit. However, instead of depriving deserving students the opportunity to study in a quality institution of learning with sequestered internal quotas, the healthier solution would be for the government to raise faculty compensation and invest in better infrastructure. This would not only create a virtuous circle of attracting better faculty, it would also serve the government's purpose of making India a hub of quality higher education.

# Time bought, not problems solved

India's buffers can manage markets for now, but hard policy choices still lie ahead

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



India is navigating uncertainties arising from the US-Israel-Iran conflict. Economic and regulatory buffers are in place, and markets have priced in higher risk. However, macroeconomic vulnerabilities remain. India needs more investments and innovation. To this end, appropriate policies can help address external and fiscal imbalances, attract foreign investment, and better support balanced growth.

### Markets, flows, and regulations

India has been managing a persistent external imbalance. In FY25, India experienced a core external deficit of \$38 billion, across its current account deficit (CAD), net foreign direct investment (FDI), and net equity foreign portfolio investment (E-FPI). This expanded to \$40-45 billion in FY26 and could rise to \$50 billion in FY27.

Against this, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has an estimated \$95 billion in foreign currency reserves net of forward sales. This buffer provides India time for adjustment.

However, through FY25 and FY26, the RBI had to net supply around \$195 billion of foreign exchange, significantly higher than the estimated \$80 billion of core deficit.

Around \$15 billion of demand was, therefore, driven not by core deficits, but by hedging and speculation. The offshore rupee non-deliverable forward (NDF) market is key to this dynamic.

Given capital account restrictions, domestic participants cannot freely speculate in currency markets. No such constraints apply to offshore participants in NDF markets. A few years ago, the RBI permitted Indian banks to arbitrage onshore and NDF markets, aligning pricing and liquidity across both.

As accommodative monetary policy narrowed interest rate differentials between the dollar and the rupee despite India's persistent external imbalance, participants steadily increased their hedging and speculative bets against the rupee. When the RBI moved to curb onshore-NDF arbitrage last month, an

estimated \$40 billion of NDF positions were being intermediated by domestic markets. Regulatory intervention must respond to a persistent external deficit with weaker rupee. Indeed, in the 40-country trade-weighted real effective exchange rate terms, the rupee has weakened from 107 in early 2025 to around 92 now.

However, well beyond core deficits, when large, one-sided positioning creates a self-reinforcing spiral of depreciation, the exchange rate can begin to influence fundamentals rather than reflect them. Regulatory intervention may then become essential.

The RBI's measures to limit arbitrage between onshore and offshore markets, for now, were justified in this context, even while one can debate the timing and manner of their execution.

It is worth emphasising that the RBI has not stopped anyone with trade or capital exposures from hedging onshore. Nor will its steps arrest speculative positions in NDF markets. However, they will limit domestic support for, and raise the cost of, such speculation.

India's equity market valuations have also eased significantly over time, relative to global markets. The share of FPI ownership in Indian equity is at multi-decadal lows.

India's risk premiums have adjusted upwards. Macroeconomic vulnerabilities remain. Nevertheless, macroeconomic vulnerabilities remain. Based on the oil price estimates of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC), India's CAD could rise to \$50-60 billion in FY27. This is a concern, given India's struggle to attract capital flows.

There are significant fiscal pressures. State governments may be understating deficits by deferring expenditures. Adjusting for this, India's true fiscal deficit could be higher by as much as 1.0-1.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). The rising trend of direct cash transfers adds to the fiscal burden, as will the upcoming pay commission outcomes.



POLICY IN PRACTICE  
ANANTH NARAYAN

## Let the rupee move freely

The Indian rupee has been under intense scrutiny in recent weeks, with its depreciation against the US dollar attracting widespread attention. Much of the commentary has framed this decline as a sign of weakness, often applauding the central bank's efforts to resist it. But this view overlooks a basic point: The exchange rate is a price. And like any price, it must adjust to shifts in demand and supply. Trying to hold it at an artificial level does not fix underlying imbalances — it only postpones the adjustment and risks making the eventual correction more disruptive.

Consider a familiar example. When the monsoon fails, the supply of vegetables falls short of demand. Prices rise, and this serves a purpose: Households cut back consumption, and farmers are encouraged to bring as much produce as possible to the market. The imbalance begins to correct itself.

Now imagine the government steps in to prevent prices from rising. The gap between demand and supply does not disappear — it simply persists. To manage it, the government would then have to impose restrictions, such as rationing or limits on sales. In the end, consumers would face shortages and reduced access, defeating the very purpose of the intervention. This is precisely why governments typically allow such prices to adjust rather than trying to control them.

The same logic applies to the foreign exchange market. When demand for dollars exceeds supply, the price of the dollar rises — and the rupee falls. What we are seeing today is simply this basic market adjustment at work.

So why is demand for dollars rising faster than supply? There are two main reasons.

First, India has been running a current account deficit, which was around \$40 billion in 2025-26, but foreign capital inflows were insufficient to finance it. This imbalance helps explain why the rupee was already under pressure last year.

Second, the war in West Asia has made matters worse. By pushing up the prices of key imports, it is likely to widen the current account deficit further — potentially to around \$80 billion this year.

As a result, India faces a difficult challenge: It needs to attract around \$80 billion in foreign capital at a time when global investors are becoming more risk-averse and pulling money out of emerging markets into safer developed economies. In such a situation, the most practical way to restore balance is to allow the rupee to depreciate.

How does depreciation help? In much the same way that the rupee helps restore balance — by reducing demand and encouraging supply. The exchange rate works through two key channels.

First, a weaker rupee helps restore balance through trade. As it depreciates, Indian goods become cheaper for foreign buyers, boosting exports and bringing in more dollars. At the same time, imports become more expensive, which reduces domestic demand for foreign goods. Together, these effects help narrow the current account deficit.

Second, a weaker rupee makes Indian financial assets cheaper for foreign investors. In dollar terms, Indian stocks and bonds now cost less, which can make them more attractive. This can encourage foreign investment into Indian markets, bringing in dollars and helping to finance the current account deficit.

In contrast, if policymakers try to hold the

Higher energy input prices could significantly add to the pressure on India's fiscal balance, unless retail prices are increased meaningfully. Choices must be made between expanding the fiscal deficit or risking higher inflation and slower growth.

Growth is already being affected by supply chain disruptions. El Niño and any fertiliser shortages will further increase risks to both growth and inflation. Concerns also persist around the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on employment and the crucial software services sector.

For now, policymakers may be tempted to delay tough choices. The government may bring a big part of the energy price burden. Monetary policy could remain relatively accommodative, while a combination of reserves and regulatory steps could be used to manage exchange rate pressures.

All this might work, if either energy prices fall quickly, or capital flows into India resume. However, hope is not a strategy.

### Way forward

Ultimately, India needs innovation, investment, and growth. To this end, appropriate fiscal and regulatory policy choices are needed. Foreign investors now need some comfort that the rupee will not see a runaway underperformance. However, India cannot simultaneously sustain low interest rates, high capital inflows, and a stable rupee.

Eventually, we must look to reduce financial repression. Large RBI bond purchases and low interest rates may appear to assist credit growth. However, debt markets are stunted when post-tax interest income returns fail to beat inflation expectations.

More market-determined interest rates would help in many ways. First, interest rate differentials between the dollar and the rupee would adjust to levels that encourage currency stability. Second, market rates would attract more foreign and domestic flows into debt. The resultant better split of domestic savings between equity and debt should reduce fears of equity market overvaluation and encourage FPI investments. Finally, more market-determined interest rates should foster fiscal accountability.

India's taxation framework also needs changes. Domestic investors need an asset-agnostic low-tax regime to encourage appropriate asset allocation and capital formation.

India's source-based capital gains tax and withholding frameworks is a major irritant for foreign investors and makes India a global outlier. We should move to a residence-based model for capital gains tax, in line with other major markets.

To simplify access to India, we should offer trusted funds passporting across asset classes. European UCITS (regulated retail investment vehicles), a gold standard for retail funds, could be a test case for passporting under the India-European Union Trade and Investment Agreement.

India has buffers to navigate the current context. However, there is no room for complacency. Policy must now shift from managing volatility to enabling investment and balanced growth.

The writer is a former whole-time member, Sebi. The views are personal.



ARUNDHITI DASGUPTA

The word Hindu has come to symbolise many things to many people. It is a religion that goes back thousands of years; it stands for a race of people from India but who are now spread all over the world and it embodies a set of beliefs that define a way of life. You could tick all the boxes above or simply write up a new line to define that best expresses the meaning of Hinduism within a different context, because Hinduism's central ideas are not cast in stone but have been handed down as experiences and observations that described the

lived reality of an ancient civilisation. The absence of a single book that lays out the tenets of a religion that has close to a billion followers today surprises many. Hinduism does not have a parallel like the Bible for Christianity, or the Quran for Islam. Also, it does not have a historical founder, such as the Buddha for Buddhism. It does have a set of scriptures that were orally transmitted for generations, which are open-ended and interpretative. Many have said Hinduism would be better understood as a philosophy wrapped in religious beliefs (like Daoism was in China). It offered a way of life, not a prescriptive code to be followed without questioning. It spread not with conversion and proselytism, but largely through its ideas. Philosophers and theologians such as S Radhakrishnan (former President of India), Swami Vivekananda and others have explored the nature of Hinduism and written extensively about the principles that under-

line its presence among followers. In their view, the ideas about life, death and afterlife in Hinduism are not framed in binary frameworks or as commandments to be followed, but are exploratory. There is greater emphasis on building a humane culture instead of a global religious order. Hinduism does not have a credo. It does not set down a singular path for enlightenment and it sanctions the divinity of knowledge as encapsulated in the four Vedas and the Upanishads. Defining Hinduism, as they and many other theologians have written, is like holding water in a sieve. In this slim book, Rajmohan Gandhi (grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, historian, political scientist and public intellectual) examines what it means to be a Hindu today. With a slow meditative gaze, he unpacks the evolution of the principles of a religion that has outlived many of its peers. Through a series of questions that do not always have an

answer, he nudges readers to take a close look at how Hinduism has transformed itself from a bunch of ideas into a faith that inspired ideas of resistance and non-violence in Mahatma Gandhi and nurtured ideas of sacrifice and brotherhood in Subhas Chandra Bose. He questions its true meaning and intent and examines the sharp turns that have marked its recent foray into Hinduism. Mr Gandhi also explores the ideas of Hinduism through a personal lens, nudging readers to do the same. What are the values that drive our lives? How do we interpret the term *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (an ancient Indian thought that loosely translates to the world is our family)? Even if one does not and a ready answer to these questions, the book seems to lead readers that the enquiry will drive a deeper understanding of the faith they profess. The author questions the popular understanding of religiosity and sets ideas of faith and divinity within a

framework of values and relationships. He writes that he was drawn into a deeper examination of Hinduism through his interactions with his grandparents as a child. His interest was further honed through a lifetime of reading philosophers and social reformers and, increasingly, also through stray encounters with strangers and friends. Hinduism, like many other ancient religions of the world, was born out of the experiences of early human beings with the world around them and their desire to build a community. The first encounters with the natural elements created the gods whose powers multiplied as they gathered more followers. All old religions believe that the world exists because it was created by the gods and its existence gives meaning to our lives, according to Romanian philosopher and theologian Mircea Eliade. How does a religion that was baked in



Do you know your Hinduism? Notes for modern-day Hindus by Rajmohan Gandhi. Published by Aleph. 160 pages ₹499

an oven of universalism and coexistence morph into a revenge-seeking manifesto of victimhood? This is a question that worries many as it does the author. A true follower of the faith ought to examine whether the religious fervour and spectacle that mark Hinduism today adhere to their dharmas (way of life). Does it respect the bundle of prehistoric humanity that has been passed down through the generations through its stories and practices? There are no clear answers to these questions but the book opens a way to raise them within our individualistic modern-day existence. Everyone has to find the meaning of religion in their lives in their own ways, but this book is a handy travel guide. The reviewer teaches folklore and mythology and is cofounder of The Mythology Project

# Opinion

TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 2026

## On a wing and a prayer

A spate of near-misses and weak oversight exposes the strain beneath India's aviation growth story

**T**HE ROUTINE STRESS faced by airline passengers—chronic delays, patchy customer service, and the occasional safety scare—is well documented. Consider this: on April 16, a SpiceJet Boeing 737 taxiing at Delhi airport struck a stationary Akasa Air aircraft, damaging its winglet and the horizontal stabiliser of the Akasa plane. On the same day, a serious collision was narrowly avoided when an IndiGo Airbus A320 (flight 6E729) arriving from Lucknow encountered a SpiceJet Boeing 737-800 (flight SG 123) preparing for take-off to Hyderabad—both aircraft coming face-to-face on a taxiway. The very next day, a taxiing IndiGo aircraft struck the wingtip of a stationary Air India Express plane in Kolkata. And this is merely a week's scorecard. India's aviation sector has been in prolonged turbulence. The Air India crash in June 2025, which killed 260 people, remains a grim reminder of the industry's vulnerabilities.

It is not if the government is unaware. A 2026 report by a Parliamentary Standing Committee revealed that 377 of 754 commercial aircraft—nearly half—recorded recurring technical defects between January 2025 and February 2026. IndiGo topped the list: of the 405 aircraft examined, 148 had recurring issues. Meanwhile, 191 of the 267 aircraft operated by Air India and Air India Express were found to have persistent technical problems. The report also flagged around 100 safety lapses, including seven Level 1 violations requiring immediate corrective action. Yet the crisis runs deeper than faulty aircraft. The industry is grappling with staff shortages, violations of flight duty time norms, lapses in quality assurance, unauthorised cockpit access, and even instances of aircraft operating with expired emergency equipment. The chaos at IndiGo counters last December exposed these systemic weaknesses.

If the country's largest airline—with over 60% domestic market share—struggles to implement Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) even two years after their introduction, it reflects poorly on the entire sector. (FDTL norms were introduced in January 2024 and became fully operational only by November 2025.) There has been some accountability. Pieter Elbers has stepped down, and co-founder Rahul Bhatia acknowledged that "neither customers nor IndiGo staff deserved it". The government, too, intervened, mandating a 10% reduction in flights. But the basic question remains: was the board and senior management unaware of such large-scale shortcomings?

At the same time, questions persist over regulatory oversight. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), despite periodic action, is itself understaffed. With a vacancy rate of nearly 50%, doubts remain about its ability to effectively supervise a rapidly expanding aviation sector. And expanding it certainly is. The government's ambitious Udaan scheme, which aims to add 100 new airports and 200 heliports over the next decade. This push comes even as 15 airports under the original UDAN scheme remain temporarily non-operational due to poor commercial viability, low passenger demand, lack of suitable aircraft, and infrastructure gaps. Yet these facilities continue to be maintained at significant cost to the exchequer, in the hope of eventual revival. The uncomfortable truth is that India's aviation sector is under severe strain. In its pursuit of growth and record-setting expansion, the government risks overburdening an already fragile system. The priority now should not be expansion, but consolidation—strengthening safety, improving regulatory capacity, and enforcing operational discipline. Right now, the industry appears to be flying not on robust systems, but on a wing and a prayer.

## SoftBank going all in on OpenAI. At what cost?

**WOULD YOU BUY** OpenAI's shares even though the transaction might expose you to a liquidity crunch? SoftBank Group's founder Masayoshi Son did just that.

OpenAI completed the largest funding round in Silicon Valley history last month, raising \$1.2 billion ahead of a blockbuster public listing expected by the end of this year. SoftBank, already one of the ChatGPT maker's largest shareholders, promised to put in \$30 billion more.

This funding round, on the heels of \$30 billion invested in OpenAI last year, is stretching SoftBank's balance sheet ever further. Based on estimates from research outlet CreditSights, the Japanese conglomerate is staring at a \$32 billion funding shortfall, including bond maturities over the next two years and other investment deals it has agreed to, such as a \$5.4 billion acquisition of ABB's industrial robots unit. As such, SoftBank recently signed a \$40 billion bridge loan with banks to manage liquidity. This is but a temporary solution, in that the jumbo debt will be due in a year.

Credit markets are puzzling over how Son's plans to manage his company's cash flow, its 87% ownership in Arm Holdings, worth about \$150 billion, is by far the biggest asset. But since the chip designer's stock has so little public float, it doesn't serve as a good collateral. SoftBank might only be able to raise another \$5 billion if it increases an Arm-backed margin loan, assuming a 20% loan-to-value ratio, according to Bloomberg Intelligence. Meanwhile, selling Arm shares outright can be tricky because the action might trigger stock slumps and margin calls.

There are other assets SoftBank could sell, including a possibly strategic \$6 billion stake in Intel. Unfortunately, Son already picked the low-hanging fruit last year when he wrote the first \$30 billion check to Sam Altman's start-up, including by selling SoftBank's entire stake in Nvidia. Last week, SoftBank paid its highest interest rate on dollar notes as part of a \$3.6 billion bond offering.

This is why an imminent OpenAI IPO is imperative to Son, not just to showcase his track record as a venture capitalist but to bridge his liquidity needs. Once OpenAI becomes a publicly listed company, SoftBank can sell some of its estimated \$110 billion holdings or—history is any guide—obtain margin loans using the ChatGPT maker's shares as collateral.

Whether a blockbuster IPO can happen soon, however, is out of Son's hands. Market conditions can change swiftly. Some early backers are already questioning the startup's latest \$852 billion valuation and calling it a "deeply unfocused" firm.

This begs the question of why Son decided to make a low-on-investment. He's done very well with the first \$30 billion, which allowed him to buy into OpenAI at only a \$260 billion pre-money valuation. Why did he choose to go big again, exposing SoftBank to a potential liquidity crunch?

One possible explanation is that SoftBank might have to serve as a meaningful cornerstone investor to anchor OpenAI's sky-high valuation, especially since some retail investors participated in the latest funding round. The other two big backers—Nvidia and Amazon.com—may not come across as convincing because their investments could be interpreted as vendor financing. OpenAI will in turn use the proceeds to buy billions of dollars' worth of AI chips from the two tech giants.

SoftBank certainly has an incentive to keep lifting OpenAI's valuation. The company has already booked about \$20 billion in value gain from its OpenAI shares. With this latest valuation more than 70% higher than last October's, SoftBank is on track for its second-most profitable year.

But these are only unrealised paper profits, which Son is essentially paying for with shaky liquidity management and higher borrowing costs. When OpenAI is ready to go public, does he have the financial means to guarantee a successful IPO?

There's good reason to believe that OpenAI has reached peak valuation. Retail has been brought into the latest funding round, especially Cathie Wood's ARK Investment Management, which topped Morningstar's chart in white destruction. Son is once again partying too hard.



**SHULI REN**  
Bloomberg

## TECHPROOF EXPRESS

AS EXPERTS DIFFER ON AI TRAJECTORY, MARKETS CAN ONLY REFLECT COLLECTIVE EXPECTATIONS OF THE PRESENT

# The uncertainly of investing

**W**ITHIN THE SPAN of a single conversation, one can hear sharply different versions of the future of artificial intelligence (AI). In one, executives at large IT services firms speak with quiet confidence about AI-assisted delivery expanding margins and deepening client relationships. In another, engineers wonder whether they are training the very systems that might one day replace them. Both views can be true. And that is precisely the problem for investors trying to price the impact of artificial intelligence.

Markets, after all, do not struggle with change so much as with uncertainty. The current AI moment is unusual not because technological disruption is new, but because the distribution of outcomes is unusually wide. Investors may therefore be making a familiar error. They are overestimating the threat to some firms while underestimating the risks to others, particularly in sectors like Indian IT services that sit at the intersection of global enterprise demand and rapidly evolving technology.

Start with the technology itself. The most visible gains from AI have come in coding. Tools that can generate, debug, and optimise code are improving quickly, particularly for routine and well-specified tasks. For firms whose business model relies on large pools of engineers billing by the hour, this raises an obvious concern. If developers can produce more output with fewer people, the arithmetic of headcount-driven revenue begins to shift.

This is no longer theoretical. Early enterprise deployments suggest that AI-assisted coding can deliver meaningful productivity gains, especially for standardised work. For Indian IT services firms, which have historically thrived on scale, process discipline, and labour arbitrage, this creates a structural tension. The very efficiency gains they help clients achieve could reduce demand for their own traditional services over time.



## INDIA-KOREA TIES

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

From chips to ships, talent to technology, entertainment to energy, we will realise new opportunities for cooperation in every sector



**SIDDHARTH PAI**  
Technology consultant and venture capitalist  
By invitation

Yet it would be a mistake to stop the analysis there. Coding is different from software delivery. Writing code is only one part of a broader process that includes understanding business requirements, integrating with legacy systems, ensuring security and compliance, and managing change across large organisations. AI can help with many of these tasks, but it does not end them. This is where the story becomes more nuanced. If AI lowers the cost of producing code, it may also increase the appetite for building software. Projects that were once considered too expensive or complex may become viable. In economic terms, a fall in the price of a key input can expand the size of the market rather than simply shrink it.

For Indian IT services firms, this creates a paradoxical opportunity. Even as the demand for low-end coding work comes under pressure, the demand for higher-order services may rise. Enterprises adopting AI at scale will need partners who can integrate these systems into their workflows, ensure they operate reliably, and manage the risks associated with their use. The centre of gravity may shift from execution to orchestration.

This pattern is not entirely new. The adoption of earlier technologies often reduced the need for certain tasks while increasing the importance of others. Tools that automated parts of financial analysis did not eliminate finance roles, but they did change what those roles needed. Sim-

ilarly, shifts in computing infrastructure to the cloud altered how IT functions ran, even as the need for oversight and coordination remained.

What makes AI different is the speed of the transition and the uncertainty about who captures the value. Leading AI labs are reporting rapid revenue growth, but they are also incurring enormous costs for computing infrastructure. If these costs stay high, the profits from AI may be concentrated among a small number of players with access to capital and scale. If, however, AI tools become more widely available, the benefits may diffuse, potentially putting pressure on margins across the industry.

**For Indian IT services, the story is neither one of inevitable decline nor guaranteed growth, but of transition**

Academic research offers a useful lens on this uncertainty. Economists have long noted that innovative technologies can fuel market optimism as investors extrapolate future growth. But there is also a countervailing effect. If investors believe that the eventual winners of a technological shift have not yet been created or listed, they may discount the value of existing firms. In such cases, markets can struggle even as technological progress accelerates. This logic is particularly relevant for Indian IT services firms. On one hand, they are seen as vulnerable to AI-driven automation. On the other, they have deep client relationships, domain expertise, and global delivery capabilities that are not easily replicated. The market's challenge is to decide which of these forces will dominate, and

over what time horizon.

The answer is unlikely to be uniform. Firms that stay anchored to labour-intensive models may face pressure as productivity gains reduce the need for large teams. Those that reposition themselves as partners in AI-led transformation may find new avenues for growth. The difference will lie not in access to the technology, which is increasingly commoditised, but in the ability to apply it effectively within complex organisational contexts.

This brings the discussion back to people, who are often overlooked in narratives about automation. Technology adoption in large enterprises depends not only on capability but also on trust, incentives, and organisational change. Systems need to be validated, processes need to be redesigned, and employees need to be trained. These are areas where experienced service providers can continue to play a vital role.

For engineers, this suggests a shift rather than a simple disappearance of work. Some roles and tasks are likely to shrink, particularly those that involve repetitive coding. Others will expand, especially those that require combining technical skills with domain understanding and oversight. The challenge will be adapting quickly enough to remain relevant.

For investors, the lesson is more subtle. In a world where even experts disagree on the trajectory of AI, markets can only reflect the collective expectations of the present. Prices will show as narratives change, sometimes sharply. Firms that appear threatened today may yet find ways to adapt, while those seen as beneficiaries may struggle to convert promise into profit.

If there is a single conclusion, it is that the impact of AI will depend less on what the technology can do in isolation and more on how firms choose to deploy it. For Indian IT services, the story is neither one of inevitable decline nor guaranteed growth, but of transition. And transitions, as business history repeatedly shows, are rarely priced correctly in real time.

## Jumping jack flash



**JAMAL MECKLAI**  
CEO, Mecklai Financial  
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**WOW! WAS THAT** the wildest shimmy the rupee has ever done? From hitting yet another all-time low of 95.23 against the USD on March 30, it shot higher by 2.9% to open at 92.54 on April 9, and then slipped a bit opening at 92.94 on Friday (April 17) for a net rise of 2.2% in 20 days (about 0.11% per day).

This was much faster than the average speed at which the rupee (0.07%) has recovered from all its earlier (eight) rallies over the past 15 years; there was only one rally (back in 2011-12) that was faster.

Now, we all know that past performance is NO indicator of the future, and that statistics have sometimes been described as "lies, damned lies, and statistics".

Nonetheless, the accompanying table throws up some curious possibilities: The average rally (recovery from an all-time low) was 9.2% and its standard deviation was 3.7%. This means that there is a 67% probability that any recovery (including this one) will range between 5.5% (9.2-3.7%), taking the rupee to 90.02, and 13% (9.2+3.7%), in which case the rupee could reach 82.89!

Note, importantly, that this also means there is a 33% probability that the rupee's decline will be either less than 5.5% or more than 13%. So, in some sense this isn't telling you much except that there is a significant probability that we could be seeing rupee levels that most people have completely forgotten about.

### RUPEE RALLIES

All-time low	On	Recovered to	On	% rally	No of days	% day	Days to return to the last low
51.67	Mar 13, '09	44.26	Apr 15, '10	14.3	398	0.04	586
55.72	Dec 14, '11	48.71	Feb 6, '12	9.3	56	0.17	99
57.09	Jun 28, '12	51.57	Oct 5, '12	9.7	99	0.10	248
68.47	Sep 4, '13	58.42	May 26, '12	14.7	264	0.06	632
68.71	Feb 29, '16	63.26	Jan 8, '18	7.9	679	0.01	171
72.45	Oct 11, '18	68.53	Mar 19, '19	8.0	159	0.05	366
76.77	Apr 16, '20	72.36	Feb 25, '21	5.7	315	0.02	426
87.39	Mar 4, '25	83.82	May 21, '25	4.1	59	0.07	91
<b>Average</b>				<b>9.2</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>327</b>
<b>Standard deviation</b>				<b>3.7</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>95.23</b>	<b>Mar 27, '26</b>	<b>92.94</b>	<b>Apr 17, '26</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>0.11</b>	<b>—</b>

One of the cardinal rules of forecasting is you either give a rate (or level) or a time-line—neverboth. So, will, of course, barrel ahead with this statistical analysis to assess how long it could take for these strange things to happen (if they do). I note that after every recovery, the rupee fell again, in all cases (thus far) breaching the previous all-time low and setting a new one. The last column in the table shows that the average time it took to breach the earlier low was a huge 327 days, although there were two readings of less than 100 days. The standard deviation of this distribution is 210 days, which, statistically

Despite hitting all-time lows, there is a significant probability that we could be seeing rupee levels that most people have completely forgotten about

ties is extremely wide—a market by any other name.

Nonetheless, given that the world had looked like it was falling apart just a few weeks ago, while everything looks uncertain (if a bit better), it is worth considering as a possibility that you can. On the other, you could do nothing and ride the tiger (as most exporters are doing), but the reversion, the history, and the apparent geopolitical reality that Trump is looking for a way out of the mess, all suggest it would be prudent to look at alternatives.

One alternative would be to simply sell some part of your exposures forward—91 days (the quickest the rupee had fallen back) would fetch you about 93.50; 327 days (the average tenor of the rupee's reversion) would get you 95.07.

Another alternative is to buy puts with a spot strike. The cost of a 91-day put option with a spot strike (92.94) is 45 paise; in fact, with the premiums relatively flat across tenors in percentage terms, this cost—about 40-50 paise—would hold even for longer tenors. This would ensure a worst case realisation of about 92.50 in the event the statistical story—insane as it sounds—pans out and the rupee stays stronger than 95.23 for several months. Against that, you would get to enjoy any further collapse as a cash cost of only 45 paise.

In any case, all levels are hugely profitable for all exporters today. Turn up the music!

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### CAFE draft rules a more practical way forward

Apropos of "Pragmatic CAFE reset" (FE, April 20), the new fuel efficiency rules show a more practical way forward. Instead of setting rigid targets that carmakers struggle to meet, the draft offers flexibility with credit and debit systems and longer compliance periods. This makes it easier for companies to plan while still pushing them towards cleaner

vehicles. The real aim is to support India's move towards electric and hybrid cars, not just tick boxes for regulation. By easing rules but keeping the bigger goal intact, the policy encourages progress without hurting industry. If such balanced steps continue, India can build a transport system that is both greener and stronger, proving that smart regulation can drive growth and sustainability together.

—K Chidanand Kumar, Bangalore

### Be firm on execution

Apropos of "Pragmatic CAFE reset" (FE, April 20), the revised norms appear balanced, yet the risk is that flexibility may dilute urgency in improving fuel efficiency. While easing targets can help the industry to adapt, implementation must remain firm and transparent. Periodic public reporting of fleet performance would improve accountability. Incentives for hybrids and EVs should be

complemented by faster charging infrastructure and stable state policies. At the same time, smaller manufacturers may need technical support to meet targets without undue strain. A coordinated approach between regulators, industry, and states can ensure that flexibility does not come at the cost of long-term environmental goals.

—SM Jeeva, Coimbatore

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

# Overheating Hormuz With Constant On-Off

Brinkmanship stalling energy recovery

It's like two people are playing with the switch, leaving everyone else blinded with each flick. The on-off passage of tankers through the Hormuz Strait will need to stabilise before energy trade can take its first steps towards recovery. Tankers are stranded on both sides of the strait—loaded in the Persian Gulf, and empty in the Indian Ocean—and they need to pass to begin shipping out crude oil and natural gas. A round trip for a tanker from, say, Saudi Arabia to China involves months of sailing. Tankers have also been diverted to ferry oil and gas for Asia from the US, which are much longer routes. Getting them back to the Persian Gulf will require even more time.

Once tanker logistics stabilise, energy-exporting nations in the region can get down to the job of reducing their storage capacities that have filled up. Onshore storage in the region has reached 20 days' production. This pressure must be relieved before production can resume. Rebalancing tankers to the Gulf trade will take around 3mths before operations stabilise, and storage capacity is depleted to a point where it allows for resuming production.

Ensuring the Hormuz Strait remains open and free of hostilities over this duration is the necessary condition for oil and gas wells in West Asia to start pumping again.

Most of the wells that have shut down can be brought on stream quickly. Half the region's pre-war output should take around a fortnight to revive. Under a third might take over a month, provided disrupted supply chains are patched up. A fifth of the output faces bigger challenges in terms of reservoir pressure, war damage and power supply. Here, recovery could stretch for the better part of a year. Damage to energy infrastructure will take years to rebuild, and some older wells may not return to their previous output. New wells can be dug. But these typically take a year, and require an improved security environment. A few weeks of conflict requires years of rebuilding to restore global energy equilibrium.

India has to work out interim practical arrangements, without getting in the way of Iran or US

# WHICH SIDE OF THE STRAIT?



Pranab Dhal Samanta

Why was an Indian tanker fired at by Iranian forces? What was it doing in Iranian territorial waters? And why is the Strait of Hormuz not open despite claims by Donald Trump and Abbas Araghchi? They all point to a reality quite different from the sanguine statements by countries not party to the West Asia conflict that Iran must respect the right of transit passage.

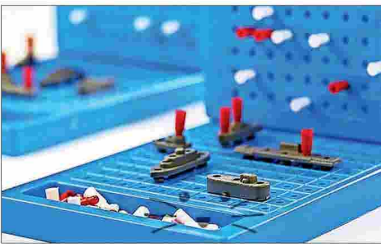
This right flows from the principle of freedom of navigation elaborated in 1958 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), of which India is a member, but the US and Iran aren't. While Tehran did sign the convention, it did not ratify either the present one or its earlier 1958 version. The US, too, has not ratified UNCLOS, but seeks to progress its implementation.

The only instrument to which Tehran is obligated is 1973 Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) for Hormuz, passed through an International Maritime Organisation (IMO) resolution. It was done to avoid collisions at sea, under which two traffic lanes—for incoming and outgoing, with a 1 nautical mile (NM) separation between the two—were plotted. This was improved in 1979 to make it two traffic lanes each for incoming and outgoing.

The other obligation for Iran is its 1974 bilateral maritime boundary agreement with Oman, the country that controls the other end of Hormuz. Both countries agreed to a 12NM claim on the narrowest point of the 21NM-wide strait. So, there's a 3 NM overlap recognised by both countries, but no provision for an international waterway. Both countries have, however, respected TSS that's somewhere in the middle of the strait.

Iran has claimed it has mined Hormuz traffic lanes. With no way of verifying this, stranded ships are exploring the safer option to skirt the usual route by going deeper into territorial waters of Iran or Oman. In this equation, the dominant entity is Iran. So, any requests by Oman to use its waters are for now being promptly dedicated to Iran.

It was in this backdrop that the Indian ships detained deeper into Iranian territorial waters. But, as recordings suggest, they had permission. New Delhi also has separately been in discussions with Tehran for safe passage following Araghchi's statement two days ago that the safer option of going deeper into Iranian or Omani waters, where Iran's the dominant entity



Play beyond hit and miss

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significantly dependent on supplies from Hormuz, which has ratified UNCLOS but is selective in following it.

This is seen to offer Hormuz up to the law of the jungle. With the US having already expanded military threat, waiting for a 'grand deal' is proving costly for importing countries like India. While it's important to repeatedly underscore the value of freedom of navigation and right for transit passage, the way forward for New Delhi is going to come from how bilateral deals will play out.

Iran has so far let nine Indian ships pass, which Tehran claims is more than any other country. But the fact is, notably has moved in the past two days. While its broad claim is there are now four broad entities within Iran—Supreme National Security Council, Ministry of Intelligence and Security, IRGC, and foreign ministry—with varying degrees of control and veto. They have to be engaged accordingly, as it's still an alternate governance architecture finding its mantra of consensus and decision-making.

The big picture may stay hazy for a while, but the key observations are permanent member-sponsored resolution on behalf of GCC countries in the UNSC supported by the US to get Iran to allow traffic through Hormuz. It first wanted a Chapter 7 resolution, which would have allowed for 'use of force'. Russia and China blocked this, as well as subsequent watered-down drafts.

In negotiations over various versions of this failed resolution, China successfully inserted a specific change—that the resolution would apply only to Hormuz, and not act as precedent elsewhere, or be considered international customary law. This is because Beijing has its own concerns in various straits in the South China Sea, and has refused to implement the UNCLOS award of the South China Sea in a dispute with the Philippines.

So, on the one hand, there's the US that agrees to the UNCLOS principle of transit passage. Then there's Iran that has knowingly stayed away from ratification precisely in preparation for a day like this when it will need Hormuz as leverage. And there's China,

which is also selectively following it.

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## THE SPEAKING TREE

### Flick of A Switch

SANT RAJINDER SINGH

Although the rapid technological advancements of the recent decades have made life more convenient, it has also drawn our attention outward, often leading to stress and imbalance. Meditation offers a way to turn within, to disconnect from external noise and reconnect with the inner source of peace, clarity and strength. Meditation is increasingly gaining mainstream acceptance worldwide, and even in India, where it originated, it is returning with renewed momentum and relevance.

Meditation is both a spiritual practice and a scientific experiment, accessible to all, that equips individuals to navigate life with composure and resilience. While physical scientists explore the outer world, the saints and mystics, the scientists of the soul, have long explored the inner world through direct experience in the Laboratory of the human body. By turning our attention inward, we, too, can discover lasting peace and a deeper understanding of life's purpose. Eternal joy cannot be found in the temporary material world. The only way to true bliss is within us. Meditation not only enhances our concentration but also enables better assimilation of knowledge, increased efficiency and greater patience in daily interactions.

By integrating spiritual practices into the demands of modern life, we can build a harmonious balance between outer achievements and inner peace.

# Proof of the Pudding Is in Partyicipation

Despite disruptions in Parliament over the Constitution (91<sup>st</sup> Amendment) Bill 2026, the political class seems aligned on expanding women's representation in politics. Yet, while legislative rhetoric has advanced, party-level practices remain resistant. Women now constitute nearly half the electorate. In several elections, they have actually outperformed male participation in voting. Yet, women account for only about 10% of candidates and about 11% of MPs, revealing a persistent gap in representation. This suggests that the problem lies not only in the constitutional framework—something women's reservation seeks to address—but within the internal workings of political parties.

Parties have yet to reflect this commitment in candidate selection, relying instead on selective inclusion—fielding women sporadically, often in low-stakes contests. Even after unanimously passing Nari Shakti Vandan Adhinyam in 2023, fewer than 800 of the 8,360 candidates in the 2024 elections were women, with 152 constituencies featuring none at all. This points to entrenched 'legacy' barriers: centralised decision-making, patronage/patriarchal networks, unequal access to resources, and a short-term view of electoral viability among overwhelmingly male party leaderships. In contrast, Panchayati Raj institutions, where quotas have ensured nearly 46% representation, show that enforceable rules—not just intent—drive change.

Bridging this gap requires moving beyond homilies and lip service to structural reform. Mandating candidate quotas, improving access to campaign funding and strengthening support for women within parties are needed. Without changes to these incentives, progress will remain slow, and democratic promise of inclusion will remain incomplete.



Rajiv Memani

'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,' Arthur C Clarke had observed. A visit to China's advanced factories can bring that metaphor home. These facilities span heavy engineering, electronics, robotics, EVs, high-speed charging and battery storage.

Robots work with precision and consistency. Some mirror human tasks so closely that the distinction begins to blur—such as a robotic hand picking up a cherry tomato from a salad bowl, which can also play a game of table tennis. This displays signals a deeper shift in how China is thinking about technology and manufacturing.

► **Ecosystem** In China's business ecosystem, ambition to build globally competitive manufacturing is deep-rooted. Firms have mastered cost, scale and speed. Mega-factories dominate the landscape spreading like footcandle beams. But these plants don't work in isolation. Entire towns grow around them, built to support suppliers, logistics, talent and housing. This focus helps to make their supply chain

# India's Chinese Techaway Option



Vidhu Shekhar

domestically strong, and promotes specialisation in the labour pool. ► **R&D** Regardless of a company's size, R&D is treated as an asset and competitive advantage, instead of an expense. Firms openly track and value innovation. Office walls are lined with patent certificates. Corporate presentations begin not with revenue slides, but with R&D spend, patent filings and talent statistics. Many firms employ engineers and doctoral researchers drawn from top universities, some of the best in the world.

Companies are trying to achieve balance between healthy Ebitda targets and R&D spends. This reflects how deeply innovation is embedded within organisations.

► **Investment** China's economy is marked by very intense internal competition—'involution'. In every segment, there are many players with their own supply chains who compete intensely, which helps Chinese firms arrive in global markets with very lean cost structures. But excess capacity in certain sectors would also mean consolidation through mergers and other measures in future.

Under China's 13<sup>th</sup>-5-Year Plan, the country aims to secure tech leadership in manufacturing and allied sectors through 2026 and 2030. There are clear, with greater focus on green energy, semiconductors, AI, quantum computing, biotechnology, green hydrogen and nuclear fusion.

► **Playground** The state's role in enabling this ecosystem has played a critical role in this transformation. China runs one of the most generous R&D tax incentive regimes in the world. As of 2026, nearly 85% of government support for business R&D flows through tax incentives.

► **Headline incentive** 'super deduction'. Companies can claim a 200% pre-tax deduction on eligible R&D expenses. Machine tool and semiconductor manufacturers receive an even higher 200% deduction until 2027. Eligible costs include researcher salaries, materials, prototype design, testing, depreciation and maintenance. Businesses are, indeed, leveraging and benefiting from state-sponsored support.

China's also deploying AI at scale. AI is embedded across production lines, warehouses and supply chains. Companies are also operating data centres and factories that run entirely on robots and humanoids. What ties all of this together is strong alignment. Central and provincial governments

move in step with industry. What Beijing wants to achieve between 2026 and 2030 will significantly shape the competitive landscape that India must navigate across manufacturing, technology, trade and geopolitical positioning. India aims to become a global manufacturing hub as supply chains diversify. To get there, it needs sharper public-private collaboration in R&D, simpler regulations and faster investment in sunrise sectors.

AI, electronics, semiconductors, biotech and green technology must move from ambition to execution. Achievements include China's greater focus on R&D and its fusion with every part of the manufacturing process, adoption of technology and consistently serving global markets with high quality standards is what will differentiate India going forward.

Innovation can be accelerated and embedded across business models, supported by greater access to tech—whether through partnerships, JVs or in-house R&D. So, leveraging the IITs or RDI Fund under the Amnushandhi Foundation will be instrumental to catalysing India's next-tech-led growth.

GoI and India Inc need to move together. Policy must translate into results on the ground. The race for industrial and technology leadership is already underway. The choices India makes now will define its place in it.

The writer is president, CII

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## JUST IN JEST

With prime influential push, puff it up to its rightful status

# Mur Mur ke Na Dekh Jhaal Muri Ko

Some of the sharpest ideas come from the humblest of situations. And what could be more humbling than the prime minister stopping by Bikram Sau's chatpata store on his way to the helipad after an election rally in West Bengal's Jhargram on Sunday to buy ₹10 worth of jhaal muri—he paid by cash, not online—and shares some of his meal with bystanders. But apart from headlines about Modi's musing, the real thonga takeaway is that the time has come to make Jhaal Muri Great Again.

This heady spicy concoction of muri, mustard oil, chopped onions, green chillies and lime has been the Khan of street khana. But of late, upstarts like momos and chow, and more 'brahminical' cousins like bhel puri, pav bhaji, phuchka/panipuri/golgappas have relegated the swash-buckling JM lower down the ranks. With Modi now giving it the right kind of re-mix, it can go places. Not just as the No.1 mur mur ke na dekh street food head turner, but also as artisanal khana for those who prefer shelling out extra shekels for 'Single-Origin Mustard Oil, Hand-Crushed Green Chillies, Ethically-Sourced Puffed Rice'. Jhaal muri is light, portable, requires no refrigeration. It can joyfully well be our answer to far healthier potato chips. If the humble Andean quinoa could become a global superstar, surely, we can puff up our puffed rice to make it a global chomp-ian.

# WLI Fully Faulty inequality Metrics



Vidhu Shekhar

A 2024 World Inequality Lab (WLI) paper, 'Economic Inequality in India: The 'Billionaire Raj' is Now More Unequal Than the British Colonial Raj', ranked India among the most unequal societies on the planet, worse than Brazil and not far from South Africa.

Yet, India's consumption Gini, derived from large-scale NSO household surveys, stands at roughly 0.26, exceeding the inter-war colonial peak. The same framework yields a Gini coefficient of 0.61. At that level, India would rank among the most unequal societies on the planet, worse than Brazil and not far from South Africa.

Can the same explanation be both? The conventional explanation is that wealthier households save more, compressing the consumption distribution. But savings alone cannot plausibly account for a gap of more than 30 Gini points. Something else is at work, namely that these indices actually measure, and what they leave out.

through which modern states reduce inequality: taxation and redistribution. It also embeds measurement distortions at both ends of the distribution. At the bottom, incomes for lower deciles are partly masked rather than directly observed. At the top, undistributed corporate profits and imputed returns on assets are attributed to individuals even when these never arrive in their hands. The result is a pre-governance distribution that no household experiences.

WLI correctly labels its methodology. The problem arises when this number travels as the headline measure of Indian inequality in global comparisons. It presents a picture of inequality that does not exist on the ground. In advanced economies, redistribution occurs primarily through cash transfers and tax credits that show up in income data. India's welfare system is structurally different. A large share of redistribution is delivered in kind: foodgrain through PDS, housing under PMAY, healthcare through Ayushman Bharat, subsidised cooking fuel,



Not measuring up

employment through MGNREGA, and access to public education, sanitation and piped water. These interventions raise real living standards directly, yet they register as zero in conventional income data.

Measuring inequality while ignoring them is like weighing someone with their backpack still on, then concluding they need to lose weight. Where real income falls sharply to zero, the metric reduces measured inequality. Where it is delivered in kind, it disappears from measurement. Few countries are penalised by this methodological blind spot as severely as India.

A more complete picture requires putting the state back into the distribution. India's pre-fiscal market income Gini stands at about 0.36, already well below the widely cited figure because it realised citizen household income rather than national accounts aggregates inflated by retained profits.

An April 2026 SP Jain Institute of Management and Research study, 'Post-Fiscal Inequality in India: Reducing the Inequality Gap (2014-2025)', by Sarabhi Mukhopadhyay and myself, adjusts this market income by adding the monetised value of welfare transfers, finds that inequality falls sharply to around 0.27. Our approach combines household survey data for the bottom 90% with I-T returns for the top 10%, valuing welfare transfers by directly using actual expenditure, and accounting for delivery efficiency rather than

headline entitlements. This post-fiscal estimate lies close to the consumption Gini of 0.25, suggesting it captures the distribution households actually experience.

Over the past decade, per-household welfare transfers have nearly tripled and new programmes such as PM-Kisan, Ayushman Bharat, Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) and Ujjwala have widened the scope of redistribution. The poorest 10% of households receive welfare transfers of roughly ₹1.07 lakh a year, raising their effective purchasing power by close to 80%.

None of this should be confused with affluence. India's per-capita income remains far below that of Germany or the US. Absolute living standards at the bottom are still 'modest' by global benchmarks. Yet, despite far lower income, India achieves a level of post-fiscal equality comparable to many advanced welfare states, because of the liberalised intervention, supported by Aadhaar, Jan Dhan and DBTs.

The real story of Indian inequality is not the 0.61 that makes headlines. It's the figure on slide 027 that reflects how people actually live. Global inequality frameworks that ignore taxation and in-kind welfare produce a distorted understanding of what India has achieved, and risk diverting policy attention that follows. It's time the metrics caught up with reality.

The writer is associate professor, Finance, SP Jain Institute of Management and Research, Mumbai



## PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

From the Fiction

### Solenoid Mireca Cartareus

I can't avoid lice—I teach at a school on the edge of town. Half the kids there have lice, the nurse finds the bugs at the start of the year during her checkup when she goes through the kids' hair with the expert motions of a chimpanzee—except she doesn't care. It's a feud between her teeth, stained with the chitin of previously captured insects. Instead, she recommends the parents apply a cloudy liquid that smells like, by the same one the teachers use.

Within a few hours, the lice are gone. In the school's anti-lice solution. It's not that bad, at least, we don't have bedbugs, I haven't seen those in a while.

I remember them. I saw them with my own eyes when I was about three, in the little house on Floresca where we lived, around 1959-60. My father would hoist up the mattress to show them to me. They were tiny black seeds, hard, and as shiny as blackberries, or like tiny blackberries. I shouldn't put my mouth.

When the seeds between the mattress and the bedframe scattered into the dark corners, they looked so panicked that it made me laugh.

Translated from Romanian by Sean Carter

## Chat Room

### More Economic, Less Political

Apropos 'Perpetually Unempowered' by Rathin Roy (Apr 20), the real tension is between economic reform and political freedom. Southern states have invested in human development and demographic transition, only to find that this very success may reduce their representation. That is a perverse incentive embedded in our constitutional arrangement. The writer's suggestion to link representation to economic convergence over time deserves serious examination. Any delimitation exercise that ignores this structural asymmetry will deepen regional distrust rather than resolve it. Political issues across party lines must engage with this honesty. Aiyimami Coimbatore



A thought for today

Personally, I'm not afraid of a robot uprising.  
The benefits far outweigh the threats

DANIEL H WILSON

# Robots Are Coming

Their growing physical capabilities, combined with AI's rapid strides, may pose an existential crisis for our species

The world changed on Feb 10, 1996, when IBM's Deep Blue computer beat Garry Kasparov at a game of chess. It changed again last Sunday, when a humanoid robot beat the men's half-marathon record by a mile, in Beijing. Nobody doubted it would happen someday, but not so soon after last year's fiasco, when the winning robot made it to the finish line in 2 hours and 40 minutes. This year's winner took just 50 minutes and 26 seconds, averaging 25kmp/h. How fast could humanoid robots be next year? T-1000, chasing cars and bikes in 1991's *Terminator 2*, doesn't look unrealistic anymore.

There are much faster robots, of course. A driverless bullet train doing 350kmp/h, for example. But we don't feel challenged by them. Humanoid robots, on the other hand, fascinate us with their form, and their possibilities. Nobody's afraid of a string puppet that looks and acts human.

But an autonomous human-shaped robot that *appears* to think better than us, and outperforms us physically, is threatening. Happily, there aren't too many of them around at the moment. Last year, only 14,500 were sold across the world, 90% of them made in China. But robot evangelists see a big shift coming. Musk, who's developed the Optimus robot, plans to make a million every year. Morgan Stanley predicts over a billion humanoids in service by 2050.

That could be a problem. If tireless robots, who never demand downtime, replace blue-collar work, what will the vast majority of humans do? When Czech writer Karel Capek coined the word 'robot' in 1920 - robot means slave labour in Czech - he was worried industrialisation was turning humans into machines. Now the fear is, machines will make humans redundant. We could do nursing and caring jobs - at least that was the hope - but Big Tech doesn't want that. Remember 2016's Audrey Hepburn-inspired Sophia robot? It had a patented skin to form 62 facial expressions. While it was glib then, current AI would boost its conversational skills exponentially. And ask yourself, what's the point of humanoid robots with hands and sensitive fingers? You don't need those features to weld car frames in factories. They are there to operate machines made for humans - microwaves, dish washers, TV remotes - change bedsheets, pour coffee. We might thank them, but when they do dangerous rescue jobs after earthquakes and fires, but generally, we'll watch their growing capabilities with a wary eye. Even Johnny Sokko, that once-famous Manga comic character, who would be 70-something now, ought to keep tabs on his Flying Robot.

# Hello, It's New Me

Adults ditch their names for many reasons, rooted in commerce, rebellion, and many things in between

FEROZ Anwar Banisrael, whose name appeared in yesterday's FTOI, had obviously taken some liberties with the name his family had given him. Such acts of self-authorship are a nice balm to all the handwringing, over the zeitgeist of individualism being under threat today. Birth names are given long before a person really arrives into their personhood. When you edit these as an adult, legally or just socially, you announce an autonomous self-definition, sort of super-humility from a, when.

Commonly we think of this choice within entertainment industry terms. Mahjabeen Bano became Meena Kumari, Jamie Foxx used to be Eric Marlon Bishop. A celebrity name is a key piece of their audiovisual branding. It's a market calculation about what will look good on posters, or sell more movie/concert tickets. And the next top-of-mind notion is numerology. Thanks to that dubious 'science', we have Suresh and Raajjeev, Priyaa and Poonam.

But often, things are less cosmetic, and more earnestly political. Leon Trotsky took the name of his Odessa prison guard, marking both a break from his past, and commitment to revolutionary activities. For Ngugi wa Thiong'o, this was a decolonisation of his Christian self. Muhammad Ali rejected his 'slave name'. Such renames can act as a psychological boundary between the person one was raised to be, and the person one has chosen to become. Women revert to maiden names loudly, after bad marriages. Dalits shed surnames that encode caste, often choosing 'Gautam', after the Buddha. Among Jews, Moishe became Morris, Rivka became Ruth, in negotiations between survival and memory. Non-binary individuals become Raver or Sage to say 'I do not fit your categories'. The deepest idea running through all these choices is, whoever controls your name, controls your story. Where imposed names feel violent, chosen ones can offer a tenderness, which may be strange to others, but is precious to the self.

# ETA: Existential

On the Beckettian wait of over 27L Bengalis

Alok Sharma



The plight of 27L+ Bengalis, desperately hoping to see their names included in the voter list ahead of polling on April 23 and 29, is similar to what's dramatised in Samuel Beckett's iconic *Waiting for Godot*. There, the circular path of absence, despair and expectation, finally turns out to be futile, as Godot never surfaces.

Awaiting a hearing at the 19 appellate tribunals, the SIR-stung citizens face a fate eerily like Vladimir and Estragon. In their wildest nightmares, they have never thought that in the month of April, notorious for vexing crawling students awaiting board results, they would be reappearing for exams they have already passed with flying colours. For their votes have elected several govts since 2002. Many had their names on rolls even before 2002.

While the match referee has a leading role in this *Waiting for Godot* redux, there are other major characters in Bengal's theatre of the absurd. Appellate tribunals were notified by EC on March 20. But it's not like ordering your cola on a 10-minute delivery app. One has to find office spaces, set up infra, stick to the rules! So, it was only on April 13, 24 days after they came into existence, that the tribunals started work.

SC has insisted on SIR compliance, while assuring those whose fate could not be decided this time, that genuine voters cannot be deleted forever. Never mind if they miss the bus this time, or if it results in a different electoral outcome on May 5. A long wait is the essence of politics, be it delivery of promises, or fulfilling dreams.

So what, if you don't find your name on the list this time. Democracy's worth the wait. Don't you wait for a commercial break to end, when Vaibhav Sooryavanshi is just asixer away from winning match? Don't you wait forever for the insurance company to pay your bills, after they have cleared your hospital discharge? In any case, SC gave another assurance to disenfranchised voters on April 16: those cleared by tribunals till two days before polling dates can vote. So what, if the tribunals had cleared just 5 out of 27L+ names till then. Just treat these polls like democracy's end-of-season clearance sale. Won't you wait till Dec to wear the woollens that you bought dirt cheap in Feb?

# Pahalgalam To Iran: Pluses & Minuses

The massacre a year before didn't result in more Pak-backed terrorism. India's deep strikes were effective. But, Iran's 'mosaic defence' against US shows what India's strategic capability needs

Ajai Sahni



A year after the Pahalgalam massacre, the incident has receded from national consciousness. It demonstrates the brutal reality that it was just one more slaughter among the many J&K has witnessed, in nearly four decades of Pakistan-backed Islamist terrorism. If it was intended to catalyse a revival of terrorism in the UT, it has failed comprehensively. The downward trajectory of terrorist activity has been maintained. On the other hand, Centre's promise of 'zero terrorism' also remains out of reach. A total of 92 fatalities were recorded in 2025, 48 of these after the Pahalgalam massacre. This year, till April 18, 12 fatalities have already been recorded, including one SF trooper, and one in the 'not specified' category. It is useful to recall, here, that fatalities were already down to 121 in 2012, before they escalated steadily to a proximate peak of 452 in 2018, and have since been declining.

If anything, Pahalgalam will be remembered as the provocation for Operation Sindoor. Despite the relative stability in J&K, and the success of the initial strikes deep inside Pakistan, India now confronts a much harsher strategic reality within an increasingly troubled global context. Operation Sindoor exposed deep structural deficiencies in India's military preparedness, and strategic thinking.

Crucially, these deficiencies and strategic misdirections have become more manifest in the wake of Iran's extraordinarily complex and effective defence, against the overwhelming kinetic power of the US-Israeli aggression. India has long imagined itself an 'emerging great power'. It has sought a dominant role in the security of the Asia-Pacific region. This, even as effective defence of the homeland remains uncertain, and drastically underfunded. Military capabilities are calculated in terms of small numbers of a few highly visible platforms - that include a handful of Rafale fighters, and two operational aircraft carriers, and a third awaiting govt sanction.

Indeed, war in Iran, brings into question the entire strategic discourse in India, and undebating debates on 'theaterisation'. The dispersed lethality of Iran's 'mosaic defence' raises the most urgent question:

whether, and how, 'theaterising' can be aligned with actual character of contemporary warfare, as manifested in Iran's resistance.

Operation Sindoor and its aftermath made it abundantly clear that India's principal military challenge is China - directly, or through Pakistan as proxy - and that a few big ticket platforms would have little utility in any future confrontation.

Indeed, no feasible quantum of military acquisitions could suffice, in absence of a fundamental transformation of the educational, scientific, technological, and industrial



base that must underpin India's military-industrial complex.

Failure to control the narrative domain has been another dramatic, and adverse, consequence, with India's global prestige wavering - something that was unprepared for. Propaganda campaigns for domestic audiences - backed by unconstrained, often abusive, rhetoric of certain electronic media, alongside a dearth of critical voices - were narrative strategies and tactics that could not be directed to international discourse.

GO's political postures haven't inspired confidence. Declarations on Operation Sindoor being the 'new

normal', that every future act of terrorism would be treated as an 'act of war', were shown as difficult promises to keep, in the wake of the Red Fort suicide bombing of Nov 10, 2025. After this incident, govt did everything possible to maintain ambiguity over any Pakistan linkage. Or, it may have committed New Delhi to make good on its statements.

India's inconsistent diplomacy has also lost out dramatically, even as Pakistan has enhanced its standing in the eyes of external observers. Pakistan's emergence as principal intermediary in US-Iran negotiations, may have plagued New Delhi. This was manifest in India's departure from diplomatic norms, as Pakistan was dismissed as a 'dalal' - a middle-man, with pejorative overtones.

Despite Indian leadership's policy to forge warm ties with Trump and Israel, and despite the risks to India's longstanding relationship with Iran, India finds itself marginalised vis-a-vis the US-Israel axis. This, even as Washington's established allies distanced themselves from this increasingly rogue partnership.

The year since Pahalgalam has revealed a paradox at the heart of India's security posture. Tactical successes in J&K coexist with strategic vulnerabilities, exposed during and after Operation Sindoor.

One problem is a radical misalignment between existing capacities, and the evolving character of warfare. Bridging this gap will require more than incremental reforms.

It will demand a fundamental rethinking of doctrine, force structure, and relationship between military power and political strategy. More important, however, is an objective, reality-based assessment of India's challenges, and framing of a political idiom, and diplomatic projections, that are in closer consonance with sobering truths of India's position in the world.

The writer is executive director, Institute for Conflict Management and South Asia Terrorism Portal

# What Trump's Blockade Says About American Power

Global economy flourished when seas were free. Of course, this freedom has to be enforced. US did the job, until now. Consequences of abandoning that stand can be terrible

Gurcharan Das



Once upon a time, Indian Ocean was famously called *Mare Liberum*, meaning 'Free Sea' in Latin. It referred to a golden age of commercial freedom, when Indian Ocean was a true global commons. International trade was free, not governed by any state. Merchants of Arabia, Persia, India, and China rode the monsoon winds to form a cosmopolitan global economy. But one day in 1507, a Portuguese admiral named Afonso de Albuquerque, seized the tiny Strait of Hormuz with naval guns, and turned a free port into a toll paying gate. In search of 'Christians and spices', Portugal then muscled in to break a 'system of natural liberty' with its military, grabbing markets through murder and marauding, gaining monopoly control of Indian Ocean.

519 years later, an American president called Trump, practically seized the same strait and declared a naval blockade. During the past month-and-a-half's war in West Asia, Strait of Hormuz has again become a classic global chokepoint, threatening one-fifth of the world's supply of oil and gas, raising crude prices and inflation across the world. It has jeopardised access to food for 100m residents around Persian Gulf. And brutally exposed India's daily kitchen life, which depends on the Gulf for half of its cooking gas, plus fertiliser for its farms.

The US naval blockade, and Iran's plan to levy \$2m per ship crossing Hormuz, are both acts of breaking the global maritime Law of the Sea, and the moral ideal of *Mare Liberum*. The blockade will fail. It's dangerous, difficult to implement, and could escalate into a broader war (eg, with China, which buys 90% of Iran's oil).

Ironically, Trump's claim that it doesn't apply to third-party shipping lanes and merchant vessels free pass, without interference. In effect, he is enforcing *Mare Liberum* at gunpoint. The blockade

was always a negotiating tool. Eventually, Trump will only save his reputation from this misadventure, if Iran gives up 400kg of highly enriched uranium (which can be enriched further to make 7-12 nuclear bombs), and renounces its nuclear programme. Iran will not agree - it is its only leverage, aside from the strait. Sadly, the likely endpoint of the saga is a US land invasion to extract the uranium, bringing more suffering.

Ironically, the word 'Hormuz' is derived from Ahura Mazda, the great Zoroastrian god of order. The Portuguese in Hormuz were expelled in 1622, by a coalition of East India Company and Persia's Shah Abbas I. The real transformation of the Indian



Ocean's economy came in 19th century when the British Empire integrated it into a global imperial system. *Pax Britannica* suppressed piracy, removed mercantilist restrictions, and restored open trade in *Mare Liberum*. Britain benefitted, but so too did the world. Global trade expanded unprecedentedly. Commerce flourished, as Indian and Chinese diasporas created new trading networks.

In the mid-20th century, this role passed on to US. *Pax Americana* underwent an even more expansive

rules-based global order: open sea lanes, stable trade routes, and an international system that, while imperfect, allowed commerce to flourish. American power served its own interests, but it helped the rise of Europe, Japan, and the Asian Tigers. The ideal of *Mare Liberum* inspired UN to write Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982.

The lesson from the mini-history behind this insane war, is a paradox. The ideal of a free sea has survived not in spite of power, but because of it. Two rules-based orders, under two hegemonies, in the past 150 years have brought palpable benefits to the world. The conclusion: free seas are not self-enforcing - some order is better than no order.

*Pax Americana*, meanwhile, is unravelling rapidly. The war has brought suffering everywhere, especially to those who had nothing to do with it. America's own allies in the Gulf have become collateral damage. Its inability to restrain Israel's brutal ambition to become a regional superpower, is losing America the trust of the world. It's the first time since World War II that America's NATO allies in Europe have opposed its war. But Trump's dogmatism - nothing seems to be stopping him. The midterm elections may slow him down, but Trump has almost three years to push America into further decline.

In all this, China has behaved with characteristic restraint. Even though it imports most of Iran's oil, it has observed the mess in West Asia with quiet dignity. It couldn't have missed the parallel between Hormuz and Taiwan Strait, its own chokepoint lying between Fujian and Taiwan. If it maintains its mature behaviour, and doesn't get tempted into a similar misadventure over Taiwan - China will gradually win the world's trust.

Trump's war in West Asia is a sad morality tale. A single chokepoint has brought disorder and suffering to the whole world. What gives the world courage, and hope, in the future are the same right to *Mare Liberum*. Let us, therefore, remember the old saying: 'Land divides us, water unites us.'

# Calvin & Hobbes



# Sacred space

The Soul appears to be finite because of ignorance. When ignorance is destroyed the Self which does not admit of any multiplicity truly reveals itself by itself: like the Sun when clouds pass away.

Adi Shankaracharya

# Basavanna's Kayaka Signifies Honest Manual Labour

KV Raghupathi

Basavashwara's primary concern was not literary composition, but attainment of the highest good of life and facilitation of the greatest good for common man through *kayaka*, a concept that signifies honest manual labour; however, it encompasses much more than merely working for one's living. In the first place, it is an occupation for subsistence without exploiting others, be it a *bhakti*, a *guru*, or a *Jangama*, a 'freed labourer' as Gandhi calls it. Its underlying principle is that every human with no high or low distinctions should pursue their material and spiritual progress through their *kayaka* and that beggary and idleness have no place in society.

The second principle of *kayaka* is the democratic freedom of occupation. Basava did not subscribe to karm theory of pre-determination based on birth; he condemned discrimination based on

birth, sex, or occupation, and declared that no occupation was superior or inferior. He also asserted that honesty was the determining factor that merited means of livelihood.

The third principle of *kayaka* is that it should fulfil the needs of both the individual and society with absolute detachment, non-possessions, and unselfishness. The earnings should promote not only the earner's material and spiritual progress but also welfare of society in the form of triple *dasoha* or dedication to *guru*, *linga*, and *Jangama*.

It is, only then that one's profession can become *kayaka*, or holy work or worship. The same idea was endorsed by Gandhiji. What Basavanna identified himself with the poor and insisted that all should voluntarily take up the labour that the poor do and eradicate poverty

and social injustice. The fourth principle of *kayaka* is that it attaches importance to bodily labour. The body's requirements must be earned by the body. The principle that the life of labour is the life worth living, as suggested by John Ruskin, was exemplified by Basavanna through his doctrine of *kayaka*.

The *Jangama* was not a particular caste or sect. A true *Jangama* is one who annihilates his ego, embraces the entire universe, and transcends it. Thereby, the *Jangama* ceases to be an individual. Basavashwara encompasses the whole universe, including all its movable beings. Money earned through one's vocation should be surrendered for the welfare of society. Thus, his conception of *kayaka* envisaged and achieved the

synthesis of the good of the individual and that of society which are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

There are remarkable similarities between Gandhiji and Basavanna in social outlook. Gandhiji's concept of 'bread-labour and Basavanna's concept of *kayaka* are alike. Based on his deepest convictions reflected in John Ruskin's book, *Unto This Last*, Gandhiji introduced three principles: (1) That the good of individual is contained in the good of all. (2) That everyone has the same right to earn their livelihood from their work. (3) That a life of labour is the life worth living. All these principles are the core of the doctrine of *kayaka* expounded by Basavanna.

What Gandhiji tried to expound and establish through '*Sardodaya*', Basavanna achieved through *kayaka*. It can be posited that *kayaka* of Basavanna is the core of Gandhiji's '*Sardodaya*'.



### Editor's TAKE

## India braces for a below-average monsoon

El Niño is likely to result in a poor monsoon, which could trigger a ripple effect — from farm distress to food inflation, testing both policy preparedness and rural resilience

The past few years have been good for Indian agriculture; a normal monsoon and favourable weather conditions have given the agriculture sector the respite it needed. However, the chances of a good monsoon this year are bleak. Thanks to El Niño, India is likely to experience a below-average monsoon. While official projections suggest rainfall at around 92 per cent of the long-period average, this may not look like a big drop, but in practice, even a marginal shortfall can translate into severe distress when rains are erratic, delayed, or unevenly distributed. Indian agriculture is monsoon-fed, as nearly 61 per cent of farmers depend on rain-fed agriculture. A weak monsoon is not only an economic dampener but also a social stress test. Moreover, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) forecast comes at a time when unseasonal rains and hailstorms have already damaged Rabi crops, causing farmer distress. A weak Kharif season would compound these losses and make things unbearable for marginal farmers. Besides, global disruptions, including geopolitical tensions, have driven up fuel costs and caused a scarcity of fertilisers, pushing their prices up. Higher input costs, combined with lower yields, create conditions of inflation across the economy. Farm distress does not remain confined to rural India; its implications extend far beyond. A poor monsoon affects rural demand, shrinks consumption, and causes fiscal strain on the government to subsidise the extra burden. It also impacts food security. The situation could be bad if key crops like rice, pulses, and oilseeds underperform. In that scenario the government would be forced to import them to keep prices in check, leading to a drain on foreign reserves. A failed monsoon is not an abstract risk for a large number of marginal farmers but a direct threat to livelihood and survival. The government, therefore, would do well to anticipate the situation and come up with a swift policy response to mitigate it.

In the long run, water management must take centre stage but this point, the government should urgently assess reservoir levels, repair canal systems, and prioritise water conservation through local structures such as ponds and check dams. MGNREGA can be crucial in building and restoring these assets, enhancing groundwater recharge and improving resilience at the village level. It would also put income in the hands of rural households. Besides, crop planning needs recalibration. Farmers should be incentivised to shift towards millets, pulses, and oilseeds-crops that are more resilient to water stress and increasingly aligned with nutritional and environmental goals.

Diversification through multi-cropping can act as a natural hedge against climatic uncertainty. A weak monsoon need not become a full-blown agrarian crisis if met with timely intervention and adaptive policy. The challenge is as much about governance as it is about rainfall. Preparing for the worst, while hoping for the best, remains India's most prudent course of action.

## Lebanon and Trump's imaginary peace deal

When Donald Trump announces another 'peace deal', the claim often dissolves under scrutiny. His latest assertion — ending an Israel-Lebanon war — adds to a pattern of victories declared online but absent on the ground



**BHOPIINDER SINGH**

Last year, the United States Department of State had released a contested post on the social media of President Donald Trump, claiming that he had ended 7 wars in 7 months. The list had included the wars in Rwanda-Congo, Kosovo-Serbia, Egypt-Ethiopia, India-Pakistan, etc. They later issued a dramatically revised list of 8 wars in 8 months to include what they claimed was the end of the Israel-Hamas war (it is still on). Recently, Trump continued his unsubstantiated claims by announcing that he had previously solved 9 wars (he did not clarify which 9th war) across the world, and now had just ended the Israel-Lebanon war as his 10th peace deal.

Not known for his sense of history, facts, or even nuance in what he keeps claiming, the historically wounded and deeply fractured land of Lebanon becomes the latest "trophy" in Trump's make-believe accomplishments. Besides the fact that Delhi has explicitly denied any hand of the United States of America in ending the Indo-Pak war, Serbia has clarified that it had no intention of going to war with Kosovo, and meanwhile the violence in Congo and the Israeli war with Hamas continues unabated. Going by the credibility of Trump's claims, the missing 9th war that he is supposed to have ended could only be speculated to be the US-Israeli war on Iran, but that too is far from over. So far, the invading Israeli military has killed more than 2,100 people in Lebanon, including nearly 200 children, and displaced over 1.3 million people (one-fifth of the country's population). This Israeli invasion was in reaction to the firing of rockets at a military site (importantly, not on a civilian area) in the Israeli city of Haifa by Iran's co-sectarian Hezbollah, immediately after the US-Israeli attack on Iran. Implicit in the weak Israeli argument for invading Lebanon by the Benjamin Netanyahu dispensation is the untenable logic that while it can attack a sovereign like Iran, it cannot allow any force (read, Hezbollah) to attack Israel in the name of standing up for Iranians. The Hezbollah rocket attack had led to two Israeli deaths, and the subsequent Israeli reprisals were emblematic of the gross disproportionality: a La Gaza Strip (where 70,000 Palestinians have been killed), with the same flattening of townships and razing of villages on the Lebanese side. As always, Trump has chosen to remain selectively mealy-mouthed about Israeli



AS A CHRISTIAN LEADER, AOUN HAS VERY LIMITED SAY IN THE AFFAIRS OF SHIITE HEZBOLLAH, AND THEREFORE ANY TALKS OF PEACE WITH THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT ARE NOT THE SAME AS TALKS WITH HEZBOLLAH DIRECTLY

The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

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The Pioneer

excesses on the Lebanese front, just as he chose to look away whilst Gaza Strip was reduced to rubble, with utter impunity and immunity.

Trump may never know that the Lebanese war with Israel predates Hezbollah. Beirut had joined Arab states in opposing the creation of Israel in 1948. The Israel-Lebanon border has never really been peaceful, with earlier Israeli invasions of Lebanon (1978 and 1982) setting the stage for the creation of Hezbollah. Today, with Iran busy warding off the challenge from American attacks, Israel realises that Hezbollah is essentially without the usual Iranian support, and hence the opportunity to push on, whatever the human consequences. This is despite the fact that Pakistani PM Shehbaz Sharif had clarified that Lebanon was part of the ceasefire and any strikes from Israel would be a violation. Israel did invade Lebanon nonetheless, and the seemingly hapless Trump administration was left meekly stating that it was a "legitimate misunderstanding", thereby giving the Israelis a clean chit yet again. American allies in the European Union have openly leaned in favour of Lebanon by calling upon "all sides to implement the ceasefire, including in Lebanon". Like the unheeded warning in Gaza Strip earlier, the World Food Programme has warned of a similar food insecurity crisis in Lebanon, but the Trump-Netanyahu duo remain unrepentant and unconcerned.

There are good political reasons for Netanyahu to keep the pot boiling with

Hezbollah in order to retain a state of emergency, which distracts from his unpopularity on the domestic front and serious charges against him personally. He instinctively favours brute force over diplomacy, and in Hezbollah he has a convenient handle. The history of invasions of Lebanon (including 2006) is instructive: once against Israel can never be clamped down by force. The current invasion, if not pulled back by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), will lead to an even bloodier and existential war for survival. Hezbollah will go flat-out to counter the occupation in its own limited way, and perhaps that bloodshed is exactly what Netanyahu seeks to prolong his own relevance. Meanwhile, Donald Trump is busy singing hosannas in his own favour on account of some mythic peace that he supposedly brokered between the Israelis and Hezbollah, when Israeli soldiers continue to occupy Lebanese land. Serendipitously, Trump has a like-minded and shifty Lebanese President in Michel Aoun, who is known to shift loyalties.

As a Christian leader, Aoun has very limited say in the affairs of Shiite Hezbollah, and therefore any talks of peace with the Lebanese government are not the same as talks with Hezbollah directly. Ultimately, peace in Lebanon is dependent on how Trump ends his own ill-advvised war on Iran, and the outcomes of the same will have the only tangible impact on ending the war in Lebanon. Short of that, history repeats itself, and Nero in Washington, DC dances as Lebanon burns.



Tourists participate in river rafting in the Beas River near Manali in Kullu. PHOTO: PPT

### PICTALK

### DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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## Pleasures and comforts but no peace



**AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI**

### 2ND OPINION

Pleasure is defined as a short-lived sensory experience requiring efforts, while comfort is a soothing state of ease and rest. Lots of people live very comfortably. Similarly, almost everyone has some pleasures like being able to eat tasty meals regularly. However, not many are either peaceful or happy in spite of living comfortably or having many pleasures of senses.

Why is it so? Seeking peace or happiness by being comfortable is not possible, because, as defined, it is only a state of ease and rest. Increasing comforts, as many do in search of peace and happiness, brings only disappointment, because being peaceful or happy requires control over the mind. And the mind is full of desires; it has many fears; is troubled by something or other; is obsessed with many problems; etc. Similarly, people seek more pleasures of the



sensory types, and only compromise health, etc, and are dissatisfied. The answer is in limiting the comforts and pleasures to what is appropriate, as instructed by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita. They should be 'yukta' (just right) only. For example, I eat only 'sattvik' (in goodness) meals, and keep good health. I also limit my comforts to what is just right, that is comfortable living quarters, etc. But the most important need is to have a peaceful mind. Again, Lord Krishna has instructed in great detail how to become peaceful and, yes, happy also.

There are many requirements, as there must be for such an important objective of peace and happiness. We have to start with the right choices of the modes we associate with. Goodness, which is to choose what is good, is required.

We all know generally what is good. Passion is fine as long as we don't allow it to overpower us. For example, we can watch sports as long as it does not become all consuming. Darkness, which is driven by what all is wrong like being controlled by lust, greed, anger, hate, etc, must be strictly avoided. Then, one must be dutiful at all times, that is guided by time, place and circumstances. Dharma (righteousness) must be the guiding principle of life. If we follow all of the above, purity is bound to be achieved.

Next requirement is that of detachment. Mind can be controlled by two means, which are practice and detachment. I have explained what practices are required. Additionally, there is need to be detached with everything material, including one's body and profession, etc. These are again to be yukta only, which is just right like a mother must love her child, but without too many expectations from him, when he grows up. The last and the biggest requirement is to add 'brahmananda' (spiritual bliss) to one's life. This is obtained by a good connection with God and total surrender to Him. It appears like a tough task, but is not till one gets started, because God begins to help. Then pleasures and comforts contribute to well-being and great satisfaction.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

## RECURRING LAPSES TURN LIVELIHOODS INTO FATAL FIRECRACKER TRAPS

Apreros the report 'Explosion in firecracker unit in Tamil Nadu kills 18, several critical' (April 20), the recurring tragedy of blasts in Virudhunagar once again exposes a grim and unacceptable reality—our failure to learn from past disasters. The devastating explosion at Kattanarpatti, claiming 23 lives, comes barely days after another fatal incident in the same district. Yet, despite repeated warnings, inquiries, and assurances, little appears to have changed on the ground. How many more lives must be lost before safety norms are enforced with sincerity rather than merely on paper?

Authorities often cite licences issued by bodies such as the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation, but such certifications lose meaning when

compliance is poorly monitored. Overcrowded units, unsafe handling of volatile materials, and inadequate supervision continue to plague the industry. Expressions of grief by leaders, including Droupadi Murmu, Narendra Modi, and MK Stalin, while important, cannot substitute for decisive preventive action.

What is urgently needed is a systemic overhaul—strict audits, real-time inspections, accountability for violations, and swift prosecution of negligent owners. Without this, such tragedies will continue to repeat, turning livelihoods into death traps. The pattern is painfully clear. The response, unfortunately, remains unchanged.

**SANJAY CHOPRA | MOHALI**

## Safety failures continue unchecked

The recent explosion at a fireworks unit in Virudhunagar district once again exposes a tragic and recurring pattern. Since 2022, the district has witnessed over 130 deaths in firecracker-related accidents. Each incident is followed by compensation announcements and promises of stricter enforcement, yet little changes on the ground.

This is not merely an industrial hazard but a clear governance failure. Unauthorised units, violations of safety norms, and excessive workforce deployment point to systemic regulatory lapses. The fact that hazardous activities continued even on a day when operations were officially prohibited reflects the absence of effective oversight. There is an urgent need for independent safety audits conducted by technical experts, strict enforcement of liability, and criminal accountability for violations. Officials who fail in their duty must also be held responsible.

Equally important is worker welfare. Most labourers lack formal contracts, insurance, and basic protection. Bringing them under labour laws, ensuring employer-funded insurance, and creating a welfare fund are necessary steps. The industry can survive only if human lives are prioritised over negligence.

**A MYLISAM | COIMBATORE**

## Reform stalled by political tactics

The government introduced three Bills in Parliament on April 16 in a special session to expand the Lok Sabha, enable delimitation based on the 2011 Census, and reserve seats for women. The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026 proposed 33 per cent reservation, while the Delimitation Bill empowered a commission to determine such seats. However, the Bills failed to pass. Earlier, Parliament had unanimously enacted the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023, reserving one-third of seats for women. Yet, its implementation was made conditional upon delimitation after a fresh Census, delaying its execution. Despite strong public demand ahead of the 2024 elections, no progress was made.

With both the earlier Act stalled and the recent Bills defeated, women's reservation remains uncertain. The ruling party is seen as having positioned itself advantageously regardless of the outcome, while the opposition faces criticism for blocking reform. However, the demand for reservation will only intensify, especially within the current strength of 543 Lok Sabha seats. A credible, time-bound roadmap is essential to ensure that women's political representation is not indefinitely postponed.

**HARIDASAN RAJAN | KOZHIKODE**

## Women's Bill fails amid distrust

The editorial, "Women's Bill fails: A reform lost in distrust" (April 20, 2026), rightly highlights how the Women's Reservation Bill collapsed under avoidable mistrust. Linking it with Lok Sabha expansion and delimitation based on the 2011 Census triggered concerns, particularly among southern states that fear losing representation despite leading in population control. These anxieties deserve engagement, not dismissal.

The government's decision to introduce such sweeping changes in a special session, without clear rules on seat allocation, fuelled suspicion. The absence of transparency created the impression of political manoeuvring rather than fair reform. The opposition, too, must accept responsibility. Delays and tactical resistance undermined a long-pending reform. While quotas improve representation, they alone cannot dismantle entrenched patriarchy; broader structural change is essential.

The way forward is clear: separate reservation from delimitation, guarantee federal safeguards, and rebuild trust through bipartisan cooperation. India needs equitable representation, but such reform must rest on credibility, not coercion.

**SK PRABHAKAR | GURUGRAM**

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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



# PRAHAAR: A comprehensive national counter-terror policy

The PRAHAAR doctrine marks a significant shift — not a routine policy announcement, but a conscious reorientation of India's counter-terrorism strategy, moving beyond reactive measures towards anticipation, and from mere containment to proactive pre-emption



ASHOK KUMAR

India has, for decades, confronted terrorism in both its overt and covert manifestations. This is not a new battle for us; however, its character today is far more complex, diffuse, and insidious than ever before. What was once largely confined to border regions and conventional methods has now evolved into a technologically driven, globally networked threat. Terrorist actors no longer rely solely on weapons and explosives; they operate through digital ecosystems, clandestine financial channels, and sustained ideological propaganda. Any response that fails to recognise this transformation is bound to be inadequate.

It is in this context that the Ministry of Home Affairs' introduction of PRAHAAR must be viewed as a decisive and timely intervention. This is not merely another policy initiative; it represents a fundamental shift in strategic thinking. The emphasis is no longer on post-incident response, but on anticipatory action—identifying threats at inception and neutralising them before they manifest. This, by any standard, is the hallmark of a mature and capable security architecture. India's counter-terrorism journey has yielded valuable lessons. The 2017 anti-Naxal doctrine of the Ministry of Home Affairs, SAMADHAN, stands as a notable example of how clarity of intent, strategic coherence, inter-agency coordination, and robust intelligence can significantly curb insurgent activity. It demonstrated that well-articulated policy, backed by strong political will and effective execution, delivers tangible results on the ground.

However, the present challenge extends well beyond earlier paradigms. Terrorism, often externally sponsored, has fragmented into smaller, decentralised modules—lone actors, micro-cells, and digitally connected networks. It now operates simultaneously across physical, virtual, and financial domains. Fragmented or siloed responses will not suffice against such a multidimensional threat.

PRAHAAR is designed precisely to address this complexity. It integrates technology, intelligence, law enforcement, financial oversight, and international cooperation into a unified framework. Its objective is clear and uncompromising: detect threats early, prevent their escalation, and, where necessary, respond with speed and severity.

The most defining feature of this doctrine is its holistic approach. It recognises that terrorism is not merely an act of violence, but a manifestation of ideology, organisation, and deliberate strategy. Consequently, the response too must be comprehensive and multi-layered.

### PRAHAAR rests on seven core pillars:

- Prevention: Intelligence-led, proactive measures to neutralise threats at inception
- Response: Swift, coordinated action in the event of an incident
- Analysis: Data-driven decision-making based on precise intelligence assessment
- Human Rights Compliance: Ensuring all actions remain within the constitutional and legal framework
- Action against Terror Financing: Systematic dismantling of financial support networks
- Awareness and De-radicalisation: Countering extremist narratives through societal engagement
- Resilience and Recovery: Rapid restoration of normalcy post-incident

Together, these pillars create a strategy that not only counters terrorism effectively but also strengthens societal resilience.

Contemporary terrorist groups are increasingly leveraging advanced technologies—encrypted communications, the dark web, drones, and cryptocurrencies—to evade detection. Traditional policing methods, in isolation, are no longer sufficient. PRAHAAR addresses this gap by embedding cyber capabilities, advanced surveillance technologies, and financial intelligence into its operational framework.

India's posture against terrorism has, in recent years, become markedly more assertive. The Balakot air strike, Operation Sindoor, and sustained operations against domestic terrorist networks underscore a clear shift: India is no longer confined to a defensive stance. The capability and resolve to undertake pre-emptive and decisive action are now firmly established.



### EFFECTIVE PREVENTION DEMANDS A ROBUST CYBER-INTELLIGENCE ARCHITECTURE, DECISIVE CONTROL OVER AI-DRIVEN MISINFORMATION, AND DEEP PENETRATION INTO TERROR NETWORKS

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PRAHAAR institutionalises this approach. It ensures that such actions are not ad hoc or situational, but guided by a structured and consistent policy framework.

At the heart of this doctrine lies the Prevention pillar. Its strategic focus is unambiguous: identify and neutralise threats at the earliest stage. This necessitates strengthening intelligence-led policing, ensuring real-time information sharing among agencies, dismantling recruitment pipelines, and disrupting support infrastructures.

Monitoring digital radicalisation and exerting stringent control over terror financing are integral to this effort. Prevention, however, has now transcended conventional boundaries. It is increasingly technology-driven. Artificial intelligence enables predictive threat analysis; big data analytics helps identify suspicious patterns; drone surveillance enhances border security; and cyber forensics allows tracking of encrypted communications. In an era where terrorism is rapidly digitising, expanding cyber capabilities is no longer optional—it is imperative.

The proliferation of deepfakes, fabricated digital content, and AI-driven misinformation has further complicated the threat landscape. Digital vigilance must, therefore, be accorded the highest priority to detect and neutralise risks at their nascent stage. At the same time, it can be recognised that radicalisation cannot be countered by security forces alone. It demands active participation from society—educators, community leaders, religious institutions, and civil organisations.

The Response pillar ensures swift and coordinated action during crises. Local police serve as the first responders, supported by specialised agencies such as the National Security Guard and the National Investigation Agency. This multi-tiered mechanism not only ensures immediate containment but also strengthens investigation and prosecution.

PRAHAAR also enhances national preparedness. Investments in modern equipment, drone surveillance, AI-enabled command systems, specialised training, cyber capabilities, and standardised operational procedures are aimed at ensuring seamless coordination between states and agencies. Strengthening international cooperation is equally critical, given the transnational nature of contemporary terrorism.

Equally important is the role of society. Radicalisation cannot be countered through force alone; it requires awareness, engagement, and credible counter-narratives. Preventing youth from straying into extremist pathways is as vital as any enforcement action. Countering adversarial propaganda—particularly in the digital domain—must be pursued with clarity and consistency.

Effective prevention demands a robust cyber-intelligence architecture, decisive control over AI-driven misinformation, and deep penetration into terror networks. Effective response, on the other hand, requires seamless coordination among police, intelligence agencies, armed forces, and civil administration.

Ultimately, no policy succeeds on intent alone. Its effectiveness depends on sustained effort, clarity of leadership, and disciplined execution.

### Conclusion

PRAHAAR marks a significant evolution in India's counter-terrorism strategy. Its architecture is sound, and the intent of the government is clear. However, its success will rest squarely on implementation. Policy formulation is only the first step; translating it into measurable outcomes on the ground is the real test. Alongside governmental efforts, citizens too must assume an active role in this collective endeavour. The Ministry of Home Affairs has, through PRAHAAR, delivered a long-awaited and necessary doctrine—one that has the potential to significantly strengthen India's national security framework and decisively counter the menace of terrorism.

# Dope vs Pope: Power in God's Image



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

Hell must be calm and beautiful, as all monsters on the planet are, performing what hell itself was meant to perform. Jimmy Kimmel got it right when he reduced the moment to a satirical shorthand: "Dope vs. Pope." Soon after President Donald Trump posted an AI-generated image of himself in a Jesus-like robe, appearing to heal a sick man—widely interpreted by critics as resembling Jeffrey Epstein—in a hospital bed, the reaction did not merely ripple through Washington or the Vatican, but spread across the wider political orbit that surrounds him. The image—later deleted from his social media account—showed Trump in a white robe, his hand glowing as it touched the forehead of a patient, framed by a staged backdrop of the American flag, the Statue of Liberty, fighter jets, an eagle, a praying nurse, and a uniformed soldier. Across political lines, it was read as self-exaltation, a deliberate borrowing of sacred imagery for personal elevation. The Pope was not an ordinary figure in controversy. It worked as a break in meaning: political identity, religious symbolism, and artificial intelligence fused into a single manufactured claim of authority. To treat it as a passing provocation would miss the point. Political history is full of rulers who have clashed with religious power or bent it to their own needs. From emperors bargaining with the papacy to modern regimes trying to absorb religious institutions into the state machine, the Church has long stood as a rival source of legitimacy.

In the twentieth century, ideological systems often defined themselves against religious authority. Adolf Hitler, in the private fragments recorded in Table Talk, described Christianity as hostile to the logic of struggle and survival, treating it as a moral system that weakened his worldview. Joseph Stalin reduced the Vatican to irrelevance with the blunt question: "How many divisions has the Pope?" Benito Mussolini treated religion as something to be contained and managed under state supremacy. Across these systems, the Church was either dismissed, controlled, or stripped of independent authority.

Authority is no longer carried only through law, policy, or institutional negotiation. It is constructed through images that circulate quickly and provoke reaction. Political power now often appears first as visual impact before it becomes anything else. This matters because earlier conflicts between Church and state were built on justifications of belief and sovereignty. Today, the conflict is not structured in that way. The AI image of Trump as a Christ-like healer is not an argument. It is an act of symbolic appropriation that unsettles the boundary between sacred representation and political display. Religious imagery becomes material for personal projection, while political leadership borrows the visual language once reserved for spiritual authority.

Against this backdrop, Pope Leo XIV presents a sharply different form of authority. His statements repeatedly insist that the Church does not function as a party-political actor, yet he refuses silence on moral questions. He has stated that he does not intend to enter partisan politics, but also insists he will speak where he believes Gospel principles are at stake. In one of his most quoted interventions, he directly counters contemporary political reasoning by stating that "JD Vance is wrong: Jesus does not ask us to rank our love for others," rejecting any attempt to organise Christian ethics into hierarchies of human value. This position avoids easy classification. It is neither aligned with ideological conservatism nor with progressive political agendas. Instead, it rests on a claim that moral truth cannot be reduced to political identity. Ethical teaching, in this view, is not meant to serve a faction, nor disappear into neutrality. It remains active in public life without becoming owned by it. He is equally direct about internal weaknesses within the Church. His criticism of "indoctrination" is not decorative language. It is a warning that religious teaching loses integrity when it suppresses independent moral judgement. He argues that indoctrination damages conscience by removing the possibility of genuine reflection, even when that reflection leads to disagreement. This places him in the middle of ongoing internal disputes over doctrine, authority, and pastoral direction. It is within this context that his African apostolic journey gains weight. Covering routes through several countries, and including a visit to the Great Mosque of Algiers, the journey is more than ceremonial travel. It signals a shift in where Catholic growth and influence now sit. Africa is no longer peripheral to global Christianity; it is one of its strongest centres. Beginning a major journey there is a deliberate acknowledgment of that reality.

The contrast with Trump is direct. The papal journey is physical, slow, and rooted in encounter. It depends on presence, dialogue, and institutional continuity. Trump's communication style operates in a different register entirely. It is instant, visual, and designed for rapid circulation. One approach builds meaning through continuity in time; the other creates impact through immediate display and repetition. One draws authority from tradition; the other reshapes tradition into material for ongoing public reaction.

This difference also reflects a wider shift in how authority is understood. The idea of an American pope was once considered unlikely, largely because of concerns about how closely American political culture sits with global religious authority. Yet Leo XIV's election complicates that assumption. He has been described as "the least American of Americans", a phrase pointing to someone who carries national origin but does not appear confined by it. His Augustinian grounding, centred on shared life, unity, and moral order, frames authority as something held in common rather than performed for effect.

Trump's use of religious imagery should not be reduced to simple disrespect. It reflects a deeper condition in which institutions no longer hold exclusive control over meaning. Symbolic language now moves freely across digital platforms, detached from its original setting. Religious images can be lifted into political communication without mediation by religious authority. Despite all this, what if Trump genuinely believes he is the chosen one—the 'son of God' and that every action he takes is divinely instructed? Then who, in the end, is the real 'dope'?



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# Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: India's civilisational path to global peace and harmony



KUNWAR PUSHPENDRA PRATAP SINGH

In an era marked by persistent conflicts, geopolitical rivalries, climate crises, economic inequalities, and cultural tensions, the quest for global peace and harmony has become more urgent than ever before. The modern world, despite its technological advancements and interconnectedness, continues to struggle with divisions and distrust among nations and communities. In such a scenario, India's ancient philosophical principle of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—meaning "the world is one family"—emerges as a powerful and timeless framework for fostering global unity, peace, and cooperation.

The concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* originates from the Maha Upanishad, an ancient Indian text that emphasises the universality of human existence. It states that narrow-minded individuals discriminate between "mine" and "others", while those with a noble outlook consider the entire world as one family. This profound idea reflects the inclusive and holistic worldview of Indian civilisation, which transcends boundaries of nation, religion, language,

and culture. It promotes a sense of shared responsibility and mutual respect among all human beings.

Unlike many modern political ideologies that prioritise national interest above all else, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* advocates for a balance between self-interest and collective welfare. It calls for empathy, compassion, and cooperation as guiding principles of human interaction. In doing so, it provides a moral and ethical foundation for addressing global challenges that cannot be solved by any single nation alone.

Historically, India has embodied this principle through its commitment to peace and non-violence. The teachings of Lord Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi emphasised compassion and non-harm towards all living beings. In the modern era, Mahatma Gandhi brought global attention to the power of non-violence (Ahimsa) as a tool for political and social transformation. His philosophy not only played a crucial role in India's freedom struggle but also inspired civil rights movements across the world. Gandhi's vision was rooted in the belief that humanity is interconnected, and that true peace can only be achieved through understanding and non-violent coexistence.

In contemporary times, the relevance of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* has only grown stronger. The challenges facing the world today—such as climate change, pandemics, terrorism, and economic instability—are inherently global in nature. They demand collective action, shared



responsibility, and a spirit of cooperation among nations. India has consistently advocated this approach on international platforms by promoting the idea of "One Earth, One Family, One Future", which reflects the essence of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in a modern context. India's actions on the global stage further reinforce its commitment to this principle. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India launched the "Vaccine Maitri" initiative, supplying vaccines to numerous countries, especially developing nations that lacked access to medical resources. This humanitarian effort demonstrated that India prioritises global well-being over narrow national interests. Similarly, India has actively participated in United Nations peacekeeping missions and has provided aid to countries affected by natural disasters, reflecting its role as a responsible and compassionate global actor.

Furthermore, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is not limited to diplomatic or political spheres; it also has profound implications for personal and cultural interactions. In a world increasingly divided by identity politics, religious extremism, and cultural misunderstandings, this principle encourages dialogue, tolerance, and mutual respect. It reminds us that diversity is not a source of conflict, but a strength that enriches human civilisation.

Education plays a crucial role in promoting the values of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. By instilling a sense of global citizenship and personal responsibility in younger generations, societies can cultivate individuals who are more empathetic, inclusive, and cooperative. Cultural exchange programmes, international collaborations, and people-to-people connections can further strengthen this sense of global unity.

India's soft power also contributes significantly to spreading this philosophy worldwide. Practices such as yoga, Ayurveda, meditation, and Indian classical arts have gained global recognition and acceptance. The celebration of International Yoga Day across countries is a testament to how India's cultural heritage can unite people beyond geographical and ideological boundaries. These traditions not only promote physical and mental well-being but also foster a sense of inner peace and harmony, which are essential for building a peaceful world.

However, the path of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is not without challenges. The current global order is heavily influenced by power politics, economic competition, and

strategic interests. Many nations prioritise short-term gains over long-term collective benefits, leading to conflicts and distrust. Bridging these differences requires strong leadership, moral courage, and a willingness to embrace a broader vision of humanity.

Despite these challenges, the principle remains a viable and necessary path forward. It does not demand the erasure of national identities or interests, but rather encourages their alignment with global welfare. It calls for a shift in perspective—from competition to cooperation, from division to unity, and from self-centredness to shared responsibility.

In conclusion, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is not merely an ancient Indian ideal; it is a universal philosophy with profound relevance in today's world. It offers a roadmap for building a more peaceful, just, and harmonious global society. By embracing this principle, nations can move beyond conflict and rivalry towards collaboration and mutual growth. As the world stands at a crossroads, grappling with complex challenges, India's civilisational wisdom provides a beacon of hope—reminding us that we are all part of one global family, and that our collective future depends on our ability to live together in peace and harmony.

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OUR VIEW



# Energy storage: India's dependence must drop

*Our exposure to supply chain risk urgently needs to be minimized. Options other than battery systems, an arena heavily dominated by China, are emerging that seem ripe for a policy push*

India needs to rethink its power storage options in the light of an energy shock that has exposed the fragility of global supply chains. Since geopolitical conflict and wobbly rules of international engagement are unlikely to relieve us of trade clamps being used as weapons, we must adjust our cost and security calculus accordingly. At particular risk are battery electric storage systems (BESS) that are now increasingly favoured by renewable energy (RE) producers for grid-scale storage. In his first term as US president, Donald Trump had begun barring China from access to what it deemed vital technology. It shattered the illusion of Big Tech's offerings being part of the global commons, as it were, open to all for a fee. When Trump launched his tariff war on the global economy in his second term, China retaliated by curbing access to critical minerals, done by tightening its grip on supply. India was among the importers that suffered collateral damage from this trade tit-for-tat between the two current archrivals for world power. The Gulf war's Hormuz crisis that has disrupted hydrocarbon supply this year is just the latest example. Commerce works, but only so long as it works. Extra-commercial considerations could kick in with little notice—and with no provocation by us—to wreak havoc on our vital infrastructure.

Globally, China dominates the field of BESS, whether we go by its technology, production, global market share or supply chains that go all the way back to mines and minerals—from nickel and cobalt to lithium and copper, all vital inputs for batteries. Some capacity for energy storage is unavoidable in a grid fed by RE, given the variability of its generation and need for grid stability. But we could minimize

our reliance on battery storage to what grid stability requires and adopt other means for the rest. The most conventional option, of course, is pumped storage, in which excess electricity generated is used to pump water up an elevation, from where it can be allowed by a sluice gate to gush down, turn a turbine and generate more power like a hydropower plant does. Its downside is its project complexity; few locations qualify for water reservoirs along hillsides, given the risks of ecological and social disruption. Another method is the use of concentrated solar power that can store heat; concave mirrors track the sun through the day, focusing its rays and heat on a container with salt that melts and traps heat. The molten salt can then be pumped through a heat exchanger to turn water into steam that turns a turbine when electricity is needed.

The technology that holds most promise is probably green hydrogen, in which RE is used to split water into hydrogen and oxygen. This hydrogen can be stored, transported and used as fuel in a combined-cycle gas turbine to produce power. In the first cycle, fuel ignites to create a combustive blast that drives a turbine, and in the second, the residual heat creates steam for a steam turbine. Hydrogen can also be used to generate power in fuel cells, a tech advancement that can run electric vehicles without any need of plug-in batteries. What's more, hydrogen can take the place of petrol in an internal combustion engine as well, producing water vapour as exhaust rather than carbon dioxide, a climate-distortive gas. Some of these modes of storage only need cost-value equations to work out, but could potentially help us avoid external dependence. That's reason enough for a policy push.

THEIR VIEW

# Deploy patient capital to set off a revolution of green technology

*Such funds could join smart regulation to propel green innovation and India's net-zero transition*



**ALOKA MAJUMDAR** is global head of philanthropy and head of sustainability, HSBC India.

India stands at a pivotal juncture in its Viksit Bharat journey. To reconcile its developmental ambitions with its commitment to net-zero emissions, a CEEW 2025 report suggests that the nation must mobilize a staggering \$4.1 trillion in investments over the next two decades. While the economic prize is massive, estimated at \$1.1 trillion in market value, many climate technologies struggle to secure the capital, investor confidence or policy support needed to move from pilot stage to adoption.

Traditional market approaches are not supporting green innovations. Early-stage solutions in the circular economy and bio-economy are frequently seen as too risky for commercial banks. To address this, donors need to go beyond traditional philanthropy and act as 'learning partners', providing patient capital and blended finance to help prove these models.

Many high-potential value chains in the green economy are capital-intensive and at a low level of market maturity. Unlike mature sectors like utility-scale solar energy, which now attracts international lenders, nascent sectors such as bio-based packaging or lithium-ion battery (LIB) recycling face high upfront capital expenditure and finance costs.

For instance, bioplastic packaging is 20-30% more expensive than conventional plastics, given its complex processing requirements and limited

equipment availability. Similarly, in LIB recycling, profitability is highly sensitive to evolving battery chemistries, which creates risk perception that deters commercial debt. Affordable finance can let these value chains attain the economies of scale needed to out-compete conventional alternatives.

Philanthropic capital is not monolithic and recognizing its diversity is critical to maximizing impact. Different forms of philanthropic capital—like corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds, institutional foundation capital and high net worth individual (HNI) or family office capital—have distinct risk appetites and time horizons. Strategically layering these capital types allows donors to absorb risk at different stages of the innovation lifecycle.

This patient capital is especially vital for nature-based solutions (NBS) such as wetland management and sustainable forest management, where gestation periods are long and market-led logic is hard to apply. This urgency is reflected in India's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which target the creation of an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2030, alongside government programmes such as Mishi and Amrit Dharohar to scale wetlands and mangrove-based solutions.

To bridge the technology gap, blended finance models can be deployed. These involve using philanthropic or public funds to provide first-loss default guarantees or concessional lending. In the decentralized renewable energy sector, for example, such mechanisms have helped small farmers and women-led micro-enterprises overcome a lack of collateral to adopt clean technologies. By taking on the first layer of risk, donors allow commercial banks to participate in supposedly 'unbankable' sectors, lowering interest rates as the technology proves its reliability.

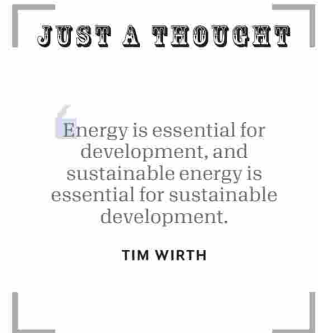
It is important that a safe space for innovation is created for capital to flow effectively. A case in point is how the

Reserve Bank of India has allowed 'theme neutral' applications as part of an 'on tap' facility under its regulatory sandbox, enabling applications across technologies and themes, including sustainable finance and climate risk mitigation. A regulatory sandbox would allow the government to grant time-bound experimental permits that relax these norms for proven clean technologies. Developers could then demonstrate their projects under real-world conditions before seeking full regulatory approval. This reduces deployment risk and provides the empirical data that financiers need.

Scaling the green economy is not just about the 'hard' tech, it is about the human capital driving it. Investing in inclusive green value chains is a productivity multiplier. There are two aspects here—of upskilling and gender parity. Data shows that organizations with greater gender parity experience higher productivity, with studies cited in the Niti Aayog's *From Intent to Impact 2025* report indicating up to levels of 15-20%.

By providing patient capital to women-led 'green livelihood hubs', donors can move women from low-value manual labour—such as informal waste-picking—into ownership roles in circular-economy units. This shift stabilizes supply chains, enhances resource efficiency and ensures that the developmental transition is socially inclusive.

Building India's green economy requires a 'whole-of-nation' approach. This creates an opportunity to move beyond expecting the private sector to carry the full burden of risk for technologies that are not yet market-mature. The role of the donor community is to serve as the foundation's architects, providing the risk-absorbing capital that allows the rest of the economic structure to stand. By focusing on blended finance, advocating regulatory sandboxes and acting as learning partners, we can ensure that India's green technology revolution is not just a vision for 2047, but a present reality.



MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

# Low wages and high profits: It's a lopsided tug-of-war

AJIT RANADE



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Edward Bernstein, an American economist, observed that inflation is ultimately a social tug-of-war; between those unwilling to relinquish their gains and those fighting for their fair share. This captures something that reams of economic data cannot. It describes the human experience behind violence in Manesar and Noida. Consider a family of four in a Noida worker colony surviving on 10,000 a month. The cooking gas price has soared, vegetables are dearer, bus fares have risen and the landlord has raised rent. There is no spending to cut, because there was nothing spare to begin with. When workers at garment and auto-component factories turned to stone-pelting and arson, it cannot be just mindless rage. It was the accumulated pressure of nearly a decade of stagnant real wages colliding with a savage spike in the cost of living. The recent uptick in inflation was perhaps the last straw. But the eruption was in the making for years. Last year, Chief Economic Advisor (CEA)

V. Anantha Nageswaran delivered a damning verdict in the *Economic Survey*. The corporate sector, he said, had been "swimming in profits" while wage growth remained tepid. The data bore him out. Profit before taxes for over 33,000 sampled companies nearly quadrupled between 2019-20 and 2022-23. Nifty 500 companies posted profit growth of 22.3% in 2023-24 alone. Over that period, employment in these firms grew a mere 1.5%. The corporate sector's net profit to GDP ratio was at a 15-year peak. But there was wage stagnation across many sectors. The government's Periodic Labour Force Survey tells a stark story: while India's GDP grew at 6.7% annually between 2021-22 and 2023-24, real wages for regular workers contracted by 0.07%. For nearly a decade, workers in formal manufacturing have seen wage stagnation, especially among contract workers. The structural source of this stagnation is a dual caste system that has quietly taken root on factory floors. An analysis by Centre for Policy Research based on data from the Annual Survey of Industries shows that contract workers' share of organized factory employment has nearly doubled—from just under 22% in 2001-02 to over 40% in 2021-22. In automotive and auto-components, the epicentre of today's unrest, regu-

lar workers earn decent wages with provident fund, state-insurance and gratuity. Contract workers doing virtually identical work on the same assembly lines earn up to 31% less, with no statutory benefits. In some plants, the total labour cost differential is 78% to 85%. The employer avoids statutory obligations, the labour contractor pockets a margin and the worker must absorb every risk—of illness, injury, job loss and inflation—with no cushion. Over 80% of India's workers remain outside formal employment frameworks. The contractual factory worker earning 13,000 a month, for all his precarity, is at the better-off end of a vast and largely invisible precariat. Wage costs in Indian manufacturing account for barely 6% to 7% of total production costs. A 10% wage hike for all workers, permanent and contractual, would raise total costs by about 0.7%. In an industry where profit growth has run at double digits for years, this is just a rounding error. And yet wages do not rise.

What explains this apparent economic irrationality? Violent protests by contract workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar factory in 2012 have an uncanny parallel with Noida today. Contract workers are hired through labour contractors, dismissed at will and have no legal standing to negotiate with employers. Maruti workers fought for union recognition and making contract workers permanent. The management refused both. The dispute ended in tragedy. More than a decade later, similar antagonism persists across Haryana and UP's industrial belts. What's the way ahead? Collective bargaining for contract workers: India's four Labour Codes, if earnestly implemented, offer a chance to extend bargaining rights to such workers. But the Codes must be backed by unemployment insurance, a safety net that will help workers withstand transitions without destitution. Enforce equal pay for equal work: The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act mandates it, but it is widely ignored.

Enforcement responsibility must shift to the principal employer, with meaningful penalties for non-compliance.

*Index: minimum wages to inflation automatically.* Periodic revisions writing out under political pressure, as with Haryana's 35% hike that followed street violence, are neither stable nor equitable. An automatic inflation link would treat wage adequacy as an institutional design matter, not a crisis-response one.

*Need the CEA's counsel on enlightened self-interest:* A corporate sector that suppresses the wages of 400 million workers undermines the consumption demand it depends on. Higher wages are not charity, but aggregate demand. A workforce that can afford to buy what it produces is the foundation of durable growth. Besides, penny pinching on contract labour wages leads to a heavy price to be paid for work disruptions, not to mention low morale and a sulking workforce.

The recent violence is a symptom, not the disease. The disease is real wage stagnation, a contractualization wave that has stripped millions of bargaining power and an inflation shock that has made the intolerable unbearable. Bernstein's tug of war is not unwinnable. Right now, only one side is pulling. That is not a tug of war. It is a rout.

**Workers have largely been left helpless against the force of inflation but a better balance can be achieved**



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Delimitation sound and fury: It's significant for our federal future

The secret of a robust federal democracy is balanced inter-se sharing of economic and political power across the country



**MYTHILI BHUSHURMAMTH**  
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The government's move to link the Nari Shakti Vandana Adhivani (Women's Reservation Act of 2023) with nationwide delimitation, or redrawing electoral constituency boundaries based on population, has stoked the latent but ever-growing sense of injustice that India's southern states have long been smoldering under.

Remember, it was not so long ago that Chandrababu Naidu, chief minister of Andhra Pradesh and a member of India's ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), urged Andhra people to have more children. And Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin suggested that rather than the 16 forms of wealth traditionally invoked while blessing newly-weds, a new invocation should be for 16 children instead. Both were wary of what they saw, precisely, as a shift in the balance of political power to northern states that would likely follow the delimitation of Lok Sabha seats, originally slated for 2031 (post the first Census after 2026).

Their fears were not without reason, it would seem. The Constitution Amendment Bill moved by the government in a three-day special sitting of Parliament last week purportedly seeks to accommodate the 33% reservation for women in Parliament and state legislatures legislated under the 2023 Act. But by linking it to delimitation—an exercise that southern states fear will reduce their voice at the national level, due to their greater success in curbing population growth—the Union government has needlessly stirred a hornet's nest.

Though the final allocation of seats is to be determined by a yet-to-be-set-up Delimitation Commission, what is at stake is how the increased number of seats (from the present 550 to 850) is to be apportioned among states. Unfortunately, the bill is silent on this. The southern states fear that any population-based delimitation exercise will result in their losing political weight in Parliament, relative to northern counterparts with higher populations. Worse, it will further skew an already-skewed relationship in the inter-se sharing of political and economic power.

Consider. At the time of elections to the 4th Lok Sabha in 1967, the southern states together accounted for roughly 25% of India's GDP and had roughly the same percentage (about 25%) of Lok Sabha seats. Today, they account for close to 31% of India's GDP, yet have only 23.8% of Lok Sabha seats. The angst of southern states stems not only from their fear of a decline in their political representation at the national level, but also the fact that their political clout, which already lags far behind their economic clout, will fall further behind if the Bill is passed. To give a simple analogy that might be familiar to Indian readers, the situation today is akin to a joint family where some members do not



contribute as much as others to the family kitty and yet have the final say in deciding the family's priorities and spending decisions.

Sure, the present state of affairs, where delimitation of constituencies has been frozen since 1976, does grave injustice to our claim of being a true democracy, since faster population growth in the north means each Lok Sabha Member of Parliament from the more populous northern states represents a larger number of citizens than from southern states. The latter realize that this is an anomaly. But they fear the government's present move will only aggravate the growing disconnect between their economic and political power.

Indeed, chances are that in a business-as-usual scenario, the imbalance between economic and political power will continue even if delimitation were to happen in 2031. In such a scenario, a better way to allay their apprehensions might be to keep their relative shares unchanged in Parliament, while using the interim period to ensure more balanced regional economic development so that the disconnect between economic and political power between the south and north is narrowed.

A uniform proportionate increase would do this. It would also not privilege any political party that has a strong base in a more populous part of the

country: the NDA's biggest member, the Bharatiya Janata Party, for instance, has a strong base in the Hindi heartland, but is largely missing in the south. But southern states, led by Tamil Nadu in particular, have made no bones about their opposition to the Bill. Why? The reason is simple. The draft Bill makes no mention of a 50% across-the-board increase. All we have is the government's word for it. So why is the government fighting shy of making this part of the Bill? Ah! There you have it! It is made part of the Bill, once it becomes an Act, incumbent governments will have to seek a fresh constitutional amendment each time they want to tweak it, possibly to their advantage. But if it is left to the Delimitation Commission, it will be easy to change the formula at whim.

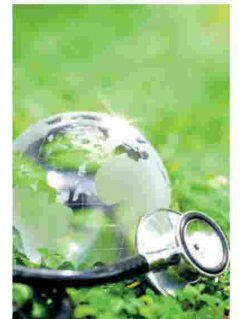
"Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," is how Macbeth described his life as he lamented his waste of time in Shakespeare's play by the same name. "Full of sound and fury" is an apt description of what we are seeing play out on the national stage today. Except that in our case, it signifies something very important for us as a nation. It is a timely reminder that, both in economic and political terms, our federal democracy is still very much a work-in-progress. We risk upsetting the applecart at our peril.

# We mustn't let climate action fall off the agenda of investors

Health is grabbing ESG funds but going green can fight illness too



**LARA WILLIAMS**  
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering climate change.



When did climate change stop being the most important issue of our time? According to a bunch of investors, quite recently. In an April report, Berenberg Bank asked 200 institutional investors which ESG—environmental, social and governance—issues were most important to their funds. Climate change, which had been ranked either No. 1 or No. 2 for the past three years, slipped to 5th place. The anonymous poll also asked investors about which United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), if any, their company targets. Just half said climate action (SDG 13), down from 70% last year.

So, what's replaced climate at the top of ESG investors' priority lists? Health. Berenberg isn't the first to spot this shift. PitchBook's February analysis of venture capital trends shows deal activity in clean and climate tech declining in 2025, while global VC activity in health tech accelerated. The private market data provider reported that funding for health-tech was up 26.1% last year over 2024.

There are no prizes for guessing why this might be. Health is a growing and profitable sector. Sales of GLP-1 weight loss drugs have been on the rise, with demand expected to boom as oral formulations are launched and affordability improves. Meanwhile, an obsession with longevity and wellness has launched a swathe of startups offering services such as precautionary body scans and blood tests.

Climate, on the other hand, has suffered from a barrage of attacks from the US government. The Trump administration has slashed funding, torn up environmental regulations and turned a once-bipartisan issue into something politically toxic—with global implications. One of the priorities for the International Monetary Fund and World Bank Group spring meetings, for example, is to set a new climate action plan for the World Bank. But reporting in *The Guardian* suggests that, in a bid to not poke US President Donald Trump, senior staff of multiple international finance and development institutions were "self-censoring" by removing climate references from reports and projects. If even the IMF and World Bank are greenwashing, then it's no wonder that institutional investors are shy away from climate too.

In 2024 and 2025, more than 70% of respondents to Berenberg's survey said they measured the impact of their funds in terms of "emissions avoided." This year's poll saw that share drop to little over half, while "resources saved" became the most

Institutional investors have made health their top ESG priority.

popular metric. That speaks to a world in which GLP-1s are reducing food and medical-care needs—and where the benefits of climate-related investment are likely to be framed in other terms: renewables are a means to energy security rather than cleaner skies. Biochar, product of a novel method of carbon removal, boosts agricultural yields rather than removing CO2 from the atmosphere.

But if investors really want to make the greatest impact on our well-being, there's no more important target than climate change. It's not just that heatwaves kill. Hot weather increases adverse pregnancy outcomes, negatively impacts mental health and exacerbates chronic conditions like asthma. It ruins our sleep and studies suggest that the hotter it is, the higher the risk of injuries and work-related accidents.

Rising temperatures are also aiding the spread of vector-borne diseases such as dengue and chikungunya. The disease-spreading creepy-crawlies are finding more areas agreeable to their climatic needs, while the pathogens themselves often replicate better at higher temperatures. A study published in *Nature* in January projected that climate change would lead to an additional 123 million malaria cases in Africa over the next 25 years. There are also fears that fungi will adapt to a hotter world, leading to new fungal diseases or enabling existing species to infect us more readily.

And temperature itself isn't the only threat. *The Lancet* has just launched a commission which will explore how sea-level rise reshapes health. Christina Figueres, former UN climate secretary and co-chair of the commission, wrote in *The Guardian*: "When saltwater intrudes into freshwater supplies, health suffers. When floods overwhelm sanitation systems, diseases spread. When farmland is inundated by king tides, nutrition deteriorates."

On the other hand, climate action is good for our health. Consider efforts to electrify heat and transport, which not only reduce emissions but also cut air pollution—responsible for an estimated 7 million premature deaths per year.

ESG-focused investors could still do a lot of good, no matter how their focus shifts. But if our health is really their top priority, they're bound to fail if they don't factor in the climate.

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

# Uttar Pradesh: A role model for a different fiscal path

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



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The Ganga mostly flows east-southeast across the Indo-Gangetic alluvial plains towards its mouth in Kolkata. As it approaches Varanasi in eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP), it encounters something unusual: an outlier of ancient Vindhyan sandstone that juts northward into the otherwise soft alluvial plain. The river cannot cut through this resistant rock as easily as through alluvium, so instead of continuing straight eastward, it deflects northward, running along the western flank of this Vindhyan rock ridge. It flows north for a short distance past the iconic ghats before eventually bending eastward again. This is what geomorphologists technically call lithological control over a river pattern.

The northward flow is central to the city's religious significance. A river flowing north towards the Himalayas has been interpreted as an ascent towards the divine. The ghats are built along the crescent-shaped concave western bank that the northward-flowing river naturally created, giving them their

dramatic amphitheatre-like form. This ancient city framed between the Varuna River to its north and Assi River to its south (hence Varanasi) is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, with a history spanning some 5,000 years.

Varanasi, and its re-emergence in the last dozen or so years, is central to the direction of India's modern politics. While much is still left to be done, it has been dramatically cleaned up. It is the Prime Minister's constituency in the country's largest state, led by a future contender for high office at the national level. If Ayodhya is the emotional epicentre of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) political project, then Varanasi can lay claim to being its philosophical centre. Both these cities are in UP.

Like Varanasi, the state of UP could economically perform much better, but a lot has been achieved. Unlike many large states in India, UP has been running a revenue surplus for two decades now. A revenue surplus is achieved when a state's revenue receipts are higher than its revenue expenditure. This usually means that a balance has been struck between the payment of salaries/pensions of government staff and investments in assets like roads, airports and irrigation systems. UP has achieved an impressive surplus of

approximately 1% of its gross state domestic product (GSDP) for over 20 years now under both non-BJP and BJP governments (except for one covid year). The annual revenue surplus since the BJP came to power in 2017 is about half a percentage point higher on average, but it is more volatile than before.

The state's BJP government also appears to be budgeting revenue aggressively, resulting in a greater difference between budgeted expenditure and revised expenditure. Nevertheless, for several years now, UP has managed a revenue surplus and also a moderate budget deficit.

This is in remarkable contrast to other Indian states. Punjab, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh, for instance, run persistent revenue deficits of over 2%. Maharashtra, which is a similarly large state, has had a mirror image revenue deficit to UP's surplus over the last decade.

UP does have some structural advantages. As India's most populous state, it is the beneficiary of a sizeable chunk of the desti-

nation-oriented goods and services tax (GST). Its population combined with the fact that the governing party is the same both in the state and at the Centre ("double engine *sarika*") results in the single largest share of central tax devolution.

Beyond these, the government of the day in UP has followed a fiscally prudent strategy of controlling expenditure and increasing revenue mobilization.

In its spending pattern, UP stands out among big states because it is the only state to refrain from unconditional cash transfers, especially to women. UP does not have an scheme equivalent to the Ladki Behen scheme in Maharashtra or the Ladli Beha scheme of Madhya Pradesh. One reason for this could be that the scale of this for UP would make it unviable. With an estimated 50 million eligible women, even a modest ₹1,500 cash transfer a month will cost the exchequer ₹90,000 crore a year and serve to double the fiscal deficit. The comparable number for Maha-

rashtra is about ₹20,000 crore, and for Karnataka's Gruhalakshmi scheme, about ₹29,000 crore a year. According to PHS Legislative Research, 12 Indian states collectively spent about ₹1.7 trillion on unconditional cash transfer schemes to women in 2025-26. This is up from two states just three years ago, so it is definitely a fast-evolving trend among states.

Whether UP will be able to resist this trend going into next year's assembly elections will determine if it can maintain its impressive record of fiscal management. If UP does manage to buck the trend, it will demonstrate an alternate model to the harmful and utterly financially unviable economic populism among states.

Of course, as a relatively poor state, UP cannot be indifferent to welfare spending for women. Like it has already done, it should focus this spending on conditional cash transfer schemes tied to education, health, institutional maternity and skilling milestones. These programmes are tied to behavioural change and work to compound positive outcomes over time.

*"Don't spend a single paisa on useless things, spend lakhs on good deeds," said Madan Mohan Malaviya, founder of Banarus Hindu University.*

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# The Statesman

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## Paying the price

**I**n the run-up to polling in West Bengal, a constitutional paradox has quietly taken shape, one that exposes the limits of legal remedies when they collide with electoral time. The Supreme Court has overseen an extraordinary clean-up exercise following large-scale deletions from the electoral rolls under the Special Intensive Revision. Judicial officers, assisted across state lines, have processed tens of lakhs of objections. Nineteen appellate tribunals now stand operational, tasked with reviewing an avalanche of appeals. On paper, the system is working. But elections are not conducted on paper.

With over 30 lakh appeals pending and polling dates already fixed, the central question is no longer whether justice exists, but whether it can arrive in time to matter. The Court has clarified that only those whose appeals are decided before specific cut-off dates - April 21 for deleted voters in phase I and April 27 for those in phase II - will see their names restored in the supplementary rolls. For the rest, even a successful appeal will come too late. The vote, once lost, is not retroactively recoverable.

This is not a failure of intent. It is a failure of alignment between legal process and democratic function. A doctrine, designed to protect democracy, can also produce exclusion when large-scale disputes emerge too close to polling. The present situation illustrates that risk in stark terms.

The use of Article 142 of the Constitution of India with its promise of "complete justice" adds another layer of complexity. Here, it has enabled the creation of a comprehensive adjudicatory mechanism: tribunals, procedures, and safeguards intended to ensure fairness and procedural completeness in design does not guarantee completeness in outcome. A remedy delivered after polling may correct the record, but it cannot restore participation.

The deeper issue lies upstream. Why was a revision of this scale permitted so close to an election? Why was adjudicatory capacity not built in anticipation of predictable disputes? The burden has now shifted to a tribunal system that, however diligent, cannot realistically process millions of cases within days. Institutions are doing what they can within the constraints they face.

The judiciary has avoided halting the electoral process altogether, a move that would have carried its own democratic costs. The Election Commission of India has followed through on the revision exercise it initiated. Yet between them lies a gap, one measured not in law, but in time.

That gap is where disenfranchisement occurs. This moment forces a harder reckoning: rights in a democracy are not defined merely by their formal availability. They depend on systems that can deliver them when they are needed. A vote is not an abstract entitlement; it is an event-bound right. Miss the moment, and the right dissolves into after-the-fact correctness.

What emerges, then, is not institutional failure in the conventional sense, but a structural mismatch. A legal system designed for deliberation has been asked to operate at electoral speed. It cannot fully do so. And when time outruns justice, democracy pays the price.

## Power Timing

**T**he debate over expanding the Lok Sabha and state assemblies has largely been framed in terms of numbers - how many seats, which states gain more than others, and whether India needs more Members of Parliament. But that focus risks missing a deeper institutional shift. The real question is not how representation is expanded, but who controls the process through which it is redesigned.

What now appears to be emerging is a more flexible, and therefore more discreet, process. At the centre of this shift is the changing character of delimitation itself. When the process moves from being constitutionally automatic to institutionally managed - through commissions, legislative choices, and executive timing - it alters the nature of political power. Control no longer lies only in how boundaries are drawn, but in when they are drawn, which data is used, and under what conditions the exercise is undertaken.

Timing, in this context, becomes strategy. The choice of the census as a baseline is not a neutral administrative decision. Demographic patterns are uneven across India, shaped by migration, fertility rates, and regional development. Selecting one census over another can subtly recalibrate the balance of representation. Likewise, the moment at which delimitation is carried out, whether during a period of political consolidation or fragmentation, can influence how effectively parties adapt to new electoral maps.

None of this requires overt manipulation. Institutional design itself can produce political outcomes. The linkage between delimitation and women's reservation adds another layer of complexity. Reservation is often understood as a question of inclusion, but its implementation depends on the architecture of constituencies. When the two processes are tied together, the redesign of electoral boundaries simultaneously determines which seats are reserved, which incumbents are displaced, and how parties reorganise their leadership structures. The effects are not only immediate; they extend across multiple election cycles.

This is where the debate shifts from representation to system design. A more flexible framework may be justified on administrative grounds. India has changed, and its institutions must adapt. But flexibility without clearly defined safeguards can also blur the line between neutral procedure and political advantage. What was once governed by fixed rules risks becoming contingent on decisions taken by those who hold power at a given moment. That does not make reform illegitimate. It does, however, raise the threshold for scrutiny.

The central issue, then, is not whether India should expand its Parliament or update its electoral map. It is whether the mechanisms that enable such change remain anchored in transparent, rule-based principles. When representation itself becomes subject to timing, selection, and process design, the integrity of the system depends less on outcomes and more on how those outcomes are produced.

In that sense, the future of India's electoral framework may hinge not on the number of seats in the Lok Sabha, but on the quiet evolution of the rules that decide them.

# Empowered to deliver

**Bureaucracies obviously resist structural change; politicians fear constraints on discretionary control; parties may see a professional cadre as a check on patronage. The strongest counter-argument is electoral: parties that can credibly promise 'and deliver' better services are rewarded at the ballot box. Demonstrating that link empirically during pilots showing that an Indian Political Service measurably improved outcomes in pilot districts would make the political case far more effectively than any white paper.**



typically receive information about implementation failures late, filtered, and sanitised. By the time problems surface, they are entrenched. There is no institutional mechanism for real-time, evidence-based course correction between the political office and the field.

Third, institutional amnesia. Electoral cycles, cabinet reshuffles, and transfer seasons create recurring discontinuities. Lessons from one administration's programmes are rarely transmitted to the next. Each government reinvents processes its predecessor had already refined or abandoned for good reason.

A professional cadre dedicated to bridging these gaps would not eliminate them, but it would create a permanent institutional stake in closing them. Several democracies have institutionalised political advisers and implementation teams, with instructive results. The United Kingdom's Special Advisers (SpAds) are formally recognised and governed by a code of conduct that draws a clear line between political advice and the neutral civil service. The system demonstrates that rules 'can' protect administrative impartiality while allowing political responsiveness through SpAds. India has occasionally blurred that line, provoking controversy and calls for reform.

The United States separates career civil servants from political appointees, giving each administration the power to set priorities. The trade-off is continuity: wholesale turnover at the top of agencies disrupts institutional memory, and the phenomenon of "bureaucratic" political appointees converting to career posts illustrates the risk of inadequate safeguards.

France's ministerial cabinets (counselors) combine political strategy with policy coordination inside ministries, offering a tightly integrated model but one that concentrates power in a small circle around the minister. Colonial-era secretariats centralised political control over implementation, demonstrating both the acceleration that embedded intermediaries can achieve and the democratic accountability they can undermine when unchecked.

The lesson across cases is consistent: embedded advisers accelerate translation and feedback, but legal clarity, transparent selection and independent oversight are non-negotiable safeguards against partisan capture. How would an IPSV work? The cadre's remit would be advisory and facilitative, defined by statute. Officers would translate political decisions into implementable plans and support delivery never supplant the authority of elected officials or the permanent civil service.

Recruitment would be meritocratic: a competitive examination combined with background checks, language requirements, administered by an independent commission insulated from ministerial influence.

Deployment would follow fixed, short rotations in central ministries, state departments, and district implementation units with mandatory cooling-off periods before any officer could join a political office. Rotation prevents entrenchment, cooling-off periods

prevent the cadre from becoming an instrument of patronage. Accountability would be multi-layered: parliamentary oversight, an independent inspectorate, publicly reported performance metrics, and periodic civil society audits. Officers would be barred from active political campaigning and from holding party office. A transparent, enforceable code of conduct including penalties for collusion is foundational. Performance metrics would be joint, linking each officer's evaluation to administrative outcomes (timely procurement, budget absorption, service coverage) and to the quality of political-administrative coordination (clarity of communication, stakeholder management) but never to partisan electoral results. Training would combine public policy, political economy, procurement, digital governance, behavioural science, and conflict resolution, equipping officers to operate credibly in both political and technocratic environments.

One of the IPSV's most consequential effects could be structural: shrinking the space for political outfits who exploit the opacity of regulatory processes. Today, entrepreneurs and citizens navigating permits, approvals, and welfare entitlements frequently rely on informal intermediaries - a shadow system that breeds corruption, inflates costs, and erodes public trust. An IPSV officer embedded in a ministry or district unit would create a clear, official, time-bound channel for policy interpretation, application tracking, and bottleneck escalation. When that channel is backed by published timelines, digital dashboards and an enforceable code of conduct, the demand for informal intermediaries falls and the opportunity for extortion contracts. This is not merely a technical fix. It requires political will to empower impartial intermediaries, protect whistle-blowers and ensure that the cadre's accountability mechanisms are visible. Only when citizens can see that the official channel is faster, fairer, and more reliable than the informal one will the market for touts be undercut.

Three objections deserve direct engagement. Politicisation. A cadre that is nominally non-partisan but effectively controlled by the ruling party would be worse than the status quo as it would institutionalise partisan reach under a veneer of professionalism. The anti-kickback structural: statutory independence of the selection commission, fixed tenures that cannot be curtailed at political convenience, rotation rules that prevent any government from building a loyal cohort, and transparent performance reporting that makes capture visible.

Turf conflict. The Indian Administrative Service and state bureaucracies guard their prerogatives fiercely, quite naturally. A new cadre with overlapping responsibilities could provoke resistance, slow implementation, and create perverse incentives. The IPSV's mandate must therefore be explicitly

complementary: it advises, translates and monitors; it does not direct, approve, or disburse. Its authority derives from expertise and access, not from executive power.

Duplication and cost. Building a new national cadre requires investment in recruitment infrastructure, training, academies, salaries, and institutional support. Those resources could alternatively strengthen existing services. The counter-argument is that the translation gap the IPSV addresses is not a capacity problem: the existing services are structured to solve it; it is a 'design' gap in the institutional architecture. Additional capacity within the IAS does not create an interlocutor between the political and administrative spheres; it simply adds more administrators.

The right approach is not national scale at birth. It is a legislated pilot. Select two states (pilots) one with high administrative capacity, one with low and two central ministries - one in the social sector, one in infrastructure. Recruit a small first cohort. Deploy them with narrowly defined mandates tied to flagship programmes. Subject the pilot to independent academic evaluation with pre-registered metrics. Publish the results. If the pilots demonstrate improved delivery without partisan capture, scale gradually with statutory checks on patronage by the evidence. If fail, document the failure modes, iterate, or abandon. Either way, the exercise deepens India's institutional repertoire. The political feasibility question is real. Bureaucracies obviously resist structural change; politicians fear constraints on discretionary control; parties may see a professional cadre as a check on patronage.

The strongest counter-argument is electoral: parties that can credibly promise 'and deliver' better services are rewarded at the ballot box. Demonstrating that link empirically during pilots showing that the IPSV measurably improved outcomes in pilot districts would make the political case far more effectively than any white paper.

India's soft power in the developing world increasingly depends on its ability to offer practical, scalable governance models: not rhetoric, but replicable institutional design. A functioning IPSV that delivers measurable improvements in health, education, sanitation, and livelihoods would be a powerful exportable innovation: not a one-size-fits-all bureaucracy, but a democratic mechanism that helps elected leaders deliver on promises while preserving administrative neutrality.

If India can demonstrate that it has solved or meaningfully narrowed the translation gap between policy and practice, it gains moral and technical authority to advise and partner with other developing democracies. That is a strategic asset no amount of diplomatic effort can substitute.

Institutional innovation is slow, unglamorous work. It is not a substitute for political contestation or the compromises of plural democracy. It is a way of making those compromises more effective for citizens. The next step is modest and concrete: a clear legal framework for a pilot, an independent selection process for a first cohort, transparent performance metrics, and third-party evaluation. Design with humility. Test with rigor. Scale with evidence. India does not lack political will or policy ambition. What it lacks is an institutional bridge between the two. The Indian Political Service could be that bridge if we dare to build it carefully, defend it from capture, and hold it to account.



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Jakarta Post

## The bullying crisis: A wake-up call for society

**T**he bullying case involving 16 law students at the University of Indonesia (UI) marks a critical inflection point, revealing the growing normalization of aggression in Indonesian society.

Rather than reinforcing the nation's moral fabric, this incident exposes a serious erosion of ethical values and civic responsibility.

It serves as a compelling warning to state institutions, parents and youth to strengthen efforts to cultivate a society driven by integrity.

Furthermore, persistent bullying across

educational settings poses a serious challenge to national education standards. It directly contradicts Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which mandates safe, inclusive and violence-free learning environments.

As a structural barrier, bullying undermines students' psychological well-being and reduces engagement, ultimately weakening academic performance and impeding equitable education for all.

An examination of the current trajectory

of bullying in Indonesia reveals an alarming escalation in both frequency and complexity. Empirical data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission and the Indonesian Education Monitoring Network indicates a substantial surge in violence within schools. Reported incidents increased from 285 cases in 2023 to 573 in 2024 - a more than twofold rise.

Notably, 31 percent of these incidents are attributable to bullying. Physical bullying remains predominant (55.5 percent), followed by verbal or psychological abuse (29.3 percent). Primary school students

constitute the most affected demographic (26 percent), followed by junior secondary (25 percent) and senior secondary students (18.75 percent), underscoring early childhood as a particularly vulnerable stage.

Recently, the diffusion of bullying into higher education signals a troubling expansion of the phenomenon. Emerging cases suggest that institutionalized forms of violence are projected to intensify through the 2025 - 2026 period. For instance, a fatality allegedly linked to severe bullying at Udayana University has prompted a formal investigation and significant public scrutiny.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

### Snobbery

**Sir,** The article "Gilded Cage" (19 April) betrays a left-leaning bias and reflects an ivory tower outlook. It catapults former West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya to the fame of a failed industrial messiah conveniently glossing over the fact that he misallocated the potential effect of building industrial hubs in agricultural hinterland and ended up causing a blood bath. To lionize him as having been "the last hope" of resurrecting West Bengal into "a modern, functional state" is to imply that West Bengal is now beyond redemption and that the present dispensation is neither "modern" nor "functional". Such a view is patently absurd and partisan.

That the Left coalition turned West Bengal into a "party state" unlike the one now ruling, perfecting it into an "extortion state", as

viewed in the article, does not absolve the previous regime's involvement in extortion activities. The extortion was then organized; now it is sporadic and blatantly open. The article takes a pot shot at intellectuals at all levels aligning themselves with the present dispensation and scoffs at the "Progressive Bhadrakolik" or "mire cheerleaders". Clearly, they don't fit into the critics' model of "conscientious intellectuals". What it boils down to is prejudice or intellectual snobbery.

Yours, etc, Ardhendu Chatterjee, Durgapur, 20 April.

### Of tyrants

**Sir,** Apropos "Moral Faultline", published in your issue, I have sharp words about tyrants pierce through the fog of political rhetoric, exposing how moral authority stands in stark contrast to the brute force of militarized nationalism. His critique is not abstract

theory but a direct challenge to leaders who cloak violence in the language of security and faith. By naming the moral failures embedded in modern warfare, he reminds us that power without conscience corrodes the very foundations of human dignity.

What is striking is the resonance of his message across continents, especially in regions where faith still shapes public life. The Pope's statement underscores that moral clarity can unsettle entrenched systems of domination. If political leaders ignore this call, they risk deepening the divide between authority and legitimacy, leaving humanity adrift in a world ruled by fear.

Yours, etc, K. Ghidhanand Kumar, Bengaluru, 20 April.

### Good move

**Sir,** This refers to the article "A Welcome

Move" by Professor Anghuman Kar. I would like to express my appreciation for the recent directive of the University Grants Commission urging universities and colleges to adopt 5-6 Anganwadi centres for monitoring childcare and early education.

This initiative has the potential to significantly enhance early childhood development by introducing academic support, improved monitoring, and innovative teaching practices at the grassroots level.

It will also encourage students to actively participate in social work, promoting responsibility and practical learning. In the long run, strengthening Anganwadi centres will build a strong educational foundation for students, contributing to a healthier and more educated society.

Yours, etc, Suman Majumder, Kolkata, 16 April.

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Where Trump went wrong

HARSHA KAKAR

The ceasefire in Iran is likely to end shortly, resulting in either renewed attacks or a peace deal, details of which could emerge soon. US President Donald Trump's major blunder was assuming tactical superiority would enable strategic victory. He expected Iran to capitulate after the removal of its hierarchy, especially since Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu promised regime change, based on Mossad's control over the Iranian opposition and presence of agents within. Days stretched into weeks and Iran held its ground. It opened new frontiers, hit back, and forced Trump into a corner.

Weeks later, with no capitulation, rising losses and low availability of missiles, Trump started becoming delusional. He threatened eradicating an 'entire civilization,' demanding NATO join the conflict and switched from claiming 'strategic' victory to announcing 'tactical' gains, implying destruction of Iran's military assets. Yet, Iran held its ground, aware that it only had to survive to win, while the US would lose if it did not secure an unconditional surrender. For the US to win, boots on the ground or destruction of civilian infrastructure and residential areas - as Israel had done in Gaza - is the only option. Netanyahu already faces an ICC warrant for Israel's actions in Gaza, defended on the logic that these were Hamas's bases. It is repeating the same in Lebanon. It is unlikely Trump can copy this model. The US armed forces will most likely refuse and this could mean an insult to Trump's leadership. What Trump failed to realize was that nations where nationalism rides high have the resilience to absorb strikes and retaliate with

asymmetric force. Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan forced the US to withdraw in defeat, despite powerful and damaging aerial strikes but failure at the ground level. Conventional carpet bombing and a naval blockade failed to bring about a Japanese surrender at the end of World War II. It only did so after nuclear strikes. Nuclear strikes are currently not on the cards in Iran. A major lesson from earlier conflicts - that military superiority, largely aerial, does not guarantee victory - was missed by Trump and his cronies.

At the end of the second week of the conflict, Trump tweeted, 'There will be no deal with Iran except UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER! After that, and the selection of a GREAT & ACCEPTABLE Leader(s), we, and many of our wonderful and very brave allies and partners, will work tirelessly to bring Iran back from the brink of destruction, making it economically bigger, better, and stronger than ever before. IRAN WILL HAVE A GREAT FUTURE. MAKE IRAN GREAT AGAIN.' On the contrary, it is Trump who is now pushing Pakistan to mediate and draw Tehran into talks.

The US has stopped referring to unconditional surrender and instead announces economic actions and ceasefire talks. There was no doubt from the start that the US possesses air power to inflict tactical losses on Iran, especially since Israel had destroyed most of its air defence systems in June last year. Iran absorbed these losses and hit back, forcing the US to recalibrate its objectives.

Trump chose Pakistan as the mediator, mainly because the 'Interests Section' of Iran operates under the Pakistani embassy in Washington. The first round of US-Iran talks failed largely because Pakistan never correctly shared

each nation's demand with the other. Had it done so, talks could have been delayed till there was some common ground for agreement. US intelligence has also red-flagged Asim Munir as a wrong choice for his close links with Iran's IRGC, and Pakistan for unreliability in mediation based on the Afghan experience.

Trump has hurt US interests by regularly tweeting his terms of dialogue with Iran. This surrenders the initiative to Tehran, which rejects them on social media, embarrassing Trump. Ideally, conditions should have been kept under wraps until some basic commonality was reached. Trump's claim that the US will shift all enriched uranium to its soil will never be acceptable to Iran. Moving it to Russia may be a better option. If Trump now agrees on Russia, it will be termed a defeat by his detractors. Trump refuses to accept that his midnight tweets cause more damage than good.

Tehran had insisted that a ceasefire in Lebanon is a primary condition for commencement of talks. Without consulting Netanyahu, Trump accepted and went as far as tweeting, 'Israel will not be bombing Lebanon any longer. They are PROHIBITED from doing so by the U.S.A. Enough is enough.' Israel was shocked, but had no choice. The reason, Trump realized is that victory in Iran is no longer possible and the best option is accepting talks, opening doors to an honourable exit.

Trump assumed that imposing a blockade would add to pressure on Iran and speed up dialogue. By insisting on opening of the Hormuz Strait, it was Trump who told Tehran that this was their master card. Iran has shut Hormuz, until the blockade is lifted. The blockade may have been a tactical victory



for the US but ended up as a strategic defeat. Trump has limited options. If he lifts the blockade, he would hand victory to Iran, if he does not do so, then the only option is re-starting hostilities. His only face-saver would be to lift the blockade with simultaneous opening of Hormuz, alongside commencement of talks.

The US is in dire straits. It is running out of missiles, has lost around 20 aircraft and around two dozen UAVs while its critical radars and bases in the Middle East are destroyed. Its forces are expeditionary, deployed away from the war zone, making supporting ground operations difficult. Its naval troops are exhausted and facing scarcity of rations. Deploying closer to the Middle East brings them within missile range of Iran. European allies are also being unhelpful.

Iran has emerged as a regional powerhouse as its strategy of selective disruption and asymmetric warfare has proven successful against the world's most powerful nation. Trump by his tweets announcing demands even before they are accepted, and by changing his base line from strategic victory to a tactical one, has weakened America's military reputation. The US end game was faulty from the start.

Trump should read Clausewitz, who said, 'No one starts a war - or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so - without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.' Trump does not fit the category of one in his senses.

(The writer is a retired Major-General of the Indian Army.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 21 April 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

Sir Squire Bancroft had become almost a legendary figure to the theatregoer of to-day. His tall form, crowned by white and curling hair, his eye-glass, his dress with its reminiscence of the dandyism of other days all went to make up the most striking man to be seen in London. His triumphs on the stage were won before the grandfathers of the present generation of theatre-goers. He had retired with a fortune in 1885 and although he subsequently reappeared in 1893 in the revived 'Diplomacy' there were few living people who had seen him act and fewer still who could recall him in those comedies of Robertson which made an era in theatrical history and drew all London to the 'Dust Hole' in Tottenham Court Road. No man had done so much to set the English theatre on a new path as he gave a fresh direction to playwrighting. His long association with his wife (Miss Marie Wilton) was a romance of the theatre. It was more, for the two were completely complementary to each other upon the stage and together formed a combination that was more successful in its results than any other theatrical union of the kind.

News Items

PROFESSOR A. B. ROY

RELEASED DETENU'S CASE IN COMMONS

London, April.

The detentions under the Bengal Ordinance, particularly the case of Professor A. B. Roy, a member of the Bengal Legislative Council, who was released on March 26 was again mentioned in the House of Commons by Mr. E. Thurtle and Mr. T. Johnston, Labour members. Earl Winterton, replying, said that Mr. Roy had been released on giving an assurance that he would not participate in terrorism, but would do everything possible to discourage it. He had been acquitted on November 25, 1924 with the four charges against him, and his replies to them were considered by two judges, who also examined the information against him and found it was convincing. The suggestion of Mr. Johnston that any members of the Government of India had admitted that a mistake was made in his case surprised the undersecretary for India, and he invited Mr. Johnston to communicate privately to him his grounds for making the allegation. He added that the impression left in his mind from a perusal of the proceedings was that there was no doubt that Roy had been guilty of breaking the law.—Reuter.

FOREIGN FILMS

MONOPOLY DANGEROUS TO EMPIRE PRESTIGE

London, April.

The Federation of British Industries has drawn the attention of the President of the Board of Trade to the practical monopoly obtained by foreign film-producing concerns in cinema programmes all over the Empire, as very detrimental to British prestige and prejudicial to the interests of the Empire, especially in the Dominions, as they contain large coloured populations. The hope is expressed that the subject will be placed on the agenda of the Imperial Conference. —Reuter's Special Service.

Delhi's cheap power always a myth

SHREY MADDAAN

Delhi's cheap electricity was never truly cheap. It was deferred. For years, power tariffs remained largely unchanged even as the real cost of generating, transmitting, and distributing electricity steadily increased. That gap didn't disappear, it was pushed into the future. Now, with over Rs 38,000 crore in regulatory assets set to be recovered, that future has arrived. What is being presented today as a tariff adjustment is, in reality, the cost of years of ineffective price management coming due, with interest.

This is not a sudden shock. It is the result of a long-running policy choice: keeping prices artificially low while allowing underlying costs to build up in the background. Regulatory assets, in principle, are approved expenses meant to be recovered later through tariffs. In practice, they have become a way to defer difficult pricing decisions. The longer the delay, the larger the eventual correction.

The current plan is to recover these dues through surcharges spread over several years, even as the government considers subsidies to buffer the immediate impact. On paper, this may appear balanced. In reality, it shifts costs rather than reduces them. Whether through

higher tariffs, surcharges, or taxpayer-funded subsidies, consumers pay either way.

This is the central problem with politically managed pricing. It prioritizes short-term affordability over long-term sustainability. Electricity was never truly cheap. The cost was simply deferred. The consequences of that approach are now visible. Because tariffs were not adjusted to reflect costs, regulatory assets are steadily accruing. In the first round of recovery, further inflating the burden. What could have been gradual and predictable adjustments has turned into a concentrated financial correction.

Subsidies are often presented as a solution in such moments. They do not eliminate costs; they redistribute them. When tariff hikes are held off, the burden shifts from electricity bills to taxpayers who ultimately pay the difference, often without the same level of transparency. What looks like relief in one place re-emerges as pressure elsewhere in the system.

This pattern is not unique to electricity. Similar dynamics have played out across sectors where prices are held below cost for extended periods. In fuel pricing, delayed adjustments have historically led to abrupt changes later. In public transport, lower fares often result

in poor service quality and mounting fiscal pressure. The lesson is clear: when prices do not reflect costs, distortions accumulate.

The trend is not unique to India either. Argentina illustrates how low tariffs for prolonged periods, along with heavy subsidies, can strain public finances and discourage investment in the power sector. When adjustments finally came, they were abrupt and economically disruptive. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, price caps delayed the impact of rising wholesale costs, but once those caps proved unsustainable, consumers paid the price.

Electricity is very prone to this, given its central role in both daily consumption and economic activity. Keeping tariffs below cost can delay infrastructure investment, weaken efficiency incentives, and strain distribution companies' finances. When cost recovery is consistently deferred, the system moves away from performance and becomes increasingly dependent on financial support.

There is also a question of transparency. Consumers are more likely to accept a price rise when they are predictable, phased in, and clearly reflects actual costs rather than abrupt adjustments. Deferring price changes does the opposite. It hides the real cost of consumption, creates a false sense



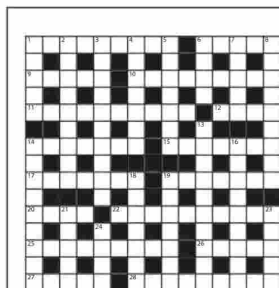
of affordability, and allows liabilities to build until they must be recovered all at once.

Electricity is essential, and affordability matters. But keeping prices artificially low for everyone is a blunt and often counterproductive approach. A more sustainable model is to keep tariffs closely linked to real costs through periodic revisions, while supporting vulnerable households. This keeps the system stable and prevents costs from accumulating into more drastic amendments later. Systems that combine cost reflective pricing with targeted assistance to manage transitions smoothly. In Germany, electricity prices broadly reflect market conditions, while assistance is focused on vulnerable consumers rather than applied universally.

Delhi's situation offers a clear lesson for energy policy. As these deferred costs come due, the focus should be on breaking the cycle rather than simply managing the immediate impact. Energy pricing is most sustainable when it reflects real costs upfront. When changes are transparent and timely, consumers can plan better, markets respond efficiently, and the system remains stable. It shows the limits of postponing reality. Deferring costs may create the illusion of affordability, but it only ensures that when they return, they do so with greater force, less flexibility, and far fewer good options.

(The writer is Indian Policy Associate, Consumer Choice Center.)

Crossword | No. 293440



Yesterday's Solution

ACROSS

- 1 Endless crude oil misused by humans? Absurd (9)
6 Sun in tree composes sacred poem (5)
9 King had this made specially for crossing river (5)
10 Clock-ticking magazine article? (9)
11 Keep selfies circulating around; removing one is simple (10)
12 Courty love but no husband for this respectful lady (4)

- 14 Slim country and western singer with assassin (5)
15 New uranium crystal used in fission? (7)
17 Substantial amount is duty Nathan ultimately wasted (4,3)
19 Element burning with pong when current put through (7)
20 Runs when piano produces round sound (4)
22 Duck in cove caught and stabbed (10)

- 25 Commoners vote, enduring claim for attention (5,6)
26 1 Across sentimentally about distant land (5)
27 Pottery expert consuming litres (5)
28 Back head to show austere approach (9)

- DOWN
1 Accommodate duke in theatre box (5)
2 Like spring rolls? Main man devours one (4-5)

- 3 Firm needs million to guarantee settlement (10)
4 Routine taken from door to landing (7)
5 Instrument is imported by Salvation Army people (7)
6 Writer to apply zero pressure in Patmore's case? (4)
7 00? not someone lacking in manners? (5)
8 Virtuoso rounds lake and medium whirlpool (9)
13 Strange cut perhaps not targeted (10)

- 14 Doctor was there with daughter for turning point (7)
16 Old weapon put in cold storage for life (8)
18 Complaint from Tees before son gets stuck into the beers? (7)
19 Catty 6 Down? (7)
21 Succeeded with murder in facility (5)
23 Saving rupees, bid down in rubbish (5)
24 American writer close to Walt 14 Across? (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

# DECCAN Chronicle

21 APRIL 2026

## Oppn should stay united to keep govt on its toes

The show of unity the Opposition displayed in the Lok Sabha last week to defeat the government's plan to smuggle in its contentious delimitation plans under the garb of women's reservation was a pointer to its collective strength and strike potential but the Opposition parties may do well to remember that it was an opportunity the government had offered it and that they could seize it only because they had numbers on their side. The real challenge will be to reinvent the common political agenda and win over the people to its side if it were to stop the advancement of the NDA.

The I.N.D.I.A. bloc remains the largest Opposition political platform in India though there are parties such as the Bharat Rashtra Samithi of Telangana, the YSR Congress of Andhra Pradesh and the Biju Janata Dal of Odisha which work outside its ambit. The single toughest challenge before the I.N.D.I.A. bloc remains the failure of the Congress, by far the leader of the pack, in redefining its political narrative in tune with the times. The *raison d'être* of the Congress is the relevance of the liberal, secular and often socialistic moorings of the Indian society; the party's left-of-centre policies and undiluted commitment to secular politics have kept it in good stead despite the series of defeats in electoral politics.

However, the party still believes it is the natural party of governance in India and is yet to come to terms with the reality that the decision on who gets to rule this country is made in the minds of the Indian voter, and not in its leader's kitchen cabinet. The party often displays a lack of seriousness and cohesiveness in its approach to current politics; neither the party nor its senior leader Rahul Gandhi displays the deftness when it comes to talking on the NDA and its grand narrative.

This thought gets reflected in the party's dealings with other political forces who share the political agenda with the grand old party. It had no qualms to travel to the brink while negotiating for seats in the Bihar and Tamil Nadu Assembly elections but made little effort to win them. The Congress contributed handsomely to the defeat of the Mahagathabandhan in Bihar while the party is giving out the message that it is ploughing the lone furrow during electioneering in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu elections are scheduled to take place on April 23; the leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha has made just one visit to the state in all these days, he even did not find it necessary to appear on stage with the Tamil Nadu strong man and alliance leader, the DMK's Chief Minister, Mr M.K. Stalin.

The Opposition must remember that their success in the Lok Sabha last week cannot be easily repeated; the BJP is deft at the appreciation of political developments from its point of view and convince the leaders and the cadre of the same.

It has, for the most part of the recent history, played its political card very well and succeeded. The BJP has the knack to convert even the worst defeat into a stepping stone to their victory in the next instance purely on its ability to frame and communicate its political position in no uncertain terms.

The Opposition, too, has little option but to define its political agenda and place it before the people before asking them to choose. It's going to be a play of convictions in Indian politics; no half measures count there.

Subhani



## As US, Iran seek peace, open Hormuz holds key



Abhijit Bhattacharyya

This "regime change" approach is consistent with the strategy of successive US administrations since the Second World War.

Amid mixed and confusing signals from the belligerent in the United States and Iran, the blockade of the Hormuz Strait was first withdrawn, as announced by US President Donald Trump and Tehran, and then, in less than 24 hours, was re-imposed by Iran over the US blockade of its ports. This bewildering development, however, signals Tehran's moral victory. For both the US and Israel, Iran was no Gaza, Venezuela, Panama, Yugoslavia or a small, powerless Asian/African country. Iran is a self-made power with four allies: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, along with Hezbollah, Houthi, Hamas warriors; and now, however, the US and Israel have unlimited resources and powerful warheads, but the potential catastrophe that might be inflicted by Iran's geography would have led to disaster for the West.

After the first round of US-Iran dialogue in Islamabad proved futile, Washington bowed to the inevitable and agreed to further talks in the coming week as it found it had virtually no diplomatic support from either Europe or Asia. Inside the US as well, President Donald Trump is facing fierce opposition from all quarters, including his MAGA base and cheerleaders.

Inflation, a stock market reverse, rising food, fuel and fertiliser costs and ascendant Democrats overwhelmed Mr Trump's oil backers, including the profit-crazed military-industrial complex. What the future holds is still unclear, mainly because of the moving nature of President Trump and his "blow hot-blow cold" tantrums and violent fits and starts, since, therefore, one has to tread with caution. In case the ceasefire ends without being extended and there is a resump-

tion of hostilities in West Asia, it will be an unmitigated disaster for the entire world's economy, not least for India. Thus, the single most contentious factor of "freedom of navigation" through the Hormuz Strait raised new hope. Nonetheless, one can only be cautiously optimistic as enormous damage has already been done. The Hormuz crisis was a surprise and shock to the world. No one visualised such disruption when the US and Israel started pounding and pulverising Iran on February 28. When President Trump threatened to wipe out Tehran's "entire civilisation" and bomb it back to the Stone Age, he was hoping for a grand victory for the West and an imminent surrender. Much like in Venezuela early-January, when American forces kidnapped President Nicolas Maduro and effected his "regime change" in Caracas. But Iran, as mentioned earlier, was not Venezuela.

This "regime change" approach is consistent with the strategy of successive US administrations since the Second World War. Creating a state of fear, tension and turmoil worldwide, as the US took over the job of policing the world from Britain's Royal Navy after 1945. Today, it is time to take stock of this legacy to avoid a repeat of Hormuz 2026. Despite intervening in almost every post-1945 global conflict, the US always faced reverses, noted the eminent American scholar Hartman K. Ullman in his masterly *Anatomy of Failure: Why America Loses Every War It Starts*. Dr Ullman asks in an unambiguous question: "Why, since the end of World War II, has the US either lost every war it started or lost in every military intervention?" Dr Ullman's facts and arguments were so irrefutable that Gen. Colin Powell, the retired Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff and former secretary of state, suggested: "This book should be read by all practitioners and serious students of national security as a guide for avoiding failures and miscalculations." However, the unprovoked February 2026 joint US-Israeli air assault on Iran once again signalled the "failures and miscalculations in using American military power". America's military-industrial complex, which functions almost like a "state within a state", tasted blood after the First World War with the Navy becoming "first among equals" due to its global power projection, taking its cue from British imperialists who subdued every continent through sea power. As Japan surrendered before Gen. Douglas MacArthur aboard the *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay, September 1945, its capitulation led to rise of the US Navy, replacing the Royal Navy ensign.

The present observations of the US military budget of \$1 trillion, which according to *Military Balance 2026* stands at \$821 billion in 2025. The war in Iran is nevertheless a warning to Washington and its allies. Despite being the pre-eminent naval power since Pearl Harbour and crack down ending with Hiroshima in August 1945, the Hormuz Strait in 2026 by itself is huge challenge to the US. The prospect of a global superpower. What was inflicted on Iran from the air is unlikely to be repeated in the constricted terrain and shallow squeezed sea lanes of the narrow Persian Gulf waterway. Like Vietnam and Afghanistan in the past, will the Persian price of Tehran deliver a new warning to the West?

### LETTERS

#### DELIMITATION ROW

It has, indeed, been a body blow to the ruling dispensation at the Centre and a first legislative setback to it in 12 years (*Delimitation confusion sank govt's new women quota bid, April 20*). The introduction of three Bills for constitutional amendment by the Bharatiya Janata Party was a part of the political agenda and the Opposition parties have swiftly sensed and outsmarted it unitedly and shattered the saffron party's delimitation dream through the backdoor under the shrewd pretext and guile of the women reservation Bill and it all suddenly and abruptly made national politics more intriguing and interesting as mentioned in the editorial.

Dr C. Ghanshyam Visakhapatnam

In its unchallenged journey, the BJP has for the first time, got a strong jolt from the opposition over the Delimitation linked women quota Bill. The already passed women's reservation Bill must be implemented forthwith for which I.N.D.I.A. bloc reassured in Parliament. Otherwise it is pre-empted as a mere political gimmick to get over the ongoing West Bengal and Tamil Nadu Assembly elections.

Ch. V.B.R. Naidu Srikakulam

#### BITING BURDEN

I wish to draw attention to this escalating public health threat (*2.6 L dog bite cases raise alarm, April 20*). Authorities must step up sterilisation drives, roll out sustained vaccination campaigns and crack down on unregulated breeding. Health and municipal departments should work out a coordinated roadmap and follow up cases rigorously. Public awareness must be scaled up so citizens watch out for stray hotspots and report back promptly. During summer, people should keep away from agitated strays, and avoid stirring up animals. Pet owners must take on responsibility, keep up with vaccinations, and not let loose aggressive animals. Unless all stakeholders come together and act on urgency, the situation may spiral out of control.

Raju Kolluru Kakinada

Send your letters to info@deccanmail.com, editor@deccanmail.com.

## Another tragedy: Norms ignored

In the biggest firecracker blast incident of the year so far, more than 25 persons, 22 of them women, may have been killed and many more injured in the southern Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu. The blast was severe to the extent of marring several sheds in a factory while a second blast during rescue work had caused more deaths.

As is routine in every such tragedy to occur in an area that has come to be known as the firecracker capital of the country, major safety lapses were noticed like excessive number of workers in small sheds meant for four persons and interlocked in a warren of workplaces with few exits where explosive materials are handled.

While friction at the time of mixing explosive chemicals is invariably suspected to be the cause, what is not said is that a whole industry like this runs with few safety protocols. The operation of this particular factory was reportedly illegal as its licence had been cancelled and was being operated on a lease.

The district administration has duly announced ₹5.5 lakh ex gratia to the kin of deceased, condolences have been uttered for the death of the victims, as happens always.

The tragic part of all such mishaps is that the most vulnerable people, the poor workers who get bare subsistence pay, are the ones that lose their lives. With few other avenues for jobs available, many in the region opt to work in an unsafe environment while dealing with hazardous and dangerous raw materials, more often paying the price in terms of damage to their general health and their physique as the raw materials are certain to affect the lungs, etc.

Those who own the places of production will aver that they generate employment for so many people while ignoring safety protocols that may add to their costs. There is just no accountability in an industry where very existence can be questioned in this age when spectacular public displays for entertainment can be put up without recourse to fireworks.

Enforcement of safety measures in such a hazardous industry is always lax — for obvious reasons. Systemic changes are called for to ensure greater safety in a hazardous industry. Of course, all that will remain just talk until the next tragedy occurs.

DECCAN CHRONICLE  
K. SUSHIK MITTAR  
Editor

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Aakar Patel

## Why are we unable to influence world? We look inwards & stay stuck in past...

What explains our inability, or if we are to be charitable, our reticence, to influence the world around us? Like the rest of the entire planet, India too is negatively impacted from the American-Israeli war on Iran. Indeed, Indians have suffered and are suffering more than any other nation, except for the Iranians. The reason, of course, is that there are one crore or so Indians across the Gulf region, a population larger than the combined citizenry of five of the six GCC states. The lives and livelihoods of these Indians are at risk from the violence. Uncertainty dogged them and this is especially hard for those among them who are not well-off. This is by far the majority, comprising the members of the Indian expatriate working class in the Gulf, whether in the services sector or in industry.

The long-term future and economic direction of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations are in question after this war. The fortunes of tens of millions of Indians are linked to that

outcome. This is why India is caught up in and suffering in this war more than most nations which, though they also share the problems of fuel and gas. Which is the reason why the question has to be asked: Why the inability to influence or even attempt to influence the actions of the warring states — the United States and Israel? Other than saying that shipping should be allowed to resume, our government has not engaged with the problem. Why is shipping halted? We made no reference to that. How can it be resumed? No wisdom there either: merely the plea or demand or request (if one wishes) since, if it is allowed to resume, it should be noted that India has aligned itself by default with the position of the colonising nations of Europe, who want no part of the war, make no reference to the perpetrators and only want their goods to flow. Let us try and answer the question. It is possible and perhaps likely that there is no single reason, but a set of them which have made staying silent

more appealing than any kind of action. Let us look at them in turn. There is the incursion of Indian foreign policy and this extends to national security. Basic example: We are unclear whether China is a friend or an enemy. Whether it should be traded with or disengaged from. The lack of coherence comes from an absence of doctrine. Much of our foreign policy is aimed at Indians and alone, as is the case today with this war, it became clear that the claims of being a world leader were hollow. We were embarrassed and looked away. Abandoning the idea of the national interest, we are beset by personal diplomacy, which is linked inescapably to personal interest, and assumed that chumminess was a solid foundation on which to rest foreign policy. Fittingly, we have been either betrayed in this endeavour (by Donald Trump) or used (by Benjamin Netanyahu), by the opposite side, which is realistic and hard. Our foreign policy is in our hands, but we have put Indians through misery, but

we think we do not have the capacity to even tell them to stop. Another reason is that diplomatic efforts elsewhere have alarmed us. It appears that we would rather that Indians suffer than the war end through the efforts of those whom we detest. This appears not only mean-spirited and petty, which it is, but also absurd. It is the actions of those who take the lead in haranguing us with platitudes about the world as a family. There is another reason and it may be described with the folk saying: "Mulle ki daud masjid tak". The Internet interprets the saying as "a person who only goes as far as their knowledge, resources, or interests allow", and "someone whose actions always return to the same familiar circle or area of expertise". New India is about a fierce inward-looking nationalism. Open the newspapers and switch on the television if you are new to this place, but this has become our refrain and our chorus. The minorities are to blame for the past, the liberals are blocking the pre-

sent path to our glorious future and they all have to be fixed first and sorted out before we can move on. So long as this remains our primary task, we will stay with it. When there is this sort of clarity about the nation, the external world becomes only a distraction, and if we ignore it, it will sort itself out hopefully. This is how it is today. The spokesman of the ministry of external affairs was asked at a press conference on Friday: "Trump is praising Akin Manir and may travel to Pakistan. How does India see Pakistan's ceasefire role? Will India be okay with it if Trump comes to India and Pakistan on one trip?" (Notice the focus of the question, which reveals much about us and our press corps.) The spokesman replied: "I have a simple answer. India is closely following the developments in West Asia." The word "following" has rarely been used so appropriately and so revealingly.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. X@aaakar\_patel

### quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	78,520.30	0.03
Nifty 50	24,364.85	0.05
S&P 500*	7,118.18	-0.11
Dollar (€)	93.13	0.22
Pound Sterling (₹)	125.75	0.01
Euro (₹)	109.53	-0.04
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	1,53,947.66	-0.43
Brent crude (\$/bbl)	94.39	4.44
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.890	-0.22
US 10-Yr T-bill yield	4.258	0.014

\* As of 8:30 PM IST

### MCX gets Sebi nod to invest in coal exchange

Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX) said on Monday it has received approval from markets regulator Sebi on April 17 to invest in a proposed coal exchange company. MCX plans to incorporate a new wholly owned subsidiary, likely to be named MCX Coal Exchange Ltd or MCX Coal Exchange of India Ltd, according to a regulatory filing. The exchange said it will commit capital of up to ₹100 crore to the new subsidiary.



### Kia launches revamped Syros at ₹8.39 lakh

Automaker Kia introduced new edition of Syros, a compact SUV, with prices starting at ₹8.39 lakh at Delhi showroom. It is now available in four additional trims with top end variant tagged at ₹15.80 lakh. "Customer insights have guided the evolution of updated Syros, with design enhancements and a revised trim feature lineup," said Atul Sood, sr. vice president, sales and marketing at Kia India.

### BoM posts 35% rise in Q4 profit to ₹2,014 cr

Bank of Maharashtra on Monday reported a 35 per cent rise in net profit to ₹2,014 crore in the January-March quarter of 2025-26, aided by core income and reduction in bad loans. The Pune-headquartered bank had earned a net profit of ₹1,493 crore in the year-ago period. During the quarter, the bank's total income increased to ₹8,695 crore against ₹7,711 crore a year ago, the bank said in a statement.

### AirTrunk set to expand in India with data centre

AirTrunk, a data centre operator backed by Blackstone, is buying Lumina CloudInfra to expand in India. The acquisition will give AirTrunk access to Lumina's development pipeline, contracts and operations and operating capabilities, a statement said. That includes about 600 MW of planned capacity, representing up to \$5 billion in development pipeline. The companies didn't disclose financial terms of transaction.



# Investors watch mode wait for positive signals

## Mkts remain cautious of evolving geo-political situation in West Asia

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD  
MUMBAI, APRIL 20

The market remained cautious of the evolving geopolitics in West Asia and gave up intraday gains towards market end with a flat close.

Crude oil futures gained more than five per cent to around \$95 per barrel on Monday on Strait of Hormuz shut to down again by Iran, which did not respond to US peace talks invite. The Sensex closed 26.76 points or 0.03 per cent up at 78,520.30 while Nifty-50 closed at 24,364.85 up by 11.30 points or 0.05 per cent.

During the day, the benchmark indices were up more than a per cent with Sensex touching 78,942.45 gaining 448.91 points or 0.57 per cent and Nifty-50 to a high of 24,480.85 gaining 37.1 points (0.52 per cent).

The broader market saw some profit taking with BSE Midcap index up by 0.18 per cent and BSE Small-cap index down by 0.33 per cent.

"Volatility in the market is likely to rise as the US-Iran stand off is showing no signs of a resolution, and the NSE's India VIX rose 0.21 per cent to 18.79 on Monday.

"Markets are likely to remain in a consolidation phase, taking cues from geopolitical developments. Strong earnings over the weekend and sustained FII buying over the last three sessions have injected optimism in the market. However, uncertainty surrounding the next round of negotiations between the US and Iran, investors also turned cautious as the ceasefire deadline of April 22 approaches," said Siddhartha Khemka, head, research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services.

Among sectors, PSU banks and power sector stocks gained while losers included IT, metal, realty, FMCG and healthcare. Private banks underperformed with HDFC Bank, IndusInd Bank, Axis Bank, Kotak Bank, IDFC First and Yes bank closing lower while ICICI Bank gained.

"Markets ended lower after sharp volatile move amid weakness in IT, telecom and banking. There is currently a lot of uncertainty in the market," said Anurag Puri, MD, Equirus Wealth.

### MEASURED MOVES

Sensex closes 26.76 pts up at **78,520.30** while Nifty-50 close at **24,364.85** up by 11.3 pts.

Volatility likely to rise as US-Iran stand off showing no signs of a resolution.

**INTRADAY BENCHMARK** indices were up more than half a per cent

**MARKETS** ended a tad lower after exhibiting sharp intra-day volatile moves amid weakness in IT, telecom and banking stocks.

**AMONG SECTORS** PSU banks, power sector stocks gained while losers included IT, metal, realty, FMCG and healthcare.

**PRIVATE BANKS** underperformed with HDFC Bank, IndusInd Bank, Axis Bank, Kotak Bank, IDFC First and Yes bank closing lower while ICICI Bank gained.

## Central banks need to stay nimble, agile during crisis: RBI gov Malhotra

FALAKNAAZ SYED  
MUMBAI, APRIL 20

RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra said that given the uncertainty around the ongoing West Asia crisis, the monetary policy response has been to wait and watch, remain data dependent and respond as inflation-growth dynamics evolve.

West Asia contributes about one-sixth of India's exports, one-fifth of its imports, half of its crude oil imports, two-fifths of fertilisers imports and almost two fifths of its inward remittances, he said at Princeton University. His speech was put on RBI website on Monday.

"The appropriate monetary policy response to

such a supply shock is to look through the first-round effect to the extent that it does not feed into second-round dynamics. Second-round effects are the real concern. They can materialise if the supply chain disruptions continue for long. Then, what began as a supply shock can become embedded in the general price level," Malhotra said.

Preventing this entrenchment is where monetary policy has a primary role to play, through its influence on inflation expectations rather than through demand compression, he said stressing the need for a nimble, maintain a broad policy stance, and avoid making firm commitments of future policy path in uncertain times.

"Our broad approach has been to be even more data dependent and to continuously reassess the balance of risks. We are in a wait and watch mode. We have been maintaining a neutral stance for the last few policy cycles. It preserves the flexibility to respond as the inflation-growth dynamics evolve," said Malhotra.

In the last decade, India on an average grew by 6.1 per cent per year whereas the global economy grew by 3.2 per cent and its peers like China grew by 5.6 per cent and Indonesia by 4.2 per cent because of various enablers which worked in the background, he said.

## Core sector growth shrinks

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO  
NEW DELHI, APRIL 20

Marking the weakest performance in nearly two decades, India's core sector activity contracted in March 2026, with the combined index of eight core industries (CI) falling 0.4 per cent year-on-year. The decline was driven by weak performance in fertilisers, crude oil, coal and cement, as well as recorded negative growth during the month, the government said Monday.

Despite the monthly contraction, the cumulative

performance for the full financial year showed modest expansion.

"The CI grew 2.6 per cent over April-March 2025-26, compared to the same period a year earlier. February 2026 data was revised higher to 2.8 per cent growth," the data showed.

The CI tracks coal, crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, fertilisers, steel, cement and electricity. Together they make up 40 per cent of the index of industrial production (IIP).

"Coal output plunged by

4 per cent, crude oil by 5.7 per cent, fertilisers sharply by 24.6 per cent, and electricity generation by 4.2 per cent over the year. Natural gas grew 6.4 per cent steel, cement (moderate gains) and refinery products provided some support, it said.

Some sectors continued to expand strongly over the year. "Steel and cement stood out with cumulative growth of 9.1 per cent and 8.6 per cent respectively during FY26, while crude oil and natural gas stayed in contraction territory," it showed.

# First tranche of US trade deal almost finalised: Goyal

FC CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, APRIL 20

Commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal on Monday said that the government has almost finalised the first tranche of the bilateral trade agreement with the United States. The minister's statement comes after a team of Indian officials reached Washington for three-day trade talks with the US authorities.

"We are trying to work out what would be the mechanism by which India can get preferential market access in the US market compared to our competitors. The Indian team will discuss these aspects while they are in Washington," the minister told reporters here.

As the tariff landscape has changed in the US, both sides may like to relook at the framework of the agreement, the text of which was released on February 7, 2025.

According to that framework, the US had agreed to reduce tariffs on India to 18 per cent, from 50 per cent. The US had removed the 25 per cent tariffs on Indian goods for buying Russian oil and was to cut the remaining 25 per cent to 18 per cent under the pact.

But on February 20, the US Supreme Court ruled against Trump's reciprocal tariffs, which were imposed under the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA).

Following the US Supreme Court's decision against the tariffs imposed by President Donald Trump, a number of countries, the Trump administration imposed a 10 per cent tariff on all countries from Feb. 24 for 150 days.

**TAPPING MARKETS**

ABOUT A DOZEN officers from India are in Washington for three-day trade talks with the US authorities.

OVER 3,30,000 importers of record made over 53 mn entries with IEEPA tariff deposits.



Under phase 1 of refund, companies must file detailed declarations listing shipments and tariff payments through the new CAPE system.

Each month that phase 1 of CAPE will be processed 63% of entries for which refunds are due.

## US starts refund of tariff collected

SANGEETHA G.  
CHENNAI, APRIL 20

The US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) on Monday started the refund process of around \$166 billion tariff payments collected from importers under the emergency tariffs imposed by President Donald Trump that were struck down by the Supreme Court.

Under the phase 1 of refund, companies must file detailed declarations listing shipments and tariff payments through the new Consolidated Administration and Processing of Entries (CAPE) system. CBP started accepting claims from Monday and the refunds are expected to be issued within 60 to 90 days.

Over 3,30,000 importers of record made over 53 million entries with the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) tariff deposits or payments to the tune of around \$166 billion.

According to a think tank Cato Institute, for each month that refunds are delayed, US will owe another \$700 mn in interest.

CBP said that phase 1 of CAPE will process about 63 per cent of those entries for which refunds are due. More recent payment requests will be prioritised, while technical glitches or documentation issues can create delay in processing.

According to experts, the refund might take months to complete. Under the importers of record, the company or person listed as responsible for bringing the goods into the US, can claim the refund. A customs broker can also file, but only if they originally handled the import paperwork for the importer.

Once importers receive the refunds, the exporters across the globe will get the refunds. Indian exporters will receive refunds on their reciprocal tariffs as well as the punitive tariffs.

## Policies not in sync with services growth

SANGEETHA G.  
CHENNAI, APRIL 20

Despite the growth in services trade seen in developing countries, their policy frameworks are not keeping up with the growth. India's UNCTAD number of countries, the Trump administration imposed a 10 per cent tariff on all countries from Feb. 24 for 150 days.

"The UN's trade and development body is planning to set up a knowledge-sharing hub to promote the use of services data in policymaking.

"Global trade in services has grown by around 5.3 per cent annually over the past decade — faster than goods trade — and now accounts for more than a quarter of total trade. This expansion is driven by digitally deliverable services, including IT, finance and professional services, enabled by rapid digitalisation.

Developed economies dominate exports of digital services, while developing and least developed countries remain on the margins. As services become central to value creation, this gap risks widening without targeted policy action.

"Bridging it requires more than expanding trade. It depends on whether countries can design trade

## POSTAL DEPT SEES ₹15,296 CR REVENUE FOR FY26: SCINDIA

FC CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI, APRIL 20

Communications minister Jyotiraditya Scindia on Monday said that the department of post posted revenue of ₹15,296 crore for FY26, up by 16 per cent growth year-on-year.

The revenue for FY25 stood at ₹13,218 crore.

"This year has been historic for the department. We've also come out with three new products and now looking at increasing the penetration of many of our services, acquiring new customers, performing against Six Sigma service level agreements with clients to post a greater growth rate over FY27," Scindia said.

Eight circles out of 23 have achieved greater than 30 per cent of their target, 14 circles met between 80 to 90 per cent of their target, he added.

Parcels grew to ₹1,133 crore in FY26, about 69 per cent higher than the last fiscal, driven by stellar show from Jharkhand, Telangana, and Gujarat.

"On mails from ₹2,396 crore revenue in FY25 we've now grown to ₹3,202 crore, which is a growth of 34 per cent," he said.

## RBI eases rupee trade norms partly

FALAKNAAZ SYED  
MUMBAI, APRIL 20

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Monday partly rolled back its directives taken earlier this month to curb excessive speculation in rupee.

In a notification, the central bank has allowed authorised dealers including banks and financial institutions to once again offer non-deliverable forwards (NDFs) to both Indian residents and overseas users. Secondly, it has also removed the ban on users rebooking foreign exchange derivative contracts that were cancelled

after April 1. However, authorised dealers still cannot enter into rupee-related foreign exchange derivative contracts with their related parties. The only exceptions are cancelling or rolling over contracts that already exist, and transactions done by unrelated non-resident users on a back-to-back basis.

These measures were introduced as the rupee breached 95-mark per dollar for the first time in late March due to a combination of rising crude oil prices, persistent geopolitical

tensions, foreign investor outflows, and a strong dollar demand globally. The rupee has recovered more than two per cent after the first set of measures were announced on March 27.

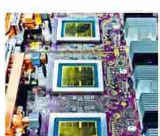
According to Abhishek Goenka, founder of IFA Global, the RBI restriction on cancellation and rebooking against the same underlying exposure had created difficulties for those with genuine reasons, for instance a delay in payment/receipt. It would have also been operationally difficult for

## HIGH COMPUTE Firm brings vast resources from online search profits Google's AI chips sales zoom

California, April 20: In a matter of months, Google's AI chips have become one of the hottest commodities in the tech sector.

Leading artificial intelligence (AI) developers are stocking up on them. Now the Alphabet-owned company aims to build on its momentum with the likely introduction of new chips dedicated to inference, or running AI models after they've been trained.

With this push, Google is poised to further challenge market leader Nvidia in a fast-growing category for semiconductors that's fueled by surging adoption of AI software.



As demand grows for quickly processing AI chips, Google is seen to be responsible to specialise chips more for training or more for inference workloads. Google chief scientist Jeff Dean said, "We are looking at a whole bunch of different things," he added, including the speed of AI

results it wants to enable.

The company plans to announce its new generation of custom-designed chips, known as tensor processing units, or TPUs, at the Google Cloud Next conference in Las Vegas this week.

Nvidia's graphics processing units, or GPUs, remain the gold standard for AI, particularly for training more advanced models. But a growing number of up-and-comers are vying to take on the chipmaker for inference tasks, including by offering chips meant to cut down response times for chatbots and AI agents.

Last month, Nvidia began selling a chip intended for faster inference based on technology it acquired from Groq as part of a reported \$20 billion licensing deal.

Google brings unique strengths to that competitive landscape, including a decade of experience designing chips, vast resources from its online search business and first-hand insights on AI models.

Among the top AI developers, only Google makes its own chips at significant scale, allowing it to share vital feedback between teams to better customise hardware. — Bloomberg



The sign of our times is that the dignity of human personality has no place; the age is impersonal, as are its laws

Sadegh Hedayat

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

## INCENTIVISE COMPLIANCE, DIVERSIFY INDUSTRIES IN TN FIREWORKS HUB

N the fireworks hub of Virudhunagar and Sivakasi in southern Tamil Nadu, the daily life of a cracker worker is a trial by fire. Danger turned into tragedy on Sunday when a massive explosion at Vanaja Fireworks in Kattannarpatti claimed the lives of 25 workers. The devastation worsened during rescue efforts when a secondary blast injured 26 more—among them workers, first responders, fire department personnel and journalists, including a *TNIE* photographer.

The incident's occurrence on a holiday, when workers were mobilised illegally, illustrated the systemic safety lapses in the sector. In the arid belt of Virudhunagar, Sattur and Sivakasi, lack of agricultural viability and decades of industrial neglect have left workers with few choices. Bereft of livelihood options, lakhs of workers put their lives on the line for a paltry daily pay of ₹600-700. The hot and dry climate of the region increases the volatility of chemicals. Several units hire seasonal, unskilled workers who are unaware of the risks or emergency protocols. Packing workrooms with workers many times more than the safe capacity increases the risk of casualties. While the authorities continue to investigate the cause of Sunday's explosion, past investigations into such accidents show overcrowded workrooms have often been one of the main reasons for high death rates. Official data shows that between 2021 and 2025, 189 people had died and 142 others were injured in cracker-related accidents in the region, including the 2021 Achankulam blast that left 27 dead.

Despite supporting 7-8 lakh jobs and generating ₹5,000-6,000 crore in annual revenue, the government's approach to worker safety and organised growth in the region has been far from adequate. With over 1,100 licensed units operating alongside hundreds of illegal ones, the region faces a severe safety crisis due to systemic enforcement failures. Government intervention is vital to preventing the region from becoming a death-trap for vulnerable workers. Promoting alternative industries is needed to give people options others than high-risk roles. Action must be taken on a mission mode to establish safe, compliant industrial parks for firework manufacturing. The existing regulations must be strictly enforced and tax incentives should be offered to encourage compliance. Unless policymakers develop innovative solutions for a safe and sustainable industry, violations will persist and workers will continue to pay with their lives.

## U.S. CLARITY ESSENTIAL FOR PEACE IN WEST ASIA

D RAMA on the high seas continued to dominate geopolitics over the weekend as hopes of a reopening of the Hormuz Strait and an extended ceasefire in West Asia were belied. Even as Donald Trump indicated that his negotiation team was ready to head to Islamabad for a second round of talks, his administration announced it had seized an Iranian-flagged cargo ship that had attempted to slip through the US blockade. Gunboat diplomacy came in the way of peace again, as Iran indicated it would not join the talks less than 48 hours before the end of the two-week ceasefire. However, Tehran kept the door to a negotiated solution open on Monday, with President Masoud Pezeshkian stressing the importance of diplomacy despite deep distrust of Washington's motives.

To be effective, diplomacy needs clear objectives, and the US has not helped the cause by shifting goalposts. The reasons proffered for the US-Israel attacks, launched merely two days after the closure of "substantive" negotiations in Geneva, have ranged from pre-emptive action and degrading nuclear and missile capabilities to regime change, securing Iran's resources, and responding to regional aggression. Behind that blur, the US and Israel have seemed insincere about a just resolution. In contrast, Trump summarily announced Israel's ceasefire with Lebanon last week and stated that further strikes were "prohibited". That was the condition Iran cited to briefly reopen Hormuz, before Trump insisted on continuing the naval blockade. To give diplomacy a chance, the US has to align its declared intent with action and not strengthen its economic chokehold on a nation it purportedly wants to negotiate with.

Trump's actions are harming his own long-held goals of keeping inflation low at home and protecting the US dollar's dominance abroad. His energy secretary indicated on Sunday that petrol prices would likely remain higher for longer than what the treasury had suggested just days earlier. Meanwhile, even as it negotiates a currency swap with the US Treasury, the UAE central bank governor warned that his country might have to resort to more yuan-denominated trade—a move that would weaken the dollar's global power.

It is now clearer what Iran wants. The crucial known-unknown is the cue the commander of the most powerful armed forces will take to move genuinely towards de-escalation. Meanwhile, a nervous world holds its breath as the spectre of a longer war refuses to go away.

### QUICK TAKE

#### PLEASE REMAIN SEATED

A Chinese carmaker has made other auto companies sit up and take note of a patent it has been granted. Chongqing-based Seres has designed an in-vehicle toilet that slides under a passenger's seat to help answer nature's calls while on the road. Buses playing long distances often feature toilets. A special version of a Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith in the 1950s was also pictured with a toilet fitted under a seat. But this is the first design of its sort. Imagine the usefulness of such a facility in a country like India—notorious for lacking clean public toilets, especially for women. More than the urge to transform long hauls, perhaps the invention reflects the need to stand out in China's crowded EV market.

THE failure of the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill to garner the requisite two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha, and the consequential withdrawal of the Delimitation Bill and Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, are being celebrated in some quarters as a victory for fair federalism. It is nothing of the sort. On careful constitutional reading, it is the beginning of a process far more disruptive than the passage of the Bills would have been. The public debate has been charged with rhetoric. What will actually unfold has found little mention.

Some constitutional history is essential. The current Lok Sabha seat allocation—39 for Tamil Nadu, 20 for Kerala, 28 for Karnataka, 25 each for Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, 80 for Uttar Pradesh—is derived from the 1971 census. The Constitution (42nd Amendment) Act, 1976 froze the allocation of Lok Sabha seats on the basis of 1971 population figures. The Constitution (84th Amendment) Act, 2001 extended that freeze—keeping every state's proportional share as it was in 1971—until the relevant figures for the first census taken after the year 2026 are published. The Kuldip Singh Delimitation Commission, constituted in 2002, worked entirely within this mandate. It redrew the internal boundaries of Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha constituencies using 2001 census figures, but was constitutionally prohibited from altering a state's seat total.

That freeze is now imminently approaching its constitutionally mandated expiry. It lifts automatically—without any further parliamentary action, without any constitutional amendment—on the publication of the relevant figures for the first census taken after 2026. Once the figures of the ongoing census are published—realistically, between 2029 and 2031—the freeze expires of its own terms under Article 82. The Delimitation Commission then constituted will work on new population figures and, under the unamended Article 81(2)(a), every state's Lok Sabha allocation will reflect its share of the national population as recorded in the post-2026 census.

This is where the arithmetic becomes uncomfortable. Between 1971 and the present, the demographic divergence between the north and the south has been profound. States that invested in family planning and human development—Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana—controlled their population growth. States that did not—UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh,

The 131st amendment was imperfect. But the constitutional mechanisms on seat allocation and women's reservation that will now automatically unfold will not help states that checked population rise

## CONSTITUTIONAL CLOCKS THAT JUST STARTED TICKING

K B S SIDHU



Retired IAS officer and a former Special Chief Secretary, Punjab



SOURAV ROY

Rajasthan—grew substantially faster. Under strict population proportionality, the political consequence is a structural shift in representation to the north that no political protest can reverse without a constitutional amendment. To illustrate: on current population estimates, one Lok Sabha seat in UP represents approximately 30 lakh people; in Tamil Nadu, approximately 20 to 21 lakh; in Kerala, approximately 19 lakh. Under post-2026 proportionality, that differential disappears and, with it, the south's representational advantage.

Now consider what the 131st Amendment Bill, had it passed, would have delivered. It locked in the 2011 census—not the post-2026 one—as the operative basis for delimitation through a specific definitional mechanism in the Delimitation Bill, 2026. On 2011 figures, Tamil

Nadu would have received approximately 57 Lok Sabha seats, an increase of 18 from its current 39. Kerala would have gone from 20 to approximately 29 and Karnataka from 28 to approximately 41. Not one southern state would have lost a single seat. Their proportional share would have declined negligibly as the overall House expanded, but their absolute representation would have grown substantially. Additionally, a constitutional provision prescribing minimum and maximum seat ranges for every state could have given the southern states a guaranteed floor written into the Constitution itself, immune to future census arithmetic.

That protection is now not in place. The Bills were defeated and withdrawn. When the new census figures are published and the Article 82 freeze lifts au-

tomatically, the Delimitation Commission will work on population proportionality with no such protection. Tamil Nadu may potentially see its seat count fall for the first time since independence, as the post-2026 figures would reflect 55 years of differential demographic growth. That is the scenario the defeated Bill was designed to prevent. The opposition discarded the shield and will now face the sword.

The deeper irony lies in the Statutory Order 1922(E) issued by the ministry of law and justice on the evening of April 16, 2026. When that census is conducted and the Article 82 freeze lifts, both processes—seat reallocation and women's reservation—will be triggered together on post-2026 population figures, with no constitutional protection for the slow-growth states in place. The notification that was meant to be a complement to the Bills has instead become the trigger for the very outcome the Bills were designed to manage.

The 131st Amendment Bill was, to borrow a phrase, inimitable and illimitable—taking care of the imminently lapsing temporal limitation of Article 82, while admittedly carrying limitations of its own. The absence of a constitutional state-wise floor to seat numbers, inadequate prior political communication, failure to translate the Prime Minister's parliamentary assurances into constitutional text—these were real shortcomings. But they were correctable and the opportunity to do so has been lost for now.

There is still a window. A revised constitutional amendment incorporating minimum seat guarantees for every state can and should be reintroduced before the post-2026 census figures are published. That is the only window in which southern states can secure constitutional protection before the freeze lifts and row proportionality takes over. The window is open for now, but it will not remain so indefinitely. The question for the political leadership is whether it will use that window wisely, or spend it celebrating a pyrrhic victory whose consequences are already written in the Constitution of India. (Views are personal)

## SEOUL-SEARCHING IN NEW SECTORS

AMID the changing global economic systems, the India-South Korea partnership is significant for its resilience, adaptability and forward-looking strategy. Initially centred on trade, the relationship now embraces technology, manufacturing, innovation and robust people-to-people ties.

On Monday, India and South Korea reaffirmed their commitment to a strong partnership and expressed their intentions for further growth in ties. Bilateral trade is approaching \$27 billion, which the two countries now aim to take to \$50 billion by 2030. This multifaceted relationship echoes the readiness of both nations to invest in long-term, sustainable collaboration that extends beyond economic gains to touch cultural and social engagement.

A significant aspect of this partnership is the strong presence of Korean businesses in India. Korean investments have transformed sectors such as automobiles, electronics and advanced manufacturing, supporting industrial growth, job creation, supply chain improvements and technological advancement. Korean electronics brands succeeded in India not just because of good products, but because they understood local needs, invested for the long term, priced their products smartly and built strong brands. Adapting to Indian consumers and focusing on trust and service helped Korean companies act more like local companies rather than foreign sellers. At the same time, Indian companies are seeking opportunities in South Korea, particularly in IT services, pharmaceuticals and emerging technologies.

The next phase of partnership between India and South Korea should prioritise inclusivity and diversity. While large companies have led the journey of economic partnership between India and South Korea so far, future progress depends on greater involvement from small and medium enterprises (SMEs). As the backbone of both economies, increased SME participation in trade and investment is essential for sustainable, broad-based growth of cooperation.

A key driver for Korean SMEs to enter the Indian market would be facilitation with respect to regulations, business practices and market structures. Addressing these critical factors requires structured support from both governments and industries. Industry associa-

tions can provide guidance, foster partnerships and build confidence for businesses seeking to expand in India. Establishing dedicated platforms such as an India-Korea SME Dialogue Forum would facilitate regular meetings, knowledge sharing and problem-solving, making collaboration easier. Raising awareness of opportunities, regulations and incentives in India is also important. Resources like Korean-language business guides, explainer videos and case studies can help bridge the gaps in information, re-negotiating and updating the Comprehensive Economic

Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has emerged as a key priority for Indian exporters to have a deeper penetration in South Korean markets. A modernised CEPA can catalyse and improve market access, and open up new avenues for trade and investment between India and South Korea. To fully realise its advantages, businesses in both countries need to make greater use of the agreement. Beyond traditional sectors, the India-



CHANDRAJIT BANERJEE



Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry

To achieve the ambitious bilateral goals with Seoul reaffirmed in Delhi, the ties must extend to smaller businesses that form the backbone of both economies. For stronger people-to-people links, internships, exchange visits and joint research can foster understanding and develop future leaders dedicated to the partnership

Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has emerged as a key priority for Indian exporters to have a deeper penetration in South Korean markets. A modernised CEPA can catalyse and improve market access, and open up new avenues for trade and investment between India and South Korea. To fully realise its advantages, businesses in both countries need to make greater use of the agreement. Beyond traditional sectors, the India-

South Korea partnership holds significant potential in strategic areas such as semiconductors, electric vehicles, batteries, shipbuilding, clean energy and critical minerals. Collaboration in these fields will benefit both economies and strengthen global supply chains. Strengthening diverse supply chains is increasingly important, as recent global disruptions have highlighted the risks of regional concentration. With robust industries and advanced technology, India and South Korea are well-positioned to collaborate on establishing resilient, future-ready supply chains.

The human dimension of this partnership is equally important. Strong connections, particularly among young professionals and entrepreneurs, will sustain the relationship over time. Initiatives such as internships, exchange visits and joint research can foster understanding and develop future leaders dedicated to the partnership.

At this pivotal moment when there are major re-alignments happening in the global economy and the fine line between geoeconomics and geopolitics has blurred, the India-Korea partnership is entering a new phase characterised by ambition, innovation and inclusion. Built on trust, shared values and economic strengths, the relationship should now advance through clear focus and effective collaboration.

In conclusion, the India-South Korea partnership illustrates how countries with shared goals and complementary strengths can work together for mutual benefit and global impact. By addressing challenges, fostering innovation and prioritising inclusive growth, both nations are ready to explore new possibilities across sectors—from traditional industries to cutting-edge technologies.

Unrelenting collaboration, greater institutional ties and a strong focus on people-to-people connections will ensure that the Korea-India partnership not only remains resilient but also continues to prosper and set new models for international cooperation in the years ahead.

(Views are personal) (cb@cci.in)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Unfolding impact

Ref: *Q4 results stay muted* (Apr 20). The concern is well-founded. Geopolitical disruptions rarely reflect immediately in quarterly numbers, the lagged effects are what unsettle markets. Indian corporates would do well to build supply chain resilience now rather than wait for the damage to reflect in balance sheets. **Abhanna Barathi, Chennai**

#### Parliament flop

Ref: *Toa rushed to reform* (Apr 20). The fact that a special session of Parliament was convened is a testament to the criticality of these bills. But the way it was handled, with no consensus-building initiative undertaken, tells us that the Centre was not serious enough. It was only looking to score political points either way. **Bal Govind, Noida**

#### Algorithm mandate

Ref: *Polls go hot* (Apr 20). The rise of chatbots in electoral contexts exposes a troubling gap between regulation and reality. Technology's reach demands sharper accountability, lest democracy be reshaped by algorithms rather than informed citizen choice. **Babu Krishna, Bengaluru**

#### Shankara's teachings

Ref: *Philosophy of oneness* (Apr 20). Adi Shankara's teachings can't be practised in their fullness in this hectic era, but to practise love for all is only a simple undertaking. Shankara never advised mankind to carry out harsh penalties. The way he puts it all in a nutshell with subtlety. **Sanath Kumar T S, Thrissur**

#### Preventable tragedies

Ref: *Explosion at Tamil Nadu firecracker unit* (Apr 20). The devastating blasts reveal how fragile safety remains in fireworks manufacturing. Workers and rescuers paid with their lives for systemic neglect. Unless strict regulation and accountability are enforced, such tragedies will continue to scar communities and erode trust in governance. **K Chidanand Kumar, email**

#### Vance speculations

Ref: *Trump sends team to Pak* (Apr 20). A curious myth continues to shadow JD Vance as he heads again to Islamabad. Calls to replace him reflect anxiety, not logic—an attempt to impose meaning on chance events. As per some, 'if you don't give a try replacing Vance it's a diffusive tension and save many lives?' **R S Narula, Patiala**

# RBI rolls back restrictions on rupee trade

Retains \$100 million cap on banks' net open positions in onshore market even as rupee remains under pressure

BENN KOCHUVEEDAN @ Mumbai

THE Reserve Bank (RBI) has withdrawn several curbs imposed on April 1 regarding rupee derivatives trade with immediate effect, though it has opted to retain \$100 million cap on banks' net open positions in the onshore market. The RBI's decision to pivot comes even as the rupee faced sustained pressure throughout last week.

The RBI imposed curbs on the rupee after it crossed 95 level. On March 27, the RBI capped banks' net open positions in the onshore derivatives market at \$100 million to curb volatility. When that measure failed to halt the currency's slide, the RBI tightened its grip on April 1 by banning arbitrage trades, prohibiting banks from offering non-deliverable forwards to corporate clients, and barring the rebooking of cancelled forward contracts. Banks were restricted from entering into rupee-linked forex derivative contracts with related parties.

In a new directive issued



Monday titled 'Risk Management and Inter-bank Dealings,' the RBI announced that a review had led to the withdrawal of the April 1 instructions. This reopens the door for banks to offer non-deliverable forwards and allows for the rebooking of cancelled contracts.

While the ban on related-party deals was eased, the regulator refined the rules to permit only the cancellation and rollover of existing contracts, alongside transactions conducted with non-resident entities on a back-to-back basis. As per the directive, authorised dealers are still restricted from new related-party contracts outside

of these specific exceptions, aligning with the master direction established in July 2016.

Despite these relaxations, the \$100-million cap on net open positions remains a firm barrier. The RBI's strategy appears to be a delicate balancing act, curbing speculative trading that could weaken the currency further while restoring liquidity and easing the path for genuine hedging.

The market remains volatile in the face of these changes. The rupee fell 19 paise on Monday to settle at 93.10. While the unit opened at 92.73 and hit an intra-day high of 92.70, it eventually gave up those gains as geopolitical tensions in West Asia drove dollar demand and kept crude oil prices steady.

Market participants have largely welcomed the move. Traders noted that liquidity had thinned significantly following the April restrictions, and the rollback is expected to restore normal hedging activity for businesses.

## EASING CURBS

- Under revised directives, authorised dealers can resume offering non-deliverable derivative contracts involving INR to resident or non-resident users
- This reopens door for banks to offer non-deliverable forwards
- Restrictions on related party transactions to remain in place
- On Monday, rupee pared its initial gains and settled 19 paise lower at 93.10 against dollar

The rollback suggests the RBI wanted to restore normal hedging activity while continuing to curb speculative trades which made rupee vulnerable

Currency trader

93.24 level rupee hit during the session

EXPRESS ILLUSTRATION

## DEVELOPMENT REPORT

# Middle-income trap: Govt drawing plans to escape it

DIPAK MONDAL @ New Delhi

WITH the risk of India getting stuck in the middle-income trap, the government is working on a detailed report on how to avoid such a situation. Sources told TNB that India has only 20 years left to escape the middle-income trap, and therefore it is studying countries which successfully avoided getting into the trap.

"Since 1990s, only 34 middle-income economies have managed to shift high income category, we will study what they did to escape the trap. We will also study those countries which failed to do so, and the mistakes they committed," said a government official on the condition of anonymity.

The report is only in its early phase, and the official did not give any timeline for finalisation of the report. As per sources, the government is studying a World Bank report on middle-income trap that was published in 2024. The World Bank in a report titled World Development Report 2024: The Middle Income Trap in 2024 had said that more than 100 countries—including China, India, Brazil, and South Africa—face serious obstacles that could hinder their efforts to become high-income countries in the next few decades.

As per World Bank classification, countries with per capita annual GDP in the range of \$1,136 to \$13,845 are classified as middle-income countries. India has per capita GDP of around



## FINDING A WAY

- India is studying countries which avoided getting into the trap
- Nations with capita GDP in \$1,136 to \$13,845 range are classified as middle-income

\$3,000. India has set the target of achieving \$10,000 (at current prices) per capita GDP by 2047.

The World Development Report 2024 argues that many countries that successfully escape poverty struggle to move beyond middle-income status because the drivers of early growth stop working. In the initial stages, growth is powered largely by investment—building infrastructure, expanding labour participation, and accumulating capital. But as countries get richer, these strategies deliver diminishing returns, and growth begins to slow. According to it, economies fail to transition to a more advanced model based on technology adoption and innovation, and as a result, they stagnate at moderate income levels.



## Vedanta Group approves May 1 as effective demerger date

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU @ New Delhi

BILLIONAIRE Anil Agarwal-led Vedanta has approved May 1, 2026, as the effective date for the demerger of its aluminium, merchant power, oil and gas and iron ore verticals into separate listed entities.

As part of the demerger, Vedanta plans to separately list four entities—Vedanta Aluminium Metal Limited (VAML), Talwandi Sabo Power Ltd (TSP), Malco Energy Ltd (MEL) and Vedanta Iron and Steel Limited (VISL). As per the exchange filing, under the composite scheme of arrangement, shareholders of Vedanta will receive equity shares in four businesses in a 1:1 ratio.

"This is to inform you that the Board of Directors of the Company, at its meeting held on April 20, 2026, as part of the ongoing reorganisation process, has inter alia, approved the following: (i) to make the Scheme effective on May 1, 2026; and (ii) in consultation with VAML, TSP, MEL and VISL, the Board has fixed May 1, 2026, as the record date for determining the shareholders eligible to receive consideration pursuant to the Scheme," said Vedanta in a regulatory filing.

It said the demerger will help in simplifying the firm's corporate structure with sector-focused independent businesses and provide opportunities to global investors, including sovereign wealth funds, retail investors and strategic investors, with direct investment opportunities in dedicated pure-play companies linked to India's remarkable growth story through Vedanta's world class assets.

## Paint cos gear up for price increase again

ARSHAD KHAN @ New Delhi

PAINT companies are gearing up for another round of price hikes over elevated crude oil prices and a rise in other input and logistics costs. The upcoming surge follows a price appreciation of 6-10% since the West Asia war which triggered a sharp rise in global oil prices.

The country's largest paint company Asian Paints will be increasing prices of its products in the range of 3-5% from May 5, 2026. Brokerage firm Nomura noted that this hike takes the cumulative price increase to high single digits to double digits, following the earlier 6-8% hike implemented in April amid continued supply chain disruptions that raised costs of raw materials, packaging and logistics.

Nomura believes volumes are unlikely to be impacted, while improved realisations are expected to support sales growth



## COMPANIES' MARGINS LIKELY TO IMPROVE

The upcoming surge follows a price appreciation of 6-10% since the West Asia war. Nomura believes volumes are unlikely to be impacted, while improved realisations are expected to support sales growth and margins.

and margins. While Asian Paints has gone for a 6-8% hike, Birla Opus took a slightly higher increase of 8-10% (following its hikes of 2-4% in Jan). Other players such as Berger, JSW-Dulux, Kansai Nerolac and Indigo took similar hikes of 6-8% staggered over two-three phases in March-April (2-3% in March, rest in April). Systematic Institutional Equities, following a channel check, believe another round of price hikes of 6-8% could

happen in June-July if crude oil holds at current levels. Paint makers' costs are 35-40% tied to crude-linked raw materials. While prices of phthalic anhydride and packaging expenses have risen sharply with crude's recent climb, a depreciating rupee has added to import cost pressures.

"The initial hikes covered crude oil inflation up to end-Q4/26 (covering Brent crude at \$75-80/bbl on average)—this inventory will be utilised in 1Q27, when the

price hikes largely take effect (with a lag of a month or so). Crude holding at current \$90 levels implies further sequential inflation of 20% in 1Q27, which remains unaddressed by pricing as yet," said Systematic Institutional Equities.

Q1FY27 gross margins could fall 50-100 bps QoQ for Asian Paints and Berger to account for slight transmission lag. Unless a fresh round of hikes is taken, Q2FY27 gross margins could be impacted by 400-450 bps QoQ, as per Systematic.

An industry executive said that they will not shy away from further price hikes if raw material prices remain high.

"What's important is that all the players are protecting their margin by opting for price hikes rather than going for a price war to grab market share. I believe a price hike of 5-7% is around the corner," the executive said requesting anonymity.

## BANK OF MAHA PROFIT JUMPS 35% TO ₹2,014 CR ON LOAN GROWTH

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU @ Mumbai

STATE-run Bank of Maharashtra has reported a 35% year-on-year rise in March quarter net profit at ₹2,014 crore, driven by strong growth in net interest income, advances, and overall business coupled with better asset quality. For the full year, the bank reported its highest-ever profit at ₹7,019 crore compared to ₹5,520 crore in the previous year.

The Pune-based bank said its net interest income rose 19% to ₹3,702.5 crore, helped by steady growth in core income and an improvement in asset quality along with a drop in provisions.

On the business front, total deposits grew 14.14% YoY to ₹3.50 trillion, while gross advances rose 21.74% to ₹2.91 trillion, while net advances increased 22.03% to ₹2.88 trillion. Of the total deposits, as much as 48.50% were low cost Casa deposits. Asset quality improved sequentially with gross non-performing assets declining to 1.45% from 1.6% in the December quarter, while net NPAs eased to 0.13% from 0.15%, the best in the industry. However, slippages increased on a quarter-on-quarter basis. The bank saw its provisions fall sharply on the back of record fall in bad loans. The bank set aside only ₹617 crore, significantly lower than ₹983 crore in the year-ago period.



## India engages with Iran after firing on vessels for safe passage of ships

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU @ New Delhi

AFTER an incident involving firing on Indian vessels by Iran, the government on Monday said it is in constant touch with Iranian authorities to ensure the safe passage of all India-bound ships through the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran reportedly fired at two Indian crude vessels on Saturday. Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, during a press briefing, said India is in touch with Iranian authorities to ensure safety of its ships and their secure transit through the Strait.

On Saturday, Iran fired at India's Sambar Herad and bulk carrier Jag Arnav while they were transiting the Strait. The vessels have since returned to the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, crude oil tanker Desh Garima, carrying 97,422 tonne of crude oil and 31 Indian seafarers, crossed the Strait on April 18 and is expected to reach



## Oil prices rise amid uncertainty over Hormuz reopening

Global crude oil prices surged on Monday amid uncertainty over the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz. Brent Crude was trading at \$94.13 per barrel, up 4.15% from its previous close, while the May contract of West Texas Intermediate (WTI) rose 4.65% to \$87.75 per barrel.

Mumbai on April 22. Global crude oil prices surged on Monday amid uncertainty over reopening of the Strait of Hormuz. Brent Crude was trading at \$94.13 per barrel, up 4.15% from its previous close, while the May contract of WTI rose 4.65% to \$87.75 per barrel.

Iran has re-imposed the closure of the Strait of Hormuz until the US lifts its naval blockade, escalating concerns over regional stability. The US said on Sunday it had seized an Iranian cargo ship attempting to breach the blockade, while Iran warned of retaliation—raising fears of renewed hostilities.

Iran stated that it would not participate in a second round of negotiations before the current two-week ceasefire expires later this week.

## TAX FRAUD Mastermind of ₹1,825 cr GST scam arrested

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU @ New Delhi

THE Ahmedabad Zonal Unit of the Directorate General of GST Intelligence (DGCI) has arrested Kapil Chugh, the alleged mastermind behind a staggering ₹1,825 crore GST refund fraud. Chugh was apprehended at the Indira Gandhi International (IGI) Airport on April 19, upon his return from Dubai. Chugh had fled to Dubai, evaded investigation and did not respond to 22 consecutive summons issued by the DGCI. Officials have labeled the case as one of the largest GST refund scams ever detected, characterised by a highly organised network of dummy entities and fictitious trade.

"Chugh emerges as the key mastermind and habitual offender who controlled the entire network via dummy firms, employees and close associates. The entities were created using borrowed KYC documents and were found to be non-functional or lacking infrastructure, manpower and genuine business activity at the declared premises," stated the government after the arrest. Investigations revealed Chugh, alongside associate Vipin Sharma, controlled several dummy firms created using borrowed KYC documents, that existed only on paper, without genuine infrastructure or manpower. They generated fraudulent Input Tax Credit (ITC) by circulating fake purchase invoices for high-value tobacco products. Simultaneously, they produced low-quality tobacco and smoking mixtures locally at nominal prices.

## GCC hirings rebound in Q4, replacement roles rise as Gen Z tenure shrinks

PADMINI DHURVARAJ @ Bengaluru

INDIA'S Global Capability Centre (GCC) hiring growth is being shaped by a drop in Gen Z tenure, with employees now staying in roles for less than 24 months, forcing companies into a cycle of continuous replacement hiring.

As per a Quesco Corp report, hiring across GCCs grew by 12-14% quarter-on-quarter in Q4 FY26, a jump from the 4-6% growth recorded in the previous quarter.

However, nearly 40% of all



hiring is now driven by replacement needs rather than new job creation. The shift is closely linked to changing workforce patterns, with Gen Z employees staying in roles for less than 24

months on average. This shortening tenure cycle is forcing companies to constantly refill positions, turning hiring into a maintenance function rather than pure expansion.

## Rise of flexible staffing

Another clear trend is the rise of flexible staffing. Contract roles now make up for 25% of the GCC workforce, reflecting a shift towards more agile hiring models as firms try to manage both skill shortages and project-based demand

"Q4FY26 reflects a clear recovery in India's GCC ecosystem, with momentum gaining across diverse sectors. However, we are witnessing a structural shift: a higher volume of re-

recruitment is being diverted to replacement roles as tenure cycles shorten," said Kapil Joshi, CEO of IT Staffing.

At the same time, demand continues to be concentrated in high-end digital capabilities. Roles linked to AI, platform engineering, and cloud infrastructure remain the biggest drivers of hiring. Yet, these are also the areas facing the most acute talent shortages. The report highlights a 38-42% gap in AI and data roles, 32-36% in platform

engineering, and 28-32% in cloud infrastructure.

This scarcity is pushing companies to compete aggressively.

In the BFSI sector, firms are offering salary premiums of up to 1.5 to 2.5 times to attract specialised AI talent, underlining how critical these skills have become.

Geographically, hiring remains heavily concentrated in Tier 1 cities, which account for 88-90% of total GCC recruitment, with Bengaluru and Hyderabad leading demand.

# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



## COMMENT &amp; FEATURES

THE JERUSALEM POST • MONDAY, APRIL 20, 2026

## THE JERUSALEM POST

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## The sacrifice of our fallen

Memory is a deeply entrenched concept within Israeli society.

Remembrance Day for the fallen of Israel's Wars and Victims of Terrorism, which will be marked nationwide starting on Monday evening, is filled with promises that the fallen will never be forgotten.

Over the past year, 170 soldiers have been killed across multiple fronts, including 15 soldiers and reservists killed in southern Lebanon since fighting resumed on March 2. Fifty-four disabled veterans have died from complications linked to wounds sustained during their service.

Behind these numbers are 7,165 bereaved relatives who have grieved and mourned for their fallen father, mother, son, daughter, or sibling.

The yearly transition from the somber ceremonies to the joy of Independence Day celebrations serves as a reminder of a difficult question that we must ask ourselves every year: What can we do to ensure that the sacrifices made by our soldiers were not made in vain?

On Sunday morning, Israelis gathered outside the homes of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other government ministers for an impromptu ceremony honoring fallen heroes.

After observing a minute of silence, the gatherings turned into a public demand: A call for a state commission of inquiry into the failures surrounding October 7.

Their message was direct and unambiguous: "The blood of our loved ones cries out from the ground and demands truthful answers."

This demand, rooted in grief, is sustained by a real fear among society that, without accountability by the political and military echelon, the failures of the past will continue to manifest themselves in the blood of Israelis being shed.

The question facing Israel is not only how to respond to the current threats – but whether it can alter the trajectory that keeps producing them.

Israelis have shown unprecedented levels of resilience since October 7, 2023. When Hamas invaded southern Israel and the IDF was nowhere to be found, citizens mobilized. When their neighborhoods, towns, and kibbutzim were destroyed, their residents came back to rebuild them from the ruins. In the North and South alike, Israelis have endured life under daily fire.

This resilience cannot be taken for granted.

The country cannot continue indefinitely on a path where each year brings new funerals, new bereaved families, and new names added to memorials.

Now, with Israel stuck in the limbo of a ceasefire both in Iran and Lebanon, an opportunity has presented itself to bring an end to this cycle of blood and tears.

In the long-standing debate of military against diplomatic pressure, it can still be argued that military pressure has brought Israel to a position where it could negotiate its safety with those who try to kill us.

However, said military pressure has always had its limits. Not only in results on the ground – but also in terms of international perception and, most importantly, domestic fatigue.

Israelis have spent thousands of days in reserve duty. Reservists have spent the majority of their past year fighting in Gaza and Lebanon. Too many did not get to return home to their friends and families.

This government, and the one that will emerge to replace it after elections face the same burden: They will need to provide bereaved families with the knowledge that the sacrifices they have made in the past years have contributed toward creating a different future.

The possibility of normalization with Lebanon and disarming Hezbollah and Hamas, even if distant, represents an alternative to perpetual hostility and spilling of blood.

There will come a time when bereaved families mourning their fallen sons and daughters will no longer be willing to accept open-ended conflict as a fact of life.

"The blood of our loved ones cries out from the ground and demands truthful answers." This statement, voiced outside the homes of Israel's leaders on Sunday, captures this sentiment resoundingly.

This Remembrance Day, therefore, is not only about honoring those who have fallen – but must ensure next year does not look like the last. Only then will we be able to appropriately honor the sacrifice of our fallen soldiers.

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## REMEMBERING ELIOT ENGEL:

## A life of faithful service



• By AVI WEISS

Congressman Eliot Engel, who passed away last week, knew the heights of Washington well. Over 32 years in the House of Representatives, he rose to chair the powerful House Foreign Affairs Committee while representing his Bronx district with distinction, including the synagogues of Riverdale, where our own congregation is situated.

He was widely regarded as one of the leading liberal voices in Congress. His advocacy for Kosovo and the Albanian people, and his insistence that America stand with them in their struggle against Serbia, has become part of his enduring legacy.

One of the true tests of leadership is not simply standing with the powerful; it is standing with the vulnerable. That was a defining feature of Eliot's life. He raised his voice for the indigent, both in America and abroad, as well as for American veterans – our heroes, too often forgotten. In a word: if there was a need, you could count on Eliot to be there.

Acknowledging Eliot's noble contributions, a major memorial will soon be held, no doubt to be attended by the who's who of New York and even national politics.

But standing at the entrance to the cemetery before his modest graveside service, I could not help but recall the words of Pirkei Avot (Book of Ethics): "Be careful in your dealings with the ruling authorities, for they do not befriend a person except for their own needs... They appear as friends when it serves their interests, but do not stand by a person in the hour of distress."

The past six years were difficult for Eliot and his family. After a bruising electoral defeat, he was unfairly por-

trayed as having strayed from his liberal ideals. Little mercy was shown, even as it became clear he was quietly struggling with his health.

Yet he carried himself with dignity, reminding us that the measure of a public servant lies not only in how one handles victory but in how one endures defeat. As he battled Parkinson's disease, the congressman to whom so many had turned for help was, too often, left to face his own struggles alone.

• By LEO DEE

Three years ago, on a spring morning during

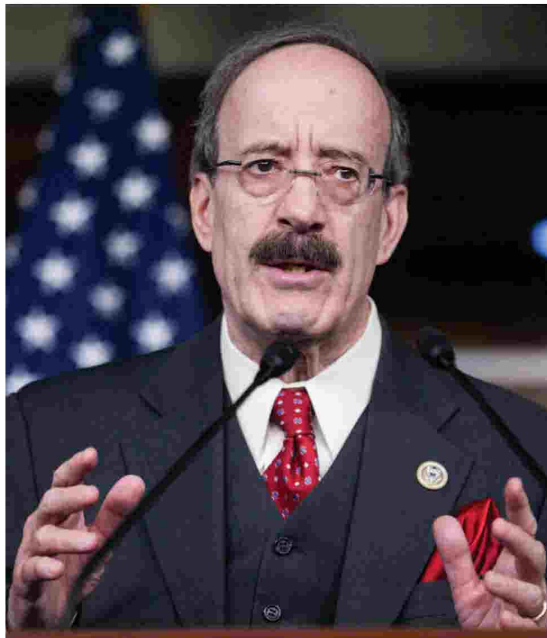
Passover, my family's life was shattered. My wife, Lucy, and our daughters, Maia and Rina, were murdered in a terror attack that belongs, tragically, to a pattern Israelis know too well.

If you want to understand Israel, you could start with its politics or its wars. However, you would miss something essential: To understand Israel, and perhaps the Jewish story more broadly, you need to understand how we relate to time, memory, and loss. In Judaism, the past is never just behind us – it is something we are constantly choosing how to carry.

We have two words for this: Zikaron (Memory) and Hag (Festival). Zikaron means memory, but not the casual kind. It is the deliberate act of stopping, of stripping away distraction, and facing what was lost in its rawest form. Its root is the Hebrew word "Zah," which describes the pure and highly filtered nature of the olive oil used in Temple service.

Zikaron represents a point in time, one that is almost frozen. A yahrzeit, the anniversary of a loved one's death, is about Zikaron. Remembrance Day is about Zikaron. It is where we allow grief to speak in its clearest voice.

Then there is Hag. We usually translate it as festival, but its deeper meaning is closer to a circle, or more precisely, a spiral, because Jewish time is not about static repetition. Each year we return to the same moments – Passover, Sukkot, the High Holy Days, Indepen-



THEN-NY REP. Eliot Engel speaks during a news conference in 2017. (Zach Gibson/AFP via Getty Images)

What stood out most to me, however, was that for all his universalism, Eliot never forgot where he came from. He never forgot his Jewish roots, his family's history shaped by European pogroms, or his unwavering commitment to the State of Israel. On many occasions, he told me that one of the great privileges of serving in Congress was the opportunity to affirm the vital importance of the American-Israeli alliance.

He did so publicly, from the

trayed as having strayed from his liberal ideals. Little mercy was shown, even as it became clear he was quietly struggling with his health.

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## Embracing grief and joy



FAMILIES OF fallen soldiers light torches for Remembrance Day on Mount Herzl in 2008. (Anna Kaplan/Flash90)

dence Day – but we arrive as different people. We live the same story, at a higher level.

This is not just theology. It is a survival strategy. It is Zionism where we confront the pain, a Hag is where we decide what to do with it. Every year, these two ideas collide on the eve of Independence Day as Remembrance Day draws to a close.

Remembrance Day is the ultimate moment of confronting the pain of our past, and Independence Day is the day we consider how far we have come since our return home 78 years ago. The juxtaposition of pain and joy is bizarre, and yet it is one of Judaism's most profound insights: that grief and joy are not opposites. They are partners.

In the language of modern psychology, I recently heard Harvard professor Dr. David Rosmarin describe a four-step model for dealing with anxiety: identify, share, embrace, and let go. Listening to him, I realized that he was describ-

ing not just therapy but a deeply Jewish process – one that mirrors the movement from Zikaron to Hag.

First, we identify. We stop and name the loss. For me, that is not abstract: it's meeting Lucy's students, whom she will never teach again. It's hearing Rina's laughter among her teenage friends. It is Maia's future – the home she never built, the life she never lived. Zikaron is the courage to look directly at what is missing.

Second, we share. Judaism rarely allows grief to remain private. We sit shiva, the mourning period. On Remembrance Day, we say kaddish, tell stories, and sing songs. This is because pain that is shared is not halved – it is humanized. It becomes part of a collective memory.

Third, we embrace. This is the hardest stage – not to numb the pain, not to scroll past it, but to sit with it. We must allow it to shape us. In Israel today, this is not theoretical. It is happening in real

time, in cemeteries and homes across the country, in a society that is simultaneously fighting a war and rebuilding itself.

And finally, we let go. Not of the people we lost, God forbid, but of the illusion that we were ever in control. Letting go is not defeat. It is an act of faith.

It is the quiet recognition that we cannot rewrite the past, but we can choose how it writes us. Letting go is what can enable us to celebrate the lives of our lost loved ones, into the Hag of Independence Day.

This, I believe, is where the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offered one of his most powerful insights: that Me-mory (Zikaron) is about "Me." It is deeply personal. Adding to that insight, I would say that a Hag, translated into Latin as "Festus," is about "Us."

It represents how we can progress as a society based on our past shared experiences. That is the transition from Zikaron to Hag that we mark every year: from Me-mory

Festus, from "Me" to "Us," and from a frozen moment of private pain to a living force that builds our future.

We see it in Israel everywhere today: in young soldiers who carry the memory of fallen friends into battle, and then channel that memory into the determination to build and defend our land.

We see it in communities that rebuild after terror, and in families who sit around the Shabbat table with empty chairs, yet sit together as a people, committed to renewing our nation and writing the next chapter of our story. And, yes, on the eve of Independence Day, as we turn from tears to dancing.

If we only live in Zikaron, in memory, we remain trapped in the private past. If we only live in Hag, we risk forgetting what gave our lives depth in the first place. But if we can move between them – if we can allow grief to become growth – then memory itself becomes an engine of renewal.

Lucy, Maia, and Rina are no longer physically with us, but their lives are not behind us. They are ahead of us – shaping the choices we make, the values we live by, and the future we are still building.

Perhaps that is what faith ultimately means. Not that we understand everything, but that we trust that even the deepest pain can be carried forward and, somehow, transformed into light.

The writer is the author of The Seven Facets of Healing, a book describing the positive steps that anyone can take following a crisis in their life. It is available to order on Amazon.com and in Israel from Bookpod.

He understood something that eludes many: that a strong sense of identity, and a deep connection to one's roots, does not stand in tension with a universal mission. It is, in fact, a prerequisite for it.

Like all politicians, Eliot understood the importance of being seen and heard, but he was a humble man at heart. In all the demonstrations I was involved in organizing, he never used his clout to demand the microphone upon arrival while others were speaking, as other politicians often did. Nor did he enter rooms announcing himself. He listened. And when called upon, he spoke with clarity and purpose.

I think of a High Holy Day service when Eliot chose not to move from synagogue to synagogue to be seen, but he remained seated for hours instead, praying quietly along-side our community.

The Talmud teaches that after one's time in this world, we are asked: "Did you act faithfully?"

Eliot Engel can answer in the affirmative.

He was faithful to his family, whom he often said were his highest priority. He was faithful to America, which he loved endlessly. He was also deeply and enduringly faithful to the State of Israel, for which he fought day in and day out.

It has been said that more important than the dates etched on a gravestone is the dash between them – the sum of a life lived. Eliot's dash shines brightly. It reflects a rare synthesis of action, conviction, dignity, and humility.

May his memory be a blessing.

The writer is the founding rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, Bronx, NY, founder of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Yeshivat Maharat rabbinical schools, and a co-founder of the International Rabbinic Fellowship.

# As Israel celebrates its 78th anniversary...



**THINK ABOUT IT**  
By SUSAN HATTIS ROLLEF

In recent years, my feelings about the celebrations of Israel's Independence Day – except for that of 2022, when the “Government of Change” was in power – have grown increasingly bitter and thought-provoking.

This is not because I have stopped believing that the establishment of the State of Israel was one of the most important and joyous events to have ever occurred to the Jewish people, of which I have vague personal memories as a five-year-old child living in Haifa.

For many decades, this event was also accompanied in my mind by endless pride in the achievements and rectitude of our beleaguered, yet steadfast state, whether or not the government in power was to my liking.

Right after our 75th Independence Day, toward the end of April 2023, which was less than half a year before the October 7 massacre occurred, as well as the following two-and-a-half years of fighting – I expressed in an article my concerns and dismay about the growing schisms in our society, which inter alia manifested themselves in the lighting of the torches ceremony on the eve of Independence Day of that year.

What was worrying about the ceremony was the fact that from an event run by the speaker of the Knesset, more or less in an atmosphere of national unity, it had turned into one in which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took over the leading role and focus of attention. This was orchestrated by Transportation Minister Miri Regev, who, since serving as culture and sports minister

in previous governments, has managed to assume absolute control over the planning of the ceremony, and to turn it into part of Netanyahu's personal aggrandizement.

It should be recalled that in April 2023, Israel's 37th government was only four months in power. The introduction of revolutionary, anti-liberal constitutional reforms, presented by Justice Minister Yariv Levin at the beginning of January, were still relatively new. The demonstrations against them, though energetic and vociferous, were still treated by the government with kid gloves by means of a police force which had not yet been turned into a politically motivated militia by National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Nevertheless, there were already first signs of a change in attitude toward the opposition, which were felt in the nature and content of the ceremony: Bereaved families of the fallen in the wars of Israel (all pre-October 7, 2023) who were believed to be associated with the opposition, or the demonstrations, started to feel that they were being cold-shouldered. Though the selection of torch bearers at the time did not turn as controversial as it is today, many already felt that it had turned overly politicized.

I must admit that in the selection of torch bearers this year, the one whom I find most unacceptable is that of Rabbi Avraham Zarbiv, a judge in the Rabbinical Court of Tel Aviv. His home in Bet El was allegedly constructed on private Palestinian land, as were other homes in the same neighborhood.

As an IDF reservist who

has served in the Gaza Strip as a D-9 Caterpillar operator, Zarbiv spoke out in favor of razing the whole Strip to the ground while bragging about the massive destruction he was personally responsible for. He also openly advocates Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip, something Netanyahu has stated the government does not support – at least not currently.

Perhaps none of this turns Zarbiv into a criminal, but does it justify granting him the honor of lighting a torch in an official ceremony, intended for the whole nation?

NO ONE is obligated to attend the ceremony on Mount Herzl, watch it on TV, or express support for it. However, as long as there is widespread criticism of it as an official national event, mainly – but not exclusively – from opposition circles, it should not be allowed to serve as a cause for dispute and division, especially when Netanyahu continues to speak of the importance of national unity in these difficult times.

Of course, one has the option of concentrating on events at the municipal level, or simply engaging in private activities of the sort that many families have adopted, such as picnics with family and friends, or visiting historical locations connected to our War of Independence.

There is also the question of whether the ceasefire agreed upon between the US and Iran will be extended beyond Wednesday, and if the ceasefire imposed by the US on Israel and Lebanon will last, at least until April 26.

In recent years, I have decided to go out with my camera on Independence Day and visit locations that are rich in wild flowers, or where rare flowers are in bloom. This year, despite the strange winter-be-



TRANSPORTATION MINISTER Miri Regev holds a press conference ahead of Israel's 78th Independence Day ceremony last week. Regev has managed to assume absolute control over the planning of this event and turned it into part of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's personal aggrandizement, the writer maintains. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

ginning-of-spring weather, we are experiencing opulent carpets of wild flowers all over the country.

However, while one can find all sorts of makeshift solutions, if one really cares about Israel's continued existence as a Jewish and liberal democratic state, in which official, national ceremonies and celebrations are designed for all parts of the nation (including, when feasible, the Arab minority as well), then a change must take place in the approaching general election.

Since there is no chance that another government with the same political makeup will stop the shift to authoritarianism and against respect for the pluralistic nature of our society, only two outcomes

are desirable.

One is that a conservative right-wing/centrist/leftist Zionist majority will form a coalition, with or without the additional support of one or more of the Arab parties. In this situation, it will be possible to at least partially reverse the anti-liberal constitutional changes introduced by the current government and return to the Independence Day ceremony as it existed before Regev hijacked it.

The second is that a wide Zionist coalition will be formed, together with the Likud, but preferably without Netanyahu, which will enable a reversal of the constitutional changes introduced by the current all-right government, by broad agreement, and intro-

duce an Independence Day ceremony that is palatable at least to the Zionist majority.

A repetition in Israel of what occurred in Hungary last week is simply impossible. There is no possibility that a single party will challenge the current coalition in Israel and emerge with over two-thirds of the Knesset seats.

No single Israeli party has ever received an absolute majority in the Knesset, and Israel has never had a single-party government. No matter what the election results will be, Israel's next government will once again be a multi-party coalition, based on complicated, occasionally corrupt, give-and-take deals.

Furthermore, no matter how many votes will shift in Israel

from the current coalition parties to the current opposition parties, there is no chance that it will even vaguely resemble the shift of voters from Victor Orban's Fidesz party to Peter Magyar's Tisza party in Hungary.

Nevertheless, I hope a political change will take place, together with an acceptable regional settlement. Otherwise, we shall face even more difficult times than we are experiencing today. Heaven forbid.

The writer has written journalistic and academic articles, as well as several books, on international relations, Zionism, Israeli politics, and parliamentarism. From 1994 to 2010, she worked at the Knesset Library and the Knesset Research and Information Center.

## Independence in tension

Between the Israeli tragedy and the Persian denouement

• BY DR. BENYAMIN YAKOVIAN

### Prologue: The facade of national identity

On Israel's 78th Independence Day, the state once again takes center stage in its own existential drama.

In the streets, amidst the flags and celebrations, we adopt what theater and literary critics call “Suspension of Disbelief.” This is our collective, semi-conscious agreement to momentarily ignore the cracks in our national identity. For a few hours, we overlook the friction in our public discourse to immerse ourselves in the grand narrative of sovereignty.

Yet, beneath this festive scenery, a deep conflict roils within the “subtext” of Israeli society. It is a dramaturgical tension between the nation's ancient DNA and the state's functional structure. To truly understand the drama in which we are players, and sometimes captives, we must perform a bold act of defamiliarization (ostranenie).

This is not a call for alienation, but an artistic technique of making the “familiar” feel “strange” to bypass our habitual perceptions. By looking at the Israeli reality through a “Persian Mirror,” etched in the mythical roots of ancient culture, we can observe our tragedy from an aesthetic distance. This perspective helps us identify the lost key to healing our reality.

### ACT I: The etymology of free men

The Iranian identity is embedded in the name of the country itself, carrying an ancient message of freedom. In ancient Persian and Sanskrit, the term Arya (or Er) signifies “noble free men.” In its mythical essence, it represents an arena intended for a free and noble people.

However, this mythical freedom is not isolated. It is inextricably linked to the concept of Airmayan, which literally means a “member of the community” or “friend of the tribe.” In the Zoroastrian tradition, Airmayan is the divine entity entrusted with friendship and healing. This reveals a revolutionary insight: there is no true freedom (Arya) without healing solidarity (Airmayan).

Here we encounter alienation in its most painful form. When freedom is severed from its communal connection, it devolves into a “distanced loneliness.” Social alienation is the tragic result of a sovereignty that no longer reaches out to the “Other.” While alienation is the ailment, defamiliarization is the theatrical tool that helps us identify and repair this disconnection.

### ACT II: The paradox of sovereignty and the Iranian bridge

Modern history reveals a recurring paradox. Many nations have co-opted the ideas of sovereignty only to turn them into tools

of oppression and alienation. In the name of “national freedom,” they trample individual liberty and drain solidarity of its meaning. This drama mirrors the tension reflected in Israel's Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration contains a fascinating dialectical tension. On one side stands the Jewish identity – our ancient DNA of sovereignty and freedom. On the other stands the democratic identity – our modern mode of solidarity and mutual dependence.

We must understand that democracy is not just a technical electoral procedure, but that it is also the practical embodiment of healing solidarity. It is the way noble, free people choose to reach out to one another without losing their uniqueness. When one element attempts to erase the other, we lose our tools for social healing and fall into mutual alienation.

### ACT III: The identity trap and the need for a new script

Viewing our reality through the lens of ostranenie reveals the “Identity Trap.” This is the dangerous tendency to define ourselves through the “enemy” we have constructed. We project our fears onto the “other,” whether an external threat or an internal rival. In the Israeli tragedy of year 78, we find ourselves in the center of an Agon – a sharp, dramatic struggle where each side is convinced it is the sole hero, even as it destroys the shared

setting of our lives.

Faced with conflict, the automatic and alienating response to claim the national struggle is more important than our social connection. However, theater teaches us the opposite: the communal bond of Airmayan is not a bonus for times of peace, but a condition for survival.

Healing begins with an internal refusal to turn our neighbor into an alienated “villain.” It requires acknowledging that the security of one is woven into the freedom of the other.

### ACT IV: Toward denouement and healing

In classical dramatic structure, after the conflict reaches its peak, there must be a denouement, an untying of knots. In the tragedy we inhabit, the denouement is the unraveling of enmity and fear. True independence is the ability to be sovereign over our spirit in a way that allows us to host the complexity of the other within ourselves.

The ancient Indo-Iranian term for a host is *Atithi-Pati*, the Lord of Guests. This magnificent concept combines uncompromising authority with infinite generosity. Israeli democracy must become such a space of hospitality.

In the Israeli tragedy of year 78, our democracy are not a contradiction, but necessary complements. Independence is the physical stage, but Airmayan, our mutual responsibility, is

the force that breathes life into it. Without this solidarity to conquer alienation, independence remains an empty simulation of power.

### Epilogue: Out to the stars

We must transition from “Independence Against” to “Independence With.” At the end of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante emerges from the depths and writes: “And then we emerged to see the stars again.”

For us, seeing the stars is the true denouement. It is the recognition that our identities are not prisons that breed alienation, but an open invitation to dialogue.

The time has come for the vision of a land of free men to stop being a tragedy of collision and instead, become a story of healing. Independence is the stage, freedom is the soul, and Airmayan is the connection between them.

Only when we learn to host our own complexities can we ensure that the curtain rises for a new act of living, breathing, and healing freedom.

This Independence Day, let us replace passive “Suspension of Disbelief” with an Active Faith – not just in the symbols of the state, but in the person sitting beside us on this shared stage.

The writer, a PhD, is a theater director, an expert on Iranian culture and religion, and is a member of the *Bama Tow* organization.

## LETTERS

### No comparison

In his article on April 17, author Yaakov Katz asks, “What is the [Israeli] government's long term policy... What is the vision for the future between two peoples who live in the West Bank [Judea and Samaria]?” Katz compares Israeli policy towards Lebanon to the policy – or lack of one – towards the Palestinian Arabs. There is no comparison. Lebanon has a government that is trying to rid its country of the terror organization Hezbollah. It is ready for a peace agreement with Israel.

The Palestinians Authority (not a country) is supporting the terrorist campaign against Israel, giving monetary rewards for the killing of Israelis. The vast majority of Palestinian Arabs would rather destroy Israel than make peace with it. A Gallup poll from July-August 2025 shows that only 23% of Palestinian Arabs believe peace with Israel would ever be achieved. Similarly, 21% in Israel believe the same thing.

Israel has the upper hand in the battle against the Palestinian Arabs. There is no prospect for

peace with them unless the Palestinian desire to wipe out Israel is replaced with a willingness for a compromise – a big one – on their part.

STEVE KRAMER  
Kfar Saba

### Time for independence

Kudos for your editorial “Military Independence” (April 17)!

Without a doubt, it is high time for Israel to prepare and achieve the fullest practical military independence from US supply chains. The reasons your Editorial sets forth are irrefutable: the erosion of support in the US Congress and American public opinion, making Israel's actions subject to a US veto. Israel can never allow that to happen.

Such independence should also include foregoing the \$3 billion + US military aid we receive but must spend in the US. We are rich enough now to stand on our own when it comes to military defense.

As the editorial put it well and succinctly, true

partnership with the America is best built on independence and shared values.

ROD MACLEOD  
Timrat

Your well expressed editorial is most certainly not the first time Israel has been encouraged to remove or at least reduce the dependency on the United States for the military hardware necessary to maintain an edge in this very volatile area of the world (Erosion of Democracy). This issue is raised every now and then, particularly since Barack Obama entered the Oval Office in 2009. There seems to be little question that sooner or later – and probably sooner – the support Jerusalem has been taking for granted will no longer be automatic. As the headline introducing your editorial declares, high time Israel starts to prioritize military independence.

Arguably the most anti-Israel Jew in the United States, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was most pleased with the results of the recent votes to block the sale of munitions to Israel. Although the motions did not carry, the growing trend is unmistakable. And with

President Trump's approval rating steadily declining in concert with the Democrats all but certain to reclaim at least one if not both houses of Congress, Israel can find itself in a serious quandary by the time the next decade rolls in.

To be sure, all is not doom and gloom. Only outright antisemitism would deny the advantage of having as an ally in the Middle East a vibrant, economically viable democracy. Even good ol' Bernie, I'm sure, realizes this. This, though, doesn't mean we should not sever or at least part the umbilical cord with Washington. On the contrary, now, while the support is still there, is the time to ensure, as you appropriately put it, that “Never again” is a promise we can fulfill by ourselves.

BARRY NISMAN  
Gnot Shomron

### Clarification

The article “Sanctioning the last Christian outpost” by Marc Zell and Dana Levinson (April 17, 2026) did not clarify that Zell is a paid lobbyist of Republika Spska. The article has been updated online to reflect this.

SANCTIONS, MEMORY, AND MORAL CLARITY:

# Why Bosnia's future cannot be built on denial

*A response to narratives that conflate accountability with imbalance, and identity with threat*

• By MUSTAFA CERIC

In engaging with the opinion advanced by Marc Zell, one encounters not merely a policy argument but a broader attempt to recast the moral and historical terrain of Bosnia. Such arguments deserve careful scrutiny, particularly when they invoke civilizational anxieties and selectively reinterpret both legal realities and historical experience.

At the heart of this debate lies a fundamental question: whether the enforcement of legal accountability – through sanctions or other mechanisms – constitutes destabilization, or whether it is, in fact, the precondition for any durable peace.

As previously established, the conduct of Milorad Dodik – his defiance of constitutional authority, his rejection of binding judicial decisions, and his denial of genocide – places him outside the normative boundaries that democratic societies must uphold. To portray sanctions as an attack on communal balance rather than a response to individual conduct is to obscure responsibility and dissolve the distinction between law and identity.

**The misuse of civilizational narratives**

A particularly troubling aspect of the argument is its reliance on a civilizational framing that casts Bosnia's Bosniaks (Muslim) population as a conduit for external, allegedly destabilizing influences. This narrative not only lacks empirical grounding but also risks reintroducing precisely the kind of ethno-religious essentialism that the post-war order sought to transcend.

The state of Bosnia is not a proxy battleground of civilizations; it is a pluralistic society whose stability depends on the coexistence of its constituent peoples under a shared legal framework.

The Dayton Peace Agreement did not enshrine division as a permanent condition, but rather established a structure within which coexistence



**BOSNIAN SERB leader Milorad Dodik delivers a speech in northern Bosnia and Herzegovina last year. Sanctions against Dodik are not an affront to balance; they are an affirmation of principle, the writer says. (AFP via Getty Images)**

could gradually be normalized. To reinterpret this framework as a zero-sum struggle between ethnically religious blocs is to regress toward the very logic that produced conflict.

**The Sarajevo Haggadah and the ethics of historical memory**

It is here that the invocation of Jewish history, particularly the symbolism of the Sarajevo Haggadah, requires both precision and care. The Haggadah, preserved through centuries of upheaval, including during World War II, stands as a testament to the protection afforded to Jewish heritage by the people of Bosnia, in particular its Muslim community. During the Holocaust, local actors,

namely Bosnian Muslims, risked their lives to safeguard this manuscript from destruction, an act that has become emblematic of interfaith solidarity.

This historical record does not support claims of a "unique tradition of antisemitism" among Bosniaks. Rather, it illustrates a distinctive legacy of coexistence and protection. Indeed, Bosnia's Jewish community has often pointed to this history as evidence of a broader civic ethos that transcended religious division even in times of extreme peril.

To draw upon Jewish symbols in order to advance a narrative that stigmatizes another community is therefore not only historically inaccurate

but ethically problematic. The memory embodied in the Sarajevo Haggadah calls for humility, solidarity, and the defense of truth, not its instrumentalization in contemporary political disputes.

**Accountability is not bias**

The assertion that sanctions against Dodik represent a pro-Bosniak or "pro-Muslim" bias misunderstands the nature of international legal enforcement. Sanctions are not imposed on the basis of identity but on the basis of conduct. The international judgments concerning the Srebrenica genocide – delivered by institutions such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former

Yugoslavia – are not contingent upon ethnic or religious affiliation; they are determinations grounded in evidence, procedure, and law.

To deny these findings, or to frame their acknowledgment as partisan, is to erode the universality of justice itself. If legal accountability can be dismissed as bias whenever it affects one group, then the very possibility of impartial justice collapses.

**Europe, sovereignty, and the limits of revisionism**

The broader geopolitical framing of the argument, linking Bosnia's internal dynamics to fears of external influence, also warrants reconsideration. While vigilance regarding

foreign interference is legitimate, it cannot serve as a pretext for undermining the sovereignty and constitutional order of the state and society of Bosnia. Secessionist rhetoric, particularly when coupled with the rejection of international agreements, aligns less with the defense of Europe than with the erosion of its foundational principles.

In this regard, the contrast between European integration and revisionist politics becomes salient. The former is grounded in the rule of law, mutual recognition, and the acceptance of shared norms; the latter seeks to renegotiate settled questions through unilateral action and historical reinterpretation. The trajectory chosen by politicians such as Russian President Vladimir Putin – with whom Dodik has often been politically aligned – illustrates the risks inherent in the latter path.

**The responsibility of honest argument**

A civilizational argument worthy of the name must be anchored in truth, not in selective memory or rhetorical inversion. Bosnia's future depends not on the triumph of one community over another but on the consistent application of law, the preservation of historical truth, and the rejection of narratives that reduce complex societies to simplistic binaries.

Sanctions against Milorad Dodik are not an affront to balance; they are an affirmation of principle. To remove them in the absence of meaningful change would not correct an injustice. It would legitimize a pattern of behavior that undermines both domestic stability and international norms.

In the end, the lesson of the Sarajevo Haggadah is not one of division but of shared responsibility: to protect what is fragile, to remember what is true, and to resist the temptation to bend history in the service of the present.

*The writer is the grand mufti emeritus of Bosnia.*

# Resilience of the Jewish Diaspora will define our future

• By ADAM MILSTEIN

The American Jewish community built its institutions for a different era. They were designed in the decades following the Holocaust, when Jewish life in the United States was secure, socially integrated, economically advancing, and largely insulated from public hostility and anti-Jewish violence.

The priority was growth and prosperity: assimilating into the broader culture, contributing to society, and expanding Jewish establishments such as schools, synagogues, community centers, and cultural life. We invested heavily in Jewish continuity, education, and Holocaust remembrance, believing that hatred of Jews could be contained through awareness and public campaigns.

But we built for a world that no longer exists. Thinking it can never get as bad as in past generations, we said "Never Again," and invested heavily in explaining and condemning Jew-hatred, yet far less in building the capacity to withstand it. That gap is now impossible to ignore.

In recent years, Jew-hatred came out of the shadows, becoming a persistent, adaptive force expressed through violence, dehumanization, and persecution. It persists across the alt and isolationist Right, the progressive Left, and Islamist movements, the latter two forming the Islamo-leftist alliance that converges into mainstream hostility toward Jews, the Jewish state, and the United States of America.

For years, many dismissed concerns about this growing alliance and the hatred of Jews that unites it. The warning signs were visible in academia, mainstream media, social media, politics, and international institutions. Too often, however, the response was rooted in the belief that education and awareness would be sufficient. It wasn't.

Today, those dynamics are entrenched. On university campuses and in K-12 education, anti-Jewish ideologies are embedded in curricula, normalized in student culture, and reinforced by faculty and leadership. Jewish students are isolated, marginalized, and in some cases violently attacked. Beyond campuses, Jewish businesses are targeted, individuals are attacked on



DIASPORA JEWS must stand up for themselves and defend their future just as Israelis have learned to do, the writer asserts. (ChatGPT)

the streets for speaking Hebrew, and hatred of Jews is normalized at scale across digital platforms.

And yet, our communal response remains reactive. We issue statements, call for justice, track incidents, correct misinformation, and plead for empathy. These efforts matter, but they are insufficient and yield diminishing results. They rest on the assumption that if we argue well enough, we can reverse the trend – but violent Jew-hatred is not a debate to be won. It is a reality to be prepared for and fought.

To understand why this reactive posture persists, we must be honest about a deeper historical pattern.

For nearly 2,000 years, diaspora Jews did not fight persecution. Instead, they appealed against it. From the courts of medieval Europe to the pogroms of Eastern Europe to the institutions of the modern West, the default Jewish response was to

seek mercy: to petition rulers, appeal to the conscience of majorities, and ask for protection rather than build the power to secure it.

This was not a weakness. It was the rational response of a people without sovereignty or a state.

That era is over. Now we have a Jewish state.

We have a proven model of Jewish strength, and yet too many in the diaspora still reach for the old tools – the petitions, the statements, and the pleas – when the moment demands something entirely different.

In contrast, Israelis have learned through lived experience to operate with a different mindset. They understand that threats are inevitable, that survival depends on preparation, and that others will not protect them. They take responsibility and secure their own future.

Meanwhile, Jews in the diaspora

live with a false sense of security. When attacked, rather than being prepared, they ask others for help in the hope that warning non-Jews that "hatred of Jews starts with the Jews, but never ends with them" will convince others to join the fight.

It has not worked, and it will not be enough. The naive hope that governments and institutions will provide protection creates a dangerous gap between perception and reality, a fragile sense of safety that recent years have repeatedly shattered.

This must change.

If we are serious about securing Jewish life in the diaspora for decades ahead, we must learn from our brothers and sisters in Israel and move from a reactive to a proactive posture across six areas.

First, we must build a strategic partnership with Israel.

Israel is not merely a symbol of Jewish pride or a refuge of last resort. It

is the world's most advanced model of Jewish survival, with unmatched expertise in security, intelligence, crisis communication, and community resilience.

THE DIASPORA has largely treated Israel as a cause to defend rather than a resource to draw from. That must change. We should be actively learning from Israel's security culture, civil defense frameworks, and hard-won experience countering both physical and ideological threats, and integrating them into our own institutions.

We are one people. It is time we began defending ourselves as such.

Second, we must redefine security. Jewish communities need serious investment in physical and digital protection, including trained personnel, intelligence

capabilities, and self-defense training. Preparedness is part of Israel's culture. It must become part of diaspora Jewish culture.

Third, we must build real crisis infrastructure. Every Jewish institution, and every individual facing harassment, should have access to coordinated networks providing legal, communications, and security support in real time.

This must include AI-enabled tools to counter the growing battlefield of information warfare. An AI-powered global Jewish response network should be a communal priority.

Fourth, we must strengthen economic resilience. As Jews increasingly face discrimination in hiring, business, and professional advancement, we must ensure that no one stands alone. That means building job pipelines, funding networks, and establishing community partnerships that allow us to support our own in times of need.

Fifth, we must rethink Jewish education. Our schools, camps, and youth programs must evolve. Alongside identity and tradition, we must teach resilience, confidence, and awareness. Our children must graduate not only knowing who they are, but fully prepared for the challenges they will face.

Finally, we must move from proud Jews to strong Jews. Pride is essential, but it is not enough. As Israel has demonstrated time and time again, strength means preparedness, self-reliance, and collective responsibility. It means building a community that is vibrant and durable – no matter the size of the challenge.

We are redefining our identity once again, navigating between past assumptions and future realities.

The future of Jewish life will not be secured by those who make the best arguments.

It will be secured by those who are prepared to defend it, build it, and lead it.

*The writer is an Israeli-American strategic venture philanthropist. He can be reached at adam@milsteinf.org, on Twitter @AdamMilstein, and on Facebook www.facebook.com/AdamMilsteinCP.*

OPINION

# The Algorithm Will See You Now



**INSIDE VIEW**  
By Andy Kessler

“We reduced time to treatment in stroke by over an hour, which is really meaningful,” says Chris Mansi, a neurosurgeon and co-founder of Viz.ai. Turns out artificial intelligence is more than vlogging or summarizing dull meetings. It is also a lifesaver.

A stroke can be ischemic, clots blocking the flow of blood to the brain, or hemorrhagic, blood vessels rupturing in the brain. After a hospital’s stroke team assesses your speech and balance, they order a CT scan to figure out the cause. Blockages can be treated with tPA medication to dissolve clots, while brain bleeding requires neurosurgery. “Time is brain,” doctors say—two million neurons are lost each minute during an ischemic stroke.

At the rescue, Dr. Mansi founded Viz.ai in 2016 with David Golan, a machine-learning expert, who weeks earlier was at Stanford Hospital with a suspected stroke. “He saw the problem through the eyes of a data scientist, thinking, ‘How do they not have technology to read these scans?’” Dr. Mansi says over lunch in San Francisco. Back then at a typical hospital, “workflow was very messy. It was 13 or 14 different calls and hand-offs,” lining up doctors and procedures. For hypertrophic cardiomyopathy—the thickening of heart muscles—it was 56 steps.

Viz.ai’s process of using AI to create care pathways begins with algorithms that assess scans. By automating many of the next steps, including logistics between doctors and staff, the company shortened initial treatment time by as much as 88 minutes. It also reduced treatment time variability from two hours to seven minutes. “Each patient is getting treated faster but more consistently as well.”

In 2018 Viz.ai was the first to get Food and Drug Administration clearance for AI system use in healthcare. It took some education, Dr. Mansi recalls: “They thought it was for helping the radiologist. But if you want to help the patient, you can’t just help the radiologist or the neurosurgeon, the individual doctor. You have to help the entire workflow. It’s a system problem, and once we explained that, they realized this was good for American patients.”

Viz.ai ran clinical trials, many of them in the Southeast, a region known as the “stroke belt” for the disease’s high prevalence. After FDA approval, hospitals in Chattanooga, Tenn., and Atlanta rolled out Viz.ai’s platform. It is now in 2,000 U.S. hospitals covering 230 million people, about two-thirds of the American population—and 35 hospitals in Europe. Business is growing 40% a year.

By solving the workflow-efficiency problem, “we create high-agency doctors,” Dr. Mansi says. “Twenty percent of the problem is detecting disease. Eighty percent is organizing the workflow so the

patient gets to the right specialist to diagnose and see the patient.” Viz.ai creates an “AI care pathway that takes a patient from initial tests all the way through to definitive treatments.” It isn’t an AI doctor, but “you’ve got the world’s best workflow working for you all the time.”

Selling any software to hospitals is hard, so Viz.ai set up a platform to handle issues beyond stroke care. “We have 55 pathways available” for different treatments, Dr. Mansi

says, including pulmonary embolism, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cancer. “Thirty-five to 40 of those are from other companies, including Microsoft, that have come to us and said, ‘Hey, can you deploy this detection algorithm into your health system?’” Hospitals have rules set up “We implement them into software.”

Here’s where it gets really interesting. The platform’s inputs are “imaging of any type—ECG, heart tracings, echocardiograms, blood tests, labs, genetic tests and, importantly, the electronic health record,” Dr. Mansi says. “A year and a half ago, every single care pathway that we built was imaging-based as a trigger.” An AI scan of an image would set a patient on a treatment plan. “This year,

90% of our care pathways that we’ve launched have been electronic-health-records-triggered.”

Could this mean earlier detection, before symptoms? “We’re now doing probably 90% of the work of the doctor automatically before the doctor’s even seen the patient, which is magical for that doctor, because they come in, everything’s organized for them,” Dr. Mansi says. So the AI does 90% of the grunt work? He nods: “But not the world I’d use. We’re giving them guidelines and they’re deciding. We’ve not had one complaint.”

Viz.ai is working with Anthropic and talking to OpenAI and others. “Claude means we can now synthesize a 900-page electronic health record and get the signal. And that allows us to expand the number of diseases to, really, every single disease.” The goal is to head off harm by finding a disease before it causes symptoms. “It fits into the narrative that should be told more, which is an AI for good.”

There are AI competitors like Aldoc, which started with pulmonary embolisms, and OpenEvidence, which doctors use to help diagnose diseases. The more the better.

Dr. Mansi is thinking about the big picture. “The agentic evolution is doing more work for doctors, nurses and administrators. It’s all the different tasks they do, because if you can take some of the burden off them, more patients are treated. Their economics get better and patients get better. That’s my big focus.”

## Viz.ai saves critical time in stroke care and helps catch other diseases earlier.

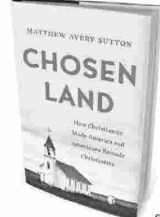
BOOKSHELF | By D.G. Hart

# Christian Multitudes

Chosen Land  
By Matthew Avery Sutton  
Basic, 656 pages, \$40

Since the country’s bicentennial, historians of American religion have stressed the nation’s diversity of faiths. Prior to 1976, scholars assumed that the Protestant story, from the Puritans and the Founders (mainly) to the antebellum social reformers and mainline denominations, was the best way to make sense of religious life in the U.S. The scholarly consensus had begun to shift a decade before. Supreme Court rulings about prayer and Bible-reading in public schools were one sign that white Protestants could no longer assume their faith provided religious coherence for the nation.

Once Protestantism was dethroned, historians excavated almost every part of the nation’s spiritual landscape. Even so expansive an idea as the “Abrahamic faiths”—Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Mormonism—was



to capture, to borrow Walt Whitman’s formulation, the religious multitudes that America contains.

In light of the academic fascination with diversity, Matthew Avery Sutton’s “Chosen Land” is noteworthy for confining its attention to Christianity. Mr. Sutton doesn’t ignore diversity—American Christianity has its own multitudes. Despite the past 50 years of scholarship, however, he places Christianity at the center of America’s national identity. “To understand American distinctiveness

fully,” Mr. Sutton writes, “we must account for how Christianity shaped and was shaped by every major historical development from education to war.” In short, Christianity is what “made the United States so unique.” The book’s subtitle—“How Christianity Made America and Americans Remade Christianity”—reflects a certain ambiguity in Mr. Sutton’s argument. Yet whether the religion of Christ shaped America or America shaped it, he believes the U.S. is explainable by Christianity.

Even so, Mr. Sutton’s narrative is hardly simple. Sometimes the diversity of Christian habits and practice is so great that readers will marvel at Mr. Sutton’s creativity in bringing it all together. Consider his chapter on the 1970s. With the Vietnam War leading many Americans to think the nation had “lost its way,” Mr. Sutton takes us through the greatest hits of that grooviest of decades. On the one hand, the war itself prompted believers to action. The Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, for example, brought together Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish Americans who opposed the war because it violated the nation’s ideals and religious consciences.

On the other hand, Americans searching for spiritual ideals had many options. Hal Lindsey’s “The Late Great Planet Earth” (1970), which predicted the imminent return of Christ, became a bestseller. Larry Norman, the first Christian rock ‘n’ roll celebrity, attracted youth by asking, as the title of his most famous song had it, “Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?” The evangelist Billy Graham solidified his appeal by supplanting hymns with the style of music to which teens and young adults flocked; Broadway even chimed in with the rock opera “Jesus Christ Superstar.”

As if that weren’t enough, Mr. Sutton throws in Jim Jones’s Peoples Temple, an odd mix of left-wing activism and apocalyptic faith that started in Indianapolis and became respectable in Redwood Valley, Calif. Before recruiting members to Guyana, where in 1978 members died by mass suicide, Jones had mingled with such figures as California Gov. Jerry Brown, First Lady Rosalynn Carter and Vice President Walter Mondale. Mr. Sutton weaves these forms of 1970s Christianity together by explaining that their various exponents used ancient prophecies to understand the nation’s “Christian destiny.”

As sensible as that interpretation sounds, Mr. Sutton’s ability to put disparate Christian expressions into tidy categories wears thin over the course of 500 pages. Readers will undoubtedly become better acquainted with the variety of American Christianity but will have to use their own wits to find patterns or hear harmonies.

## The diversity of Christian habits and practice in the U.S. has been considerable. America shapes religious belief—and vice versa.

Examining the intersection of Christianity and Americanness across centuries works best, Mr. Sutton says. For instance, what might an experiment have yielded that took samples from George Whitefield (1740s), Lyman Beecher (1830s), Harry Emerson Fosdick (1920s) and Doug Wilson (2020s)? Mr. Sutton discusses all four, Whitefield extensively, but draws no line between them. Could he have followed a strand of nation-building or Americanized religion from Whitefield’s preaching during the First Great Awakening, to Beecher’s fears of Roman Catholic immigrants on the frontier of southern Ohio, to Fosdick’s Protestant celebration of scientific progress, to Wilson’s effort to re-create Christendom in Moscow, Idaho? Figuring out which direction each of these pastors pulled—toward a Christian nation or an Americanized Christianity, or both—might have added fine print to Mr. Sutton’s catalog of believers.

Because Mr. Sutton uses a political timeline to narrate the history of American Christianity, he gives away his own view of which direction the influence went—more Christian nation than Americanized Christianity. “Chosen Land” leaves readers with the impression that, rather than adopting Christianity to American life, believers tried to impose their faith on the country. Yet even here Mr. Sutton is evasive. Sometimes Christians merely wove their faith into family life, political and economic analysis, opinions about social issues, explanations of natural disasters, choices about school curricula and attitudes to war. By the book’s end, all such variety reduces to three groups: conservatives who want to establish Christian dominance; liberals who desire a kinder, gentler Christian politics; and separatists who keep politics out of churches.

At a time when many Americans will want to reflect on the meaning of 1776, drawing attention to the political side of American Christianity’s past may lead some readers to follow Mr. Sutton into its remarkable diversity. Others, however, will conclude that all he’s shown is that American Christians want power. Such a reading will miss why Christianity, an ancient faith that shows few signs of letting up in the modern world, appeals to so many people with no political interests.

What makes Christianity work, and always has, is the gathering together of the faithful to worship in song and in recitation of ancient creeds affirming creation, sin, salvation, and the death and resurrection of Christ. A heavy emphasis on politics misses Christ’s promise of eternal life.

Mr. Hart, who teaches history at Hillsdale College, is the author of “Protestants and Patriots: Presbyterians in the Age of Revolution.”

# The Trouble in Trump’s Venezuela



**AMERICAS**  
By Mary Anastasia O’Grady

Is Venezuelan dictator Delcy Rodríguez, Washington’s woman in Caracas, as the Trump administration claims? Or is she a *christista* stand-in for strongman Nicolás Maduro, intent on preserving the socialist dictatorship?

Every day the latter looks more plausible. President Trump can still do something about it. But time isn’t on his side.

Ms. Rodríguez told the nation in an April 8 economic speech that to fight inflation she will approve only a “responsible” minimum wage increase on International Workers’ Day, May 1. Coming from a communist, that seems like a courageous step toward common-sense reform. But don’t get too excited. What matters to Ms. Rodríguez is her survival, and for that she needs the backing of the criminal insiders who run the country. She continues to nurture them.

After the U.S. military captured Mr. Maduro in January and brought him to New York to face drug-trafficking charges, Mr. Trump approved Mr. Maduro’s deputy, Ms. Rodríguez, as interim head of state. The goal was to preserve the chain of command in law enforcement and the military and avoid chaos. But Mr. Trump was emphatic that the U.S. would run the country.

More than 100 days into Ms. Rodríguez’s new job, freedom is still a dirty word for the government. According to Foro Penal, a Venezuelan nongovernmental organization that monitors the criminal-justice system, the regime holds 477 political prisoners, including 187 members of the military. Many of those who have been released are under gag orders. The amnesty law passed by the National Assembly in February is a fraud. Opposition leader María Corina Machado is under threat of arrest if she returns to her country. Even if American policymakers don’t care about human rights, civil liberties or democracy, the risks to U.S. security interests posed by a regime with a record of working to destabilize the Western Hemisphere can’t be denied.

Ms. Rodríguez mouths some of the right lines about the importance of oil and gas and mining and cutting red tape. But talk is cheap, and the cancer of collectivism has metastasized throughout the economy. The country needs an overhaul of regulation, labor law and the central bank. Ms. Rodríguez, who was a major player in the repressive Maduro regime and was subjected to sanctions by the first Trump administration in 2018, is part of the problem, not the solution.

In January Secretary of State Marco Rubio proposed a three-phase strategy for Venezuela: stabilization, recovery and transition to democracy. Phase one has been all up-

side for Ms. Rodríguez. The U.S. decision to lift its ban on Venezuelan oil exports has sent hard-currency revenue flowing back to Caracas, albeit under U.S. control. The economy is forecast to grow 4% this year.

The recovery phase, now under way, requires a meaningful change of personnel. But so far there are no signs that Ms. Rodríguez is on board. Quite the opposite. Her

## Does Rodriguez want change or is she intent on preserving the socialist dictatorship?

new defense minister is a former head of the shadowy intelligence agency responsible for untold human-rights violations. The former defense minister, a Putin ally, has been tapped to run agriculture. Diosdado Cabello, who is under U.S. indictment for drug trafficking, remains interior minister. The paramilitary, known as the *colectivos*, still roam the streets as Bolivarian enforcers. The best Ms. Rodríguez could do at the central bank, which generated 475% inflation last year, was replace the president with the vice president.

Last week Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control eased sanctions when it issued a new general license to let U.S. persons engage in dollar transactions with some Venezuelan state financial in-

stitutions. Venezuela has made almost no political concessions in return.

Ms. Rodríguez gets along well with Chevron, which has a history of lobbying the Trump administration for special licenses to work with the dictatorship. The American oil company stayed in Venezuela in 2007 after other big players left, and it’s pouring more capital into the country. But most investors are holding off until they see real reform.

In her April 8 speech, Ms. Rodríguez acknowledged the economic collapse that led to the mass emigration of both the Venezuelan professional class and the poor. But did that have anything to do with the confiscation of private property and independent media, central-bank incompetence, the politicization of the national oil company, gross corruption, rampant crime or the government’s use of food as a political weapon?

Not in her narrative. The late dictator Hugo Chávez fought for social justice but his project came undone as a consequence of U.S. sanctions, she explained. The blame lies with “the blockade,” the term Cuba uses for sanctions. She demanded all be lifted.

Ms. Rodríguez recognized that hyperinflation has destroyed Venezuelan living standards. Two cheers for that. But if the leader of the “recovery” continues to parrot socialist bromides and surround herself with other thugs, there’s not much hope for the future.

Write to O’Grady at wsj.com.

# Matt Hansen Is ‘Famous Enough’

By Masada Siegel

My 10-year-old son grabbed my arm and pointed at a young man. “That’s a famous singer,” he said. The man was dressed in a black shirt and blue jeans. He held a guitar as another man filmed him against the majestic backdrop of Red Rock State Park in Sedona, Ariz., where we were hiking.

I had no idea who Matt Hansen was. We went over to investigate—after I got my son’s approval, so as not to be that embarrassing mom. I never knew what to expect when approaching a famous person, especially one I’ve never heard of. I was a little nervous. I didn’t need to be.

Mr. Hansen, 26, was genuinely warm and happy to chat with us. His cameraman, Brayden Moreno, was equally friendly, agreeing to take a

few photos of the three of us. Wanting to confirm I had the right person to follow, I asked his photographer to pull up Mr. Hansen’s Instagram account, and a 1.4 million follower count stared back at me. I was standing next to

## On a Sedona trail, I met a singer who is carving his own path in the music industry.

someone with more than a billion streams, five million monthly Spotify listeners and a sold-out headline tour across Australia and New Zealand.

Mr. Hansen has chosen not to sign with a traditional record label. His career kicked into high gear when he up-

loaded a 30-second cover of Frank Ocean’s “Godspeed” on TikTok, recorded in an empty parking garage. He woke up to 50 million views, five million likes and 400,000 new followers.

Music-industry professionals immediately flooded his inbox. He had dozens of meetings with the biggest record labels. They all told him the same thing: to best his posting on TikTok and getting views. He did, but he didn’t sign with any of them.

Mr. Hansen releases everything independently and controls every decision about his music. The labels were offering access, but what he already had was better. He said on the “Ourselves” podcast that he has found the “freedom to put out the song that I want to put out and not having a plan.” That freedom extends to his fans too. “I abso-

lutely love talking to all of my fans,” he said. “It makes me truly happy.” But in the podcast, he was honest about the danger, the dopamine rush of strangers telling you love you on the street. He has been careful not to need it. “I wouldn’t consider myself famous in really any capacity,” he said. “I can go anywhere, and go get dinner anywhere and be like ‘Hello, my name is, I’ll be fine.’” He cherishes every follower but doesn’t build his world around their approval. “That’s a gift. That’s amazing. But that’s not why you exist.”

Famous enough. Free enough. Calling his own shots. In a world amplifying the noise of never enough, this is what real success looks like.

Ms. Siegel is a freelance journalist covering international affairs, business and travel.

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Yale Takes Itself to Reform School

The American academy isn't known for its self-reflection, but maybe the political criticism of recent years is having a subtle effect. A report last week by Yale University contains a surprising dose of self-examination that dares to agree with what many of its critics have been saying for years.

Readers of these pages know the critique: rising tuition that prices out the middle class; an explosion in bureaucracy that steals resources from instruction; runaway grade inflation; an opaque admissions process that prizes race, gender and identity over achievement; disdain for America's founding and its abiding principles; and a largely left-wing monoculture that discourages honest (or any) debate, among other sins.

Here's the news: Yale's report by an internal Committee on Trust in Higher Education treats those criticisms with respect and in many cases agrees with them. The report by 10 faculty members was commissioned by Yale President Maurice McInnis, and it's hard to believe it came from the same school that not long ago thought wearing an ethnic costume to a Halloween party was an academic felony.

"Today, universities nationwide are facing a historic wave of calls for change," writes Ms. McInnis in her letter responding to the report. "Trust in institutions is waning, and that's not a problem we can brush aside. For higher education to serve the public good, we need the public's trust." The report offers the bracing numbers: Public confidence in higher education in 2024 was 36%, down from 57% in a decade.

The best news here is the lack of defensiveness and arrogance that has been the typical academic response to criticism. The authors don't indulge in the dodge of blaming Donald Trump. They essentially agree with the criticism about rising costs, admissions that lack transparency, and the failure to support free speech on campus and genuine academic freedom.

After a useful summary of the problems, the report offers 20 recommendations that run from the obvious ("lead by example") to the challenging ("grade like we mean it"). On grading, the report recommends a new mean policy of 3.0 from the current norm of nearly all A grades. Older readers will think a standard of 2.0 ought to be the real mean, but 3.0 is progress.

On admissions, the report cites a lack of transparency that it says has ruined the belief that elite universities are a meritocracy. "The top priority in admissions decisions should be academic achievement," the authors write, and they recommend that Yale "reduce preferences for special classes of applicants."

## A faculty study agrees with many of academia's critics, believe it or not.

Most encouraging is a full-throated endorsement of free inquiry and "enhancing open and critical debate on campus." It urges each department, starting in 2026-27, to examine its "intellectual and methodological commitments" as well as the "range of scholarly approaches represented on its faculty" and "the diversity of perspectives in its curriculum."

This could devolve into a cursory review or the token hiring of a visiting conservative professor. But if the reviews are serious, and Ms. McInnis uses her authority on tenure reviews, it could revive the intellectual tradition for which Yale was once noted.

\* \* \*

A report is nothing but words if its recommendations aren't implemented, and that question hangs over this one. President McInnis's response is encouraging, especially on free inquiry. She says she has "asked the deans to convene students and faculty to establish classroom principles that foster intellectual openness."

Yet the reforms will have to be implemented by the same people who had no problem with university failings until they began to cost dollars and public support. The faculty at nearly all elite schools is dominated by progressives who promote and offer tenure to the like-minded. Changing an in-bred monoculture built over decades is difficult, and the trustees should play a role by insisting on follow-through.

Some of our friends on the political right think the rot in the academy is so great that an entire new system needs to be built. We've wondered the same. New programs like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Civic Life and Leadership and the University of Texas Austin's School of Civic Leadership are a welcome antidote and worth supporting.

But American higher education more broadly remains a national asset worth trying to save. The Yale report suggests that maybe it isn't past the point of no return.

## Grocery Socialism in New York City

It took the world decades to conclude that Marxist economics was more Groucho than Karl. Perhaps Mayor Zohran Mamdani's experiment in socialism in New York City will shorten that instruction time.

Groucho Marx socialism is already on display in the initial rollout of the mayor's plans for city-run grocery stores. Mayor Mamdani said last week that the city will build its first store in East Harlem to open by 2029. Estimated cost: \$30 million.

Even in New York City, that cost is out of this world. The city doesn't need to build a store from scratch when space can be refurbished and rented. But the mayor wants a gleaming 9,000 square-foot example of what he called the "warmth of collectivism" in his inaugural address. He wants a store in each of the city's five boroughs by the end of his term at an estimated capital cost of \$70 million.

The plan is for the city to select private operators, albeit with what will be strict rules for pricing and wage rates for employees

(unionized of course), while subsidizing staples like bread and eggs. In other words, price controls.

## The Mayor rolls out his vision for government Mamdani Marts.

means the Mamdani Marts will be able to undercut prices at the private grocery stores and bodegas in their neighborhoods. This kind of collectivist competition isn't what the other store owners would call warm.

Meantime, as Mr. Mamdani builds his socialist grocery chain, the city faces huge budget shortfalls. The New York City Housing Authority says it needs \$78 billion in repairs, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority another \$69 billion. The city budget is estimated to have a deficit of more than \$12 billion through 2027, which is one reason Mr. Mamdani is begging Albany to raise taxes again. A socialist education is expensive.

## New Hope Against Pancreatic Cancer

When former Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse was diagnosed with Stage 4 pancreatic cancer in December, he was given three to four months to live. Now a drug by Revolution Medicines is giving him precious more time with family and provides new hope to patients with the deadly disease.

Revolution Medicines reported last week that patients who took its small molecule pill daraxonrasib lived a median of 13.2 months, compared to 6.7 months for those who received chemotherapy. It reduced the risk of death by 60% compared to the chemotherapy group. Doctors are heralding the results as a revolution in pancreatic cancer treatment.

A six-month survival benefit is considered enormous in any cancer trial. Experimental therapies are considered successful if they extend survival by even a few months. But the benefit is even more significant for pancreatic cancer because treatment options are scarce and the prognosis is bleak. The five-year survival rate for Stage 4 is 3%.

Patients stand better odds if their cancer is caught early (40%) and tumors can be removed. But the usual course of treatment is rounds of chemotherapy and radiation. Unlike for other cancers, immunotherapies and targeted treatments haven't proven effective. RAS mutations that drive tumor growth in 90% of pancreatic patients—as well as a large share of colon and non-small cell lung cancer cases—have long been considered "undruggable." Revolution's daraxonrasib shows otherwise.

The drug works by inhibiting RAS proteins that promote tumor growth. While it can cause unpleasant side effects like skin rashes, chemo-

therapy isn't a walk in the park and suppresses the immune system, making patients susceptible to secondary infections. Mr. Sasse has vouched for the drug's benefits, notwithstanding nasty side effects.

He noted in a recent interview with StatNews published last week that his CA 19-9 levels—a common blood marker of pancreatic cancer—had plunged from north of 8,000 to about 374. "That's huge. Something like 60% tumor volume," he said. Some in the glass-is-half-empty crowd say the drug's survival benefit isn't meaningful since patients are likely to die anyway.

But treatment advances always occur at the margin, and most patients would cherish another six months of life. New therapeutic advances could come along that further extend life. Revolution is running trials on a next-generation RAS inhibitor that could be even more effective, as well as testing daraxonrasib in non-small cell lung cancer.

An experimental drug that targets another protein involved in pancreatic cancer slashed the risk of death by 38% when combined with chemotherapy, Northwestern University reported this week. Twice as many patients who received the drug were alive after one year than in the control group. Combining treatments has the potential to improve survival.

Ditto advances in AI, which have shown the potential to detect pancreatic cancer on CT scans at earlier stages and with greater sensitivity than can radiologists. The biggest impediment to cancer progress is a defeatist mindset that extending lives isn't worth the cost. Let's hope that view doesn't take hold at the Food and Drug Administration.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Tariffs Have Long Been a Corruption Magnet

Paul Rahe's justifications for tariffs fail under scrutiny ("There's a Case for Tariffs," op-ed, April 16).

Mr. Rahe assumes tariffs boost resiliency, but recent history shows the opposite. National security might justify narrow trade restrictions, but tariffs have not insulated Americans from economic disruptions and have frequently made things worse. The baby-formula crisis of 2022 and auto-makers' recent struggles to obtain aluminum, each triggered by the sudden closure of a tariff-protected U.S. factory, show that localized supply chains are vulnerable to local shocks—and tariffs block alternatives. Research from the pandemic finds that globalized supply chains performed better and adjusted faster than nationalized ones.

Mr. Rahe also errs on tariffs' ability to promote manufacturing. Decades of protection failed to create thriving U.S. steel, shipbuilding, textile and footwear industries. More recent duties on solar panels did the same. With around half of imports

being manufacturing inputs, tariffs raise American producers' costs and undermine competitiveness. Combined with uncertainty surrounding executive branch tariffs, this explains why surveys consistently reveal manufacturers opposed to new protectionism.

Mr. Rahe is correct about the intrusiveness of income taxes, but tariffs can't replace them because import volumes are far too small. Their invisibility, meanwhile, isn't the benefit Mr. Rahe thinks. Since the 19th century, tariffs have been a breeding ground for rent-seeking and corruption and have persisted after decades of failure, precisely because their costs are hidden and diffuse. Transparency is a hallmark of good tax policy; opacity is its enemy.

ALFREDO CARRILLO OBRERON and SCOTT LINCINGIO  
Washington

Mr. Carrillo Obreron is a trade policy analyst and Mr. Lincingio is vice president for economics and trade at the Cato Institute

## Democracy Has Been Weakened in Hungary

Your editorial "Democracy Lives in Europe, After All" (April 14) has been widely cited by media outlets in Hungary as evidence that concerns about democratic backsliding under Viktor Orbán were unfounded. This interpretation, however, rests on a false equivalence. It conflates rhetorical claims about "fascism" with well-documented concerns about institutional erosion.

Hungary's recent election result demonstrates that political change remains possible. It doesn't, however, invalidate years of evidence regarding the weakening of judicial independence, the concentration of media ownership and the use of

state resources in ways that disadvantaged the ruling party.

A system can remain formally democratic while exhibiting significant distortions in competition, accountability and the rule of law. The fact that voters ultimately removed Mr. Orbán doesn't erase those distortions; it shows they weren't insurmountable.

The more important lesson is that democratic institutions can be weakened without being entirely dismantled—and that recognizing this distinction is essential if such systems are to be strengthened.

IDLIKO MODRA  
Budapest

## How the FDA Should Handle Drug Standards

Your April 15 editorial rightly raises troubling questions about the FDA's handling of Replimune's RPI ("Dr. Makary and Mr. Hyde at the FDA").

The people most harmed by this rejection aren't investors or executives, but patients with advanced melanoma who have already failed anti-PD-1 treatment. For them, time isn't an abstraction, and "more study" may mean no chance at all.

RPI received breakthrough therapy designation, yet the FDA still rejected it while demanding more definitive randomized evidence. Reasonable people can debate that standard. What they shouldn't accept is a process that appears unclear, inconsistent and shielded from public scrutiny.

If the FDA believed only a randomized trial would support approval, it should have said so plainly from the beginning. And if the agency would not convene an advisory committee before rejecting RPI, it should at

least permit a belated public advisory committee review now.

The FDA preserves credibility not by shifting standards, but by applying them clearly, consistently and fairly—especially when patients' lives hang in the balance.

ARIE BLITZ, M.D.  
Weslaco, Texas

As a practicing oncologist for more than 40 years and a participant in many clinical trials, some with melanoma, I wish to take issue with your editorial stance regarding the FDA's rejection of RPI. I have reviewed the publication of the study results of the drug and am not convinced that the study shows that the drug is more beneficial than the use of other chemicals injected into melanoma sites have been in the past.

The history of attempts to cause shrinkage of sites of melanoma by injecting chemical agents is long and varied, with mixed results. The study would have been more indicative of a positive effect of RPI if there had been separate arm treated with a different tumor-injected agent.

CHARLES DUGGS, M.D.  
Boise, Idaho

## Government Is Watching You

Woe betide the Chinese national who takes Cameron Berg's April 14 op-ed to heart ("AI Is Bound to Subvert Communism"). Who among them believes anything they put into an internet-connected digital medium is "private" from government? Mr. Berg's argument dissolves upon separation from the western ideological vacuum in which it is so delicately couched.

I don't even take conversations with AI chatbots hosted in the U.S. as private. In contrast to an encrypted conversation with another human being, where there is some ostensible presumption of privacy, when I'm speaking to a chatbot my counterpart is the property of a commercial entity with commercial interests. Recent events have shown those interests as amenable to government influence in the U.S. as they surely must be everywhere else.

TRAPIER MARSHALL  
Raleigh, N.C.

## Freedom Through Federalism

The difference in tax approaches underscores the beauty of America's federalist system—where states compete for workers, residents and businesses ("The Growing State Tax and Jobs Divide," Review & Outlook, April 15). Federalism isn't just why low-tax states are winning—it's why this competition exists at all, and why Americans have the freedom to pick their preferred approach.

If you live in a progressive state, you will pay more in taxes, but federalism is also the system that makes it possible to move to a lower-tax state in the first place, and that's a wonderful thing. It's federalism that preserves our freedom to choose what we think is the best fit for us.

CAMILLE WALSH  
State Policy Network  
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Free Expression  
From WSJ Opinion

A daily newsletter on life, politics and culture. Edited by Matthew Hennessey and featuring columnists Matthew Continetti, Kyle Smith, Louise Perry, Ben Sasse, James B. Meigs, John J. Miller, Meghan Cox Gurdon and other contributors.

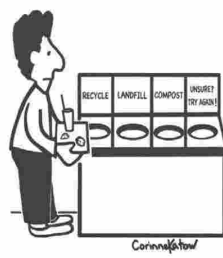


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Pepper ...  
And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Corningston

OPINION

# The Economics of Religion

By Roland Fryer

When I was a postdoctoral student at the University of Chicago, Gary Becker was one of my mentors. He had a way of reducing complicated social institutions to simple economic questions. After a trip to Rome, he mentioned meeting Pope John Paul II. I asked what they talked about. Smiling, Becker said he'd asked the pope, "How's business?"

As someone who spent Sundays in an African Methodist Episcopal church with my grandmother, this felt like blasphemy. Religion, as I joyfully taught my second-graders in Sunday school, was about faith and community—something beyond transactions. But Becker had a gift for finding the market inside any mystery.

Religion is one of the most successful enterprises in human history. Churches in the U.S. alone collect well over \$100 billion a year in donations. Billions of people globally are

## Faiths thrive when they demand more of their participants—and so do their broader societies.

adherents to a religion. The institutions are durable. The customers are loyal. And the product—moral structure, meaning, answers to life's hardest questions—serves an essentially universal demand.

Which makes for a strange market. Industries filling universal needs tend to consolidate into a handful of players. It happened to commercial aviation, credit cards and social media. Religion went in the other direction, toward many traditions and hundreds if not thousands of denominations—and a simultaneous paradox: almost no successful new entrants. Almost no successful new religion, but very few last.

Market structure is one of several features of religion that resist easy

explanation. Why does religion persist despite asking so much—time, money, behavioral constraint, belief in claims that resist verification? Why does the market fragment rather than consolidate? And what exactly does religion produce? The answers have something to say about American society.

I grew up in the South, where not going to church made you strange. Now I live in Cambridge, Mass., where going to church does. Moving between those worlds, I've never been able to treat religion as background noise. It has always demanded explanation. That instinct got me into trouble in graduate school, when I was pushed out of a Bible study for asking too many questions.

In the church I grew up in, people didn't only show up for doctrine. They showed up for needs. A man might ask for help with his electricity bill. A woman would ask for wisdom in dealing with a prodigal son. The church provided more than belief. It provided mutual insurance: a network of people who, in moments of need, would show up for one another.

Such systems have a familiar problem: free-riding. If the benefits of membership are available at a low cost, people have an incentive to take without contributing. Over time, the system breaks down. The mutual aid degrades. The community hollows out. This isn't unique to religion—it afflicts any organization that produces collective goods. But religion, across traditions and centuries, has converged on a remarkably consistent solution: make participation costly.

This is the central insight of Laurence Iannaccone, whose paper "Sacrifice and Stigma" (1992) reframed how social scientists think about religious behavior. The demands religion places on its members aren't barriers to participation. They are the mechanism by which participation becomes valuable.

Muslims fast during Ramadan. Observant Jews set aside the Sabbath. Latter-day Saints tithed and



internalized deeply enough to change behavior when no one is watching.

Mr. Barro and Ms. McCleary also found that participation is higher where there is more competition among denominations. Monopoly religions, like monopoly firms, get complacent. The extraordinary pluralism of American religious life isn't a defect. It's why the market stays vital.

Or stayed vital. Church membership, which hovered near 70% of American adults for much of the 20th century, fell below 50% in 2020. Weekly attendance has dropped from 42% two decades ago to around 30% today.

Alexis de Tocqueville warned that without voluntary associations—churches, civic groups, local organizations—individuals would become atomized and government would fill the vacuum with what he called "soft despotism." Of all these associations, he considered religion the most important.

What is filling the space religion is vacating? Political identity. Wellness culture. Online community. These all feature low barriers to entry and exit. You can join a political tribe in an afternoon and leave it the same week. The cost is low. So is the quality of the mutual insurance. When your rent is due or your diagnosis is dire or scary, your Twitter following isn't coming over.

Economics can go a long way in explaining why religion persists. What it can't fully explain is why, in moments of crisis, people turn not only to each other but to something beyond each other.

I am still trying to square my faith with my discipline. The tension between the question and the commitment isn't a problem to be solved—even if, sometimes, it gets you expelled from Bible study. It is, I've come to think, what faith actually is.

*Mr. Fryer, a Journal contributor, is a professor of economics at Harvard and founder of Equal Opportunity Ventures and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.*

serve missions. Christians gather, give and organize their lives around shared rituals like Easter. The details differ. The economics don't.

When participation requires visible sacrifice—time, money, behavioral constraint—commitment becomes observable. And observable commitment solves a deep problem of trust. In a community built on mutual aid, you can't verify what a stranger believes. You can observe what he sacrifices. The person who shows up every week and gives regularly has demonstrated something about his willingness to contribute. That demonstration is the glue that holds the community together.

Mr. Iannaccone formalized this as a club-good problem. Religious communities produce things—solidarity, insurance, belonging—that are valuable only if members contribute. High costs screen out free-riders and raise the quality of the group. The community becomes more valuable precisely because entry is hard.

The data are consistent with this. Using survey data from several decades, Mr. Iannaccone documented a striking pattern: The more a tradition demands, the more intensely its members participate. This isn't causal proof—stricter traditions may

attract more committed people—but the pattern is consistent. And there is at least one natural experiment: A 2025 paper showed that when the Catholic Church undertook sweeping reforms after Vatican II—moving Mass from Latin to the local language, softening centuries-old doctrinal positions, loosening practices—attendance fell substantially across Catholic countries, declining about 20 percentage points more than in Protestant countries between 1965 and 2015. Lower cost, weaker community.

Religion also produces something measurable. My colleagues Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary examined data from 59 countries for a 2003 paper. Belief in heaven and hell is positively associated with economic growth. Nations where these beliefs are widespread tend to grow faster.

The mechanism appears to run through behavior: Internalized belief shapes work ethic, honesty and willingness to cooperate with strangers. More striking is what happens when you separate belief from attendance.

Church participation is negatively associated with growth, once you account for belief. Sitting in the pew, on its own, does nothing. What drives the effect is conviction—belief

## Swalwell That Ends Well? Democrats Try to Forget



By Alyssa Finley

Did Democrats know that Eric Swalwell, the seven-term San Francisco Bay Area congressman who resigned last week amid allegations of sexual misconduct, was what older generations would call a sociopath? Their putative shock calls to mind the 2014 novel "You Should Have Known." The therapist protagonist counsels her clients to stop ignoring signs that their husbands are cheating on them—and is later stunned when she discovers that her own husband is a philanthropist sociopath and she ignored the signs.

Democrats say Mr. Swalwell deceived them. "I fell for it," said Arizona Sen. Ruben Gallego, a close Swalwell friend. He "became very good at being a predator" and "extremely proficient at lying to us." Yet Mr. Gallego acknowledged that he had heard Mr. Swalwell was "flirty" with women. (Mr. Swalwell has denied sexual misconduct and acknowledged "mistakes in judgment.")

Press reports suggest Mr. Swalwell's disreputable behavior wasn't a secret in the party. "The broad contours of Swalwell's alleged behavior, if not the specifics, did not come as a surprise to many working in and around politics, especially in Washington," Politico now tells us.

Even if Democrats didn't know, they probably should have known and have only themselves to blame if his misdeeds cost them. Still, people see what they want to see—and avert their eyes from what they don't. That's as true in politics as in personal relationships.

Such self-deception may help explain how Mr. Swalwell became a Democratic darling and the front-runner in the race to succeed Gov. Gavin Newsom. At the same time, his relentless pursuit of Donald Trump lent him a cloak of political protection, perhaps even among the liberal women on whom he allegedly preyed.

If you persuade yourself that Mr. Trump is a grave threat to democracy, you may be inclined to excuse or ignore the indiscretions of those trying to take him down. How could a congressman who denounced Mr. Trump as a "liar" and "shadowy op-

erator" be those very things? How could a congressman who said during Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings that sexual-assault victims "deserve to be heard" have his own trail of victims? "We have to believe all women," Mr. Swalwell said then.

An aura of political invincibility and anti-Trump star power might have fed Mr. Swalwell's impunity.

### He 'became . . . extremely proficient at lying to us,' says the ex-congressman's close friend Sen. Gallego.

Nobody in his party was calling him out for his behavior, and even the women he allegedly exploited didn't make a fuss. Mr. Gallego conceded that he may be "shouting he talked" to Mr. Swalwell about the rumors that were going around. Liberals insist that "bystanders" have a duty to report or confront sexual miscreants. How many Democratic bystanders failed that test?

Democratic strategist Mike Trujillo in December wrote on social media that "folks know he slept with many of his interns while he was married, sexually harassed others while engaged, has a ton of weird texts late at night saved on former interns phones." He says he had heard stories about Mr. Swalwell's inappropriate behavior with women as early as 2017.

It took two liberal social-media "influencers" to track down stories from women about their negative experiences and spoon-feed them to CNN before the mainstream media reported them. And if talk of Mr. Swalwell's alleged exploits hadn't been swirling on social media, would reporters have investigated or reported them?

The accusations against Mr. Swalwell came out only when airing them was necessary to protect the Democratic Party. Had the media sat on the story, it might have blown up on Democrats if Mr. Swalwell advanced through the June 2 jungle primary to face Republican Steve Hilton in the general election.

He was useful to them, until he wasn't. And then he had to go. This

is a pattern in the Democratic Party. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo became a Democratic hero in 2020 because of his antagonism toward Mr. Trump over Covid. He was swiftly swept aside in 2021 after allegations of inappropriate behavior with women were made public. Democrats insisted that Joe Biden was as sharp as ever until his disastrous debate performance proved otherwise. Then he had to go. Like Mr. Gallego, they insist they were fooled back then.

Beyond shaking up the California governor's race, the main effect of the Swalwell scandal will be to underscore Democrats' lack of credibility and principles. Mr. Hilton says this "whiff of decay and corruption" could help him. Many Americans dislike Mr. Trump's boorish behavior, but they dislike the left's moral posturing even more.

Mr. Trump doesn't actually purport to be Jesus, and his supporters are under no illusion that he is. But antagonists like Mr. Swalwell hold themselves out as righteous, and Democrats too often turn a blind eye to their failings. Such self-deception will come back to bite them.

## The Justices Can Rein In an Overzealous SEC

By Nick Morgan

The Supreme Court on Monday confronts a bizarre legal theory that has become a favorite of the Securities and Exchange Commission: "victimless disgorgement." In *Sripetch v. SEC*, the commission insists it can strip defendants of their earnings—which it labels "ill-gotten gains"—even when no investor has lost a dime.

Take the case of J.D. Jordan, a client of my organization, the Investor Choice Advocates Network. No "wolf of Wall Street," he was a busi-

nessman invested in convertible debt. Before selling the resulting stock, he prudently hired a lawyer to confirm his transactions complied with securities laws.

The SEC disagreed. Years later, the commission sued Jordan for selling unregistered securities—a strict-liability provision violation that requires no proof of fraudulent intent. The SEC didn't allege he defrauded anyone, or that a single investor lost money buying the stock he sold. Those buyers received exactly what they paid for.

Yet the SEC demanded Jordan

"disgorge" his profits. With no victims to compensate, this money would likely disappear into the U.S. Treasury. This isn't restitution; it's a penalty masquerading as equity.

Jordan died late last year, and the SEC's pursuit of his estate continued until last week. On the eve of oral argument in *Sripetch*, the commission quietly authorized staff to dismiss the case. That the commission held on this long, chasing the assets of a deceased man to remedy a "harm" no living or dead person suffered, speaks volumes about the principles at stake.

In *SEC v. Barry*, the commission pursued Brenda Barry and others for similar registration violations. No one alleged Ms. Barry had committed fraud, and no identifiable victims claimed to have lost money. Yet the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled last year that the SEC could demand disgorgement, eviscerating the requirement that equitable remedies serve a remedial purpose.

This aggression defies guidance from the Supreme Court. In *Litu v. SEC* (2020), the justices held that disgorgement is permissible as an equitable remedy if it is "awarded for victims." The logic was simple: Equity is about making victims whole. Otherwise, stripping a defendant of profits is simply punishment, which is the domain of stat-

utes and penalties, not of the flexible powers of equity.

Since *Litu*, federal courts have split on victimless disgorgement. The Second Circuit, in *SEC v. Govil* (2023), faithfully held that the SEC can't obtain disgorgement without showing that investors suffered "pecuniary harm." But the Ninth

### The commission uses 'disgorgement' to punish investors by compensating nonexistent 'victims.'

Circuit (where *Sripetch* originated) and the First Circuit have gone rogue, allowing the SEC to collect disgorgement as if *Litu* never happened.

Defenders of the SEC's overreach argue that if the commission can't seize profits in victimless cases, fraudsters will be allowed to keep their loot. They conjure images of insider traders walking away with millions because the specific counterparties to their trades can't be identified.

Yet Congress has already empowered the SEC to deprive wrongdoers of profits. Under federal securities statutes, the SEC can seek civil penalties tied to the "gross amount of

pecuniary gain" resulting from a violation. This authority exists to ensure that fraud doesn't pay, even when restitution is impossible.

So why does the SEC fight so hard to use disgorgement instead? Because statutory penalties come with guardrails. To win a penalty—especially one calculated on "pecuniary gain"—the SEC has to meet higher procedural standards, including the right to a jury trial and strict statutory caps. Disgorgement, by "harm" as the commission has been an "equitable" cleanup tool in cases decided by a judge with looser constraints.

The agency prefers the power to punish with fewer procedural protections for the defendant. It wants to claim the moral high ground of "compensating victims," even when victims exist. Disgorgement as if *Litu* never happened, the Supreme Court has the opportunity to close this loophole.

That ruling will come too late for J.D. Jordan. But thousands of other entrepreneurs and investors will benefit once the fiction of victimless disgorgement is set aside and the SEC focuses on punishing fraud with actual victims.

*Mr. Morgan is president of the Investor Choice Advocates Network, which represents the estate of J.D. Jordan, and a former senior trial counsel at the SEC.*

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# COMMENT

## Editorials

### Hormuz passage is global concern, not just contention for belligerents

Every so often the global economy is reminded that it still runs, quite literally, through a narrow passage of water.

The Strait of Hormuz is one of those places where geography and economics collide with geopolitical forces. When it is open, the world scarcely notices. When it is closed, everyone pays — at the pump, in inflation data, in stock markets and eventually in global stability itself.

Tehran said that the Strait of Hormuz was blocked since Saturday evening and will not reopen until the United States lifts its naval blockade on the waterway. That happened shortly after Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi said on Friday the strait would remain "completely open" to commercial shipping during the current truce with the US, in line with the announcement of the ceasefire in Lebanon.

The turning point was Washington saying on Friday that the US naval blockade would "remain in full force", noting that the US would not lift it until the country makes a deal with Iran.

This brinkmanship over the opening and closing of the strait is not merely a regional security issue. It is a textbook case of how a regional conflict can metastasize into global economic risk.

For the belligerents in the Middle East crisis, the strait has become leverage. For Washington, in particular, maritime access is both a strategic necessity, though it claims otherwise, and a credibility test, as along with Israel, the US started the conflict that has led to all that has happened.

But here is the larger point: once a critical choke point is turned into a bargaining chip, the costs are borne globally while the leverage remains local. That is an old story in economics — private incentives, public costs. Oil prices have already reacted sharply to every rumor of closure and reopening. Shipping insurers have raised premiums. Tankers hesitate or reroute. Energy-importing economies from Asia to Europe absorb the shock in the form of higher costs.

The world learned this lesson in the 1970s:

energy shocks do not stay in the energy sector. They ripple outward into food prices, transport costs, industrial output and consumer sentiment.

In that sense, using the Strait of Hormuz as leverage by either side is a form of coercion directed at the entire world. This is why Beijing's recent diplomatic proposals deserve attention.

China has put forward a four-point proposal on peace and development in the Middle East, alongside a five-point initiative that it proposed with Pakistan emphasizing a ceasefire, de-escalation, humanitarian relief, restoration of maritime access and renewed dialogue. The essential economic logic behind the proposal and initiative is straightforward: global public goods such as secure sea lanes should not be subordinated to the tactical calculations of wartime actors.

Beijing has repeatedly stressed that the strait should remain open and that all parties must avoid escalation. The Strait of Hormuz is too systemically important to be weaponized. But the Middle East crisis has prompted it to be treated as such. In future geopolitical conflicts in other parts of the world, the likelihood of other actors emulating this simple-but-consequential practice has increased significantly.

The immediate actors may believe they are maximizing bargaining power, but they are simultaneously exporting instability to every oil-importing country. The belligerents should realize that using the strait as a coercive tool is profoundly destructive, and serves no party's interest. China's calls for dialogue, a ceasefire and the protection of maritime routes should be heeded. The world economy is fragile enough even without turning one of its most vital arteries into a hostage.

Threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz is not a sign of strength. Keeping it open is not just a naval objective or a diplomatic talking point. It is a basic obligation to a world that is already far too interconnected to pretend that someone else's crisis can remain someone else's problem.

### Marathon of innovation has no finish line

The half-marathon in Beijing's E-Town economic and technological development zone on Sunday showcased a leap in the capabilities of Chinese-made humanoid robots.

The winner of the race, autonomous-navigation robot "Lightning", developed by Honor, completed the race in an impressive 50 minutes and 26 seconds, despite a minor mishap near the finish line, surpassing the human world record.

"Lightning" incorporates Honor's proprietary integrated joint modules, delivering a peak torque of 400 Nm. Its liquid-cooling system features cooling channels that penetrate deep into the motor's interior like capillaries to dissipate heat, while a high-power liquid pump generates a heat-exchange flow exceeding 4 liters per minute. This design effectively resolves the thermal management challenges associated with high-load operation.

The event's evolution from its inaugural edition, which focused on technical feasibility, to this year's emphasis on capabilities, is a testament to China's rapid technological development.

In contrast to last year's race, when navigation required remote control, many humanoid robot competitors this year are competing with fully autonomous navigation. Teams that have "discarded the remote control" now make up 40 percent of the field — demonstrating their ability to perform localization, obstacle avoidance and path planning. This marks a big improvement in their autonomous operation capabilities.

Beyond the track, there is a layer of invisible infrastructure that allowed the competing robots to run with greater ease and precision. Qianxin SI, leveraging the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, provided centimeter-level high-precision positioning for over two-thirds of the autonomous navigation teams. Meanwhile, the telecommunication service providers deployed a three-dimensional event network based on 5G-Advanced infrastructure and 5G "smart slicing" technology, delivering millisecond-level response times and a communication environment with near-zero lag. This forward-looking new infrastructure is precisely what made the humanoid robot half-marathon a reality.

These improvements are a reflection of the broader progress in China's robotics industry. The shift from isolated breakthroughs to testing comprehensive capabilities underscores the sector's transition from theoretical possibility to practical application.

In terms of industry scale, data released by the

international research firm Omdia show that global shipments of humanoid robots reached 13,000 units in 2025, with China accounting for 90 percent of the total. Chinese companies swept the top six spots on the shipment rankings.

This rapid scaling has been driven not only by cost and pricing advantages but also by the comprehensive strengths forged through a robust supply chain and supporting capabilities. Not long ago, industry insiders estimated that the cost of custom-developing a humanoid robot in Shenzhen could be as low as 2 million yuan (\$282,000). Supported by the availability of core components and comprehensive engineering capabilities, the barriers to innovation in humanoid robotics continue to fall.

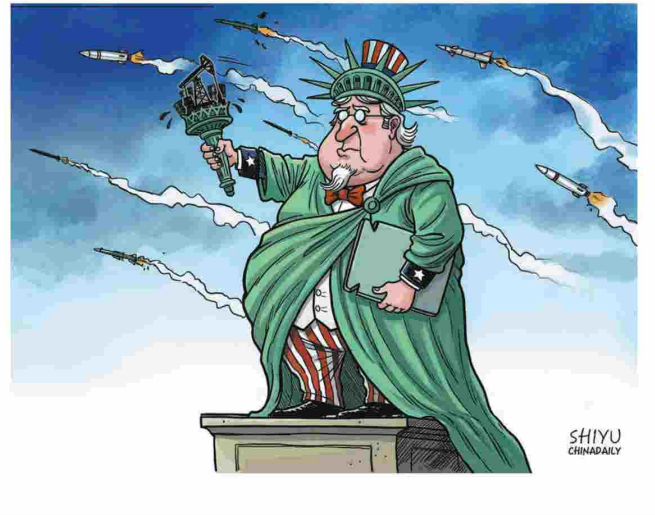
Over the past two years, domestic humanoid robots in China have achieved substantial progress in both foundational software — such as vision-language-action models and embodied world models — and core hardware, including frameless torque motors and harmonic reducers. Through continual innovation, many teams have developed unique strengths and carved out their own positions in the competitive market.

That said, the remarkable performance of humanoid robots is inseparable from China's vast "innovation laboratory". And in an increasing number of factories, humanoid robots are tightening screws and moving materials, becoming an indispensable part of a new human-robot collaborative manufacturing model.

On a broader scale, government departments at various levels have introduced strong policy support and well-crafted initiatives — such as building open-source communities for humanoid robots, releasing dataset standards, establishing government investment funds, and publishing application scenario catalogs. These measures have enabled China's humanoid robotics industry to rapidly transition from technical validation to real-world deployment.

The marathon of innovation has no finish line. The defining feature of the humanoid robot half-marathon is the principle of promoting research, industry, and application through competition. The focus has shifted from "whether they can finish the race" to "how fast they can run" — and the pace of technological progress is even more thrilling than the race itself. By staying committed to independent innovation, strengthening self-reliance, and leveraging the advantages of a vast market and diverse application scenarios, China is poised to achieve even better results in this innovation marathon.

Shi Yu



## Opinion Line

### Warship deal and Strait transit raise alarms over Tokyo's course

There was a time when Japan seemed to export Toyotas and opportunities. Now it's exporting warships — and a kind of deja vu.

On Saturday, Japan and Australia inked a \$6.5 billion warship deal. This is not just another military contract — it is Japan's most strategically consequential arms export since the country began doubling down on attempts to loosen its postwar restraints in recent years.

And if you listen closely, there's a hum beneath the surface — not just of ship engines, but of history.

The timing is almost too neat. As a Japanese destroyer, JS *Ikazuchi*, transited through the Taiwan Strait on Friday eliciting stern, justified responses from Beijing, Tokyo is simultaneously unveiling itself as a new player in the global arms bazaar. It's as if Japan is auditioning for two roles at once: the so-called "guardian" of regional "stability" and supplier of the tools that make instability more likely.

The Japanese government under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi casts a long, unmistakable shadow over this double-faced play. If this is the trailer, you can already guess the tone of the feature film.

The script, intriguingly, has an old plotline with a modern rewrite. During World War II, Japanese militarism formed a grim economic loop — "sustaining war through war". Occu-

pied territories were drained to fuel the machinery that enabled further expansion.

Today's version might have not yet involved territorial conquest, but by scaling up domestic weapons production and liberalizing its exports, the Takaichi government is creating a self-reinforcing cycle: sell more weapons, justify higher military spending, build more weapons, and repeat.

It's capitalism with a militaristic edge — less "Made in Japan" and more "Armed by Japan".

Unlike European nations that often rely on US military contractors, Japan appears determined to keep the profits — and the power — at home. Its advanced manufacturing sector, once synonymous with consumer innovation, is being repurposed into a strategic asset for military expansion. The assembly line in some Japanese big-name companies is still humming; it's just producing a different kind of product. Some of these companies were also the backbone of Japan's war machine in the past.

And with a NATO delegation visiting Tokyo immediately before the arms deal was announced, the message was almost theatrical in its staging. Look, Japan seemed to be saying, we're not just a "pacifist" nation with a complicated past; we're a "reliable" partner, a capable producer, and — if necessary — an actor willing to step

onto the stage.

The warship transiting through the Taiwan Strait on the last day of the NATO delegation's visit to Japan was a signal to NATO: we're doers, not talkers.

That kind of signaling may play well in certain strategic circles, but it raises the temperature in a region already prone to anxieties.

Symbolism matters. And in Asia, history has a long memory and a short fuse.

For many in the Asia-Pacific region, the sight of Japanese warships operating assertively beyond Japan's territorial waters is not easily divorced from the past. The optics can feel unsettlingly familiar — like hearing *Umi Yukaba*, a popular song associated with the Imperial Navy of Japan in World War II stressing loyalty to the Emperor and readiness to die, played in a new key.

The rise of a new type of militarism in Japan has shown the potential to mislead the country to repeat its history. That should invite scrutiny and vigilance of the region and beyond. What Japan seeks is by no means "normalization" but a break from its postwar restraints.

History doesn't repeat itself neatly. It rhymes, it mutates, it adapts. And sometimes, it sails back into view — this time with a \$6.5 billion price tag.

—LI YIANG, CHINA DAILY

## What They Say

### Targeted domestic demand policies taking effect

**Editor's note:** China's GDP registered 5 percent year-on-year growth in the first quarter of 2026. Its total retail sales of consumer goods grew by 2.4 percent, and service consumption increased rapidly. Su Jian, professor of the School of Economics at Peking University, spoke to National Business Daily about what the data signal. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

The performance of consumption during the first quarter of this year shows that China's overall economy is recovering, and that consumer confidence is gradually picking up. Going by tax revenue and bank credit figures, China's economy entered a stage of full recovery in 2024. The country introduced a package of policies to boost domestic demand, and these policies are taking effect.

The 5 percent year-on-year GDP growth in the first quarter of this year is 2.6 percentage points higher than the growth rate of the total retail sales of consumer goods.

Yet the fact that the total retail sales of consumer goods registered a 2.4 percent growth rate amid the complex and challenging domestic and international economic environment shows that consumer confidence is on the mend and people's willingness to spend is rising.

Two things can be read from the rapid growth of service consumption in the first quarter. First, people's consumption demand has evolved as household incomes and

living standards rise, and they are showing a greater preference for high-quality and service-oriented consumption. Second, by lifting the institutional restrictions on service consumption, China has unleashed a new round of consumption demand.

For example, large-scale soccer events at the local level were rarely heard of in the past. But now, Suchao and Xiangchao, grassroots football leagues launched in Jiangsu and Hunan provinces, have gained huge popularity and helped boost the catering, accommodation and tourism sectors. Their success also shows that service consumption still has considerable room for growth.

That the potential of new forms of consumption is being unlocked shows that consumers are now willing to pursue more diversified consumption experiences.

Such new types of consumption will gradually replace the old ones. Businesses, which are looking for ways to reduce employment costs, should seize this opportunity and reform their operations. New busi-

ness forms powered by new technologies, such as unattended stores, warehouse clubs and "lights-out factories", are emerging in cities, helping businesses reduce operating costs and expand sales channels.

But the key to boosting consumption capacity lies in increasing household incomes. Stronger willingness to spend requires better consumer expectations.

The most direct way to improve expectations is to strengthen the social security system, such as by further reducing the burden of education and medical expenses on young people.

In addition, it's necessary to formulate scientific and reasonable plans to increase household incomes. This involves two tasks: Growing the pie and then dividing it fairly. To this end, the income distribution system needs to be reformed to reduce the tax burden on enterprises and, through transfer payments and other means, ease the pressure on local governments. A package of policies is also needed to raise household disposable income.

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# VIEWS

Biljana Vankovska

## Governance powered by the goals of people



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

In today's era of complex global challenges, measuring governance success has never been more crucial. The West seems to have lost its way, with liberal democracy in crisis. In contrast, China remains an inspiring model in many respects.

Reflecting on Chinese President Xi Jinping's insights in "Establishing and Practicing a Correct Understanding of Governance Performance", one core question stands out: "For whom is governance performance practiced?" Western leaders have forgotten this crucial issue and indulged in self-interest oligarchy.

But China's philosophy is unequivocal — governance is for the people. This is not merely a slogan, but the foundational principle that guides every policy, every project, and every evaluation of an official's work. Xi's writings consistently emphasize the Party's core purpose: serving the people. Governance performance is not an end in itself, nor a metric for personal advancement. Its value is derived solely from its contribution to the people's well-being.

This understanding of governance performance acts as a crucial compass, steering officials away from "image projects" and "vanity metrics" — those flashy but hollow initiatives designed for career advancement — toward the less visible but far more meaningful work of addressing people's needs.

Therefore, true performance is found in solving the "pinhead and thread" issues of daily life. This can involve ensuring a family in a remote village has electricity, helping a young graduate find dignified employment, or creating a clean, safe community for the elderly.

These actions build trust, earn the genuine appreciation of people and provide hope for future generations.

A correct view of governance embraces a long-term perspective, recognizing that the most valuable contributions are those whose fruits are harvested by future generations. This philosophy challenges the myopic pursuit of short-term results and encourages officials at all levels to invest in foundational work such as environmental restoration, scientific research, educational reform, and institutional strengthening. These "hidden merits" may not make headlines but are essential for sustainable and high-quality development. Evaluating performance through this lens requires patience

and wisdom from both officials and appraisal systems. It means valuing a reforested hillside as much as a new industrial park, and prioritizing a robust public health service over a one-time local economic stimulus.

People from my part of the world may ask: What is the guarantee that this people-centered view will prevail? This is because lies and propaganda dominate the political discourse in the West. Xi identifies a spirit — the commitment to the public-serving mission — as a decisive factor. The spirit helps officials transcend personal interests and align their actions with the goals of the people.

Reliance on individual morality must be complemented by clear legal rules, a normative framework and

strong institutions. In China, governance performance is embedded in the very architecture of evaluation and accountability. It means refining assessment mechanisms to listen to the people; avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach that can distort priorities; rewarding foundational work and enforcing accountability.

Why should this be shared with the world? Simply because the quest for a correct understanding of governance performance is not unique to China.

Worldwide, citizens are demanding that their governments deliver tangible improvements in their lives, not just statistics and propaganda.

The Chinese emphasis on "people-centered development" offers a valuable perspective for this global

conversation. It reminds us that governance, at its best, is stewardship.

Officials are entrusted with power and resources not for self-aggrandizement, but as temporary custodians tasked with improving the collective condition. The ultimate report card is written not in internal memos, but in the lived experiences of the people — their security, prosperity, dignity, and hope for the future.

From my perspective in the Western Balkans, the question "For whom is governance performance practiced?" resonates deeply with a generation grappling with disillusionment.

Many young people see politics as a distant arena of elite competition, where performance is often measured by ribbon-cutting ceremonies or short-term patronage, not by lasting improvements in people's quality of life. The result is a persistent brain drain.

This is why Xi's understanding of governance performance holds universal appeal. When young people see that policies are evaluated by whether they solve real problems such as affordable housing, digital infrastructure and green jobs, they re-engage.

They recognize that governance is not about who holds power, but how that power is used to empower others.

In this sense, the Chinese governance philosophy offers a valuable reference point: development must be judged by whether it enables the next generation to build their lives with dignity and hope. This is not an Eastern or Western value: it is a human one.

As China embarks on the new journey of the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30), reinforcing a correct understanding of governance performance is both timely and essential.

"For whom is governance performance practiced?" The answer to this question must forever echo: For the people.

This truth transcends borders, offering young generations in the Western Balkans and beyond a compass: governance that empowers their dignity, opportunity and future is governance worth believing in. When performance is truly practiced for the people, it ceases to be an administrative concept and becomes the living engine of shared prosperity. This is the enduring value that speaks to the very purpose of political power in any society, at any time.

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Tian Kun

## China-Africa ties moving toward higher-quality growth

Mozambican President Daniel Francisco Chapo's visit to China from April 16 to 22 reflects evolving dynamics in China-Africa relations.

Trade growth remains important, but the focus is increasingly on how market access, investment and industrial cooperation can work together to support Africa's modernization.

The key question is whether such engagement can support progress in processing, logistics and skills development, and contribute to a new phase in China-Africa economic cooperation.

The latest trade figures show the scale and momentum of that relationship. According to China's customs data, China-Africa trade reached a record \$348 billion in 2025, up 17.7 percent year-on-year.

China's exports to Africa stood at \$225 billion, while its imports from Africa reached \$123 billion. China has also continued to widen market access for African goods. Chinese President Xi Jinping has announced that from May 1 China will fully implement zero-tariff treatment for 53 African countries that have diplomatic ties with Beijing.

Higher-quality growth in China-Africa trade ties should be understood as a broader opportunity, not just larger volume. It means bringing more competitive African goods into the Chinese market, supporting more local processing in Africa, and creating more jobs and skills across the continent. That is in line with the vision of shared modernization advanced under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

Mozambique is well placed to benefit from that opening. In 2024, bilateral trade between China and Mozambique reached \$5.21 billion.

Since Dec 1, 2024, Mozambique has enjoyed zero-tariff treatment on all taxable exports to China. According to China's Ambassador Zheng Xuan, the policy helped Mozambique save about 140 million yuan (\$20.5 million) by the end of 2025. With strengths in agriculture, fisheries, minerals, energy and Indian Ocean connectivity, Mozambique has clear scope to turn wider market access into more local processing and industrial investment.

### Higher-quality growth in China-Africa trade ties should be understood as a broader opportunity, not just larger volume.

China's push to move beyond trade volume alone is not confined to one country.

In February, South Africa signed a framework agreement with China, covering trade, investment, new energy and multilateral cooperation. South African officials say the agreement can help expand exports of agricultural products and high-value manufactured goods to China.

The task now is to turn wider preferential access into stronger productive capacity. That will require practical follow-through: smoother customs procedures, credible certification, stronger logistics, better trade finance and sustained investment in production capacity. For many African exporters, the challenge is not only gaining tariff-free access but turning that access into repeat business. Cold-chain logistics, testing and certification, warehousing, settlement services and reliable distribution channels all help determine whether a product can move from farm, factory or mine to the Chinese market on competitive terms.

This is where Chinese importers, logistics firms, e-commerce platforms and local African partners can make a practical difference.

South Africa already offers early evidence on the trade side. The first shipment of stone fruit to China in February showed how improved access can support agricultural upgrading and give exporters confidence to scale up.

South African officials have also highlighted opportunities in mining, renewable energy and technology, sectors where trade access and industrial cooperation can reinforce each other.

Investment tells the other half of the story. In November 2025, the SANY South Africa Industrial Park was officially completed in Johannesburg. According to the company, the 28,000-square-meter facility integrates manufacturing, logistics and talent development and is expected to produce 1,000 excavators annually.

Projects like this do not change trade patterns overnight, but they show how Chinese investment can support local manufacturing capacity, supplier development and longer-term industrial ecosystems.

The broader policy backing is already in place. The FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2025-27) supports Africa's industrialization, mineral value-chain upgrading, special economic zones and the development of "Made in Africa" brands. It also encourages Chinese and African enterprises to strengthen industrial and supply-chain coordination. This way, China's market, capital and industrial experience are helping African countries build stronger productive capacity.

People-to-people ties matter as well. With 2026 designated as the China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges, both sides have a fresh opportunity to deepen trust, strengthen business confidence and support the long horizons that industrial cooperation requires.

China-Africa economic relations are already among the most important partnerships in the Global South. The next step is to turn strong momentum into higher-quality growth through wider market access, more local processing, stronger logistics and deeper skills development.

If that momentum is sustained, China-Africa trade ties will become not only deeper, but stronger, more resilient and better anchored in long-term industrial development.

The Mozambican president's visit, Africa's economic partnership framework with China and the broader zero-tariff policy point in the same direction. China-Africa trade cooperation is moving onto a broader and more substantive footing. That is good news for China and Africa alike, and for a more open and inclusive world economy.

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Dan Steinbock

## Asia's energy pain is far from over

Major shocks don't happen in isolation. Like an earthquake followed by a tsunami, the deeper damage unfolds later. It's the same with the US and Israel's strikes against Iran. What began as an energy disruption is morphing into a severe and persistent economic shock, especially in the Global South.

At the peak of the crisis, oil prices surged more than 50 percent to \$110-116 per barrel before easing slightly to \$90-100 after the temporary ceasefire. Liquefied natural gas took an even harder hit, soaring as much as 143 percent to a three-year high.

In Asia, the supply risk is significant because 20 percent of global oil and LNG flows via the Strait of Hormuz to the region. But there is a difference in how the disruption impacts these fuels. Oil is volatile but substitutable, while LNG is the binding constraint, with limited short-term alternatives.

Today, Asian countries are grappling with tightened LNG supply, growing shipping frictions, mounting foreign exchange pressure and damage already locked into the second quarter performance.

Compounding the challenge is Israel's attack on Lebanon, which has severely strained the fragile United States-Iran peace talks.

With a very fragile 10-day ceasefire in Lebanon, the stakeholders have bought time. If the ceasefire fails or peace proves elusive, the economic prospects of Asia and the world at large are likely to be downgraded further. The risks are on the downside.

Inflation has always been the most powerful transmission channel of any energy crisis. The shortage of fuel, electricity and fertilizers pushes up their prices, which in turn leads to higher production costs for businesses. Higher wages, rising shipping costs

and higher prices for raw materials are passed on to consumers across goods and services.

The LNG shock often leads to an industrial slowdown. As prices of petrochemicals, plastics, and fertilizers soar, production costs have risen sharply, disrupting manufacturing across Asia, a region widely regarded as the "world's factory".

Gas-dependent economies such as Japan, the Republic of Korea and Vietnam are the worst hit.

Shipping and logistics add another layer of strain. The disruption in the Strait of Hormuz has driven up freight and insurance costs, exacerbating supply chain bottlenecks across Asia.

At the same time, currency pressure is intensifying. Oil importing countries have suffered currency depreciation as energy bills rise, while central banks delay rate cuts to keep inflation under control. The result is tight financial conditions across the region.

Even sectors that might seem insulated, such as tourism, are feeling the effects. Higher airfares and disruptions in Middle East airspace have affected travel flows. While the immediate impact is moderate, this could change if the crisis lingers.

The Iran crisis is primarily a disruption of the oil and LNG supply chain, but its manifestations vary across Asia. In East Asia, it has led to an industrial squeeze, while in Southeast Asia it has caused high inflation and a foreign exchange squeeze.

The ceasefire does not mean normalization. Due to the uncertainty, risk premium persists even though oil prices have dipped temporarily. Economic conditions continue to deteriorate faster than projected.

The Philippines is a telling example. Not so long ago, the Philippines had projected 5 percent to 6 percent growth. The World Bank recently downgraded the country's GDP growth to 3.7 percent. Across Asia, growth estimates are being recalibrated. The International Monetary Fund

has even signaled broader global downgrades and warned of a "permanent scarring".

These revisions are happening because the LNG shock was underestimated, and the impact on foreign exchange and inflation has proved more challenging than anticipated. Earlier assumptions about inventory buffers are also fading. March data still reflected pre-crisis inventories. As these are drawn down, demand compression will start showing in April and May.

The deterioration is worse than assumed in Japan and the ROK due to their dependence on LNG, petrochemicals and exports. In Japan, inflation combined with a weak yen complicates monetary policy, prompting the central bank to reassess the interest rate trajectory.

In the ROK, GDP growth is likely to be closer to 1 percent or lower, down from the earlier estimate of 1.5 percent to 2 percent. As a major trade, shipping and refining hub, Singapore remains highly sensitive to fluctuations in freight costs and energy flows. It faces a large downgrade in performance terms.

China is in a different position. Ever since the first Trump administration, the country has faced multiple penalties imposed by the United States.

However, access to alternative sources of energy and diverse policy tools has given it resilience. Even so, weakening global demand and softening exports may weigh on the growth momentum.

The picture is mixed in Southeast Asia. Vietnam faces rising manufacturing costs of inputs such as plastics and chemicals, which are affecting production.

The Philippines, highly dependent on oil imports and with scarce reserves, is already facing an energy emergency, sharp currency depreciation and transport disruptions amid domestic political corruption and governance challenges.

The trajectory of the crisis depends

on geopolitical developments. If the ceasefire fails and hostilities continue, oil prices could rebound toward \$105-120 a barrel.

If the war intensifies, they could even surge to \$150 per barrel. LNG prices would remain elevated and spike further with tight supply. Inflation would surge in the second and third quarters as higher input costs feed into the economy.

Currency depreciation would deepen in vulnerable economies, especially the ROK, the Philippines and Indonesia. At the same time, supply chains would crumble further due to depleted inventories.

Potential escalation triggers are renewed disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, outages in major LNG producers such as Qatar and the crisis expanding to other maritime chokepoints such as the Bab el-Mandeb. Any of these would amplify the crisis.

For now, the energy crisis remains one of the largest in recent history. The downside risks are significant, and growth expectations continue to drift lower. There are no meaningful upgrades.

What Asia must cope with now is a persistent supply shock with partial financial relief. Although markets can bounce back, the real economy won't rebound in parallel.

Global growth prospects are shifting lower to 2.2-4 percent. Risks are heavily on the downside.

What happens in Asia won't stay in Asia. In an interconnected global economy, neither Europe nor North America is immune to the impending tsunami.

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# GLOBAL VIEWS

HANS SEESAGHUR

## Opportunity beckons

Transforming of China's economic structure represents expanding prospects for African countries

Each spring, China's two sessions, the annual meetings of the National People's Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, offer a comprehensive view of China's economic direction. The discussions and policy signals emerging from this year's meetings highlight the growing importance of domestic consumption as a central pillar of China's next stage of development.

As China advances toward high-quality growth, policymakers are placing greater emphasis on expanding consumption scenarios, improving service consumption and upgrading the quality of goods available in the market. For African countries, this transformation in China's economic structure is particularly significant.

China's consumer market is undergoing a profound shift. As urban lifestyles evolve, consumption is moving beyond basic needs toward experiences, identity and quality. Increasingly, Chinese consumers are looking for products that combine authenticity, cultural meaning and distinctive origin. These trends are reshaping China's domestic market and creating new opportunities for international partners.

The policy direction outlined during the two sessions coincides with an important milestone in Africa-China economic relations. Beginning on May 1, China will implement 100 percent tariff-free treatment for products from all 53 African countries that maintain diplomatic relations with China. This measure significantly expands market access for African exports and reflects a broader commitment to strengthening economic ties between the African continent and China.

The intersection of these two developments — China's upgraded consumption and expanded tariff-free access for African countries — creates a favorable environment for African producers seeking to enter or expand within the Chinese market. Agricultural products from African countries

are increasingly aligned with the preferences of Chinese consumers who are exploring diverse global tastes. At the same time, organic products and sustainably sourced goods from African countries fit well with Chinese consumers' desire for high-quality, healthy and environmentally friendly products.

Beyond agricultural exports, China's evolving consumption landscape also offers opportunities for African countries' cultural and creative industries. Younger consumers in China are increasingly attracted to products that reflect cultural identity and global influences. Fashion inspired by African design, music collaborations, artistic products and handcrafted goods can resonate with Chinese consumers who are seeking distinctive lifestyle experiences. In this context, African countries' cultural heritage and creative sectors can become an important dimension of economic exchange with China.

China's major trade platforms will play a crucial role in facilitating this new phase of engagement. Among them, the China International Import Expo stands out as one of the most significant. The 2026 expo will take place in Shanghai in November, continuing its role as a premier platform for China's vast consumer market.

Launched in 2018, the CIEE has become a flagship gateway for introducing African products to Chinese consumers. African companies and national delegations have used the expo to connect with Chinese distributors, retailers and e-commerce platforms, helping transform market access opportunities into concrete commercial partnerships. As 2026 marks the "China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges", a larger and more coordinated participation by African countries offers a unique opportunity not only to showcase high-value products, from agricultural goods to specialty foods and consumer brands, but also to build stronger brand recognition and establish long-term distribution networks within China's rapidly expanding consumer market. Aligned with China's tariff-free treatment for exports from 53 African countries, the CIEE 2026 is set to

beat an African rhythm.

Another platform contributing to the development of China-Africa economic relations is the Fifth China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo, to be held in Changsha, Hunan province. Scheduled for June 2027, the expo is expected to further deepen economic and trade cooperation between African and Chinese enterprises.

Thus, the fifth CAETE will serve as an important venue where policymakers, investors and businesses from both sides can explore practical avenues to expand two-way trade. For the 53 African economies, the expo represents a crucial opportunity to move up the value chain and diversify export portfolios. In this sense, CAETE provides a vital bridge between diplomatic dialogue and concrete economic implementation, helping transform new market access into sustained export growth.

The pathway from the CIEE 2026 to the 2027 CAETE will serve as practical testing grounds for the full implementation of China's tariff-free access for exports from 53 African countries. It will allow policymakers, businesses and trade institutions from both sides to reflect on emerging opportunities, address practical challenges and identify ways to further scale African exports to the Chinese market. If effectively leveraged, these platforms can transform policy commitments into tangible trade flows, allowing African producers to establish brands, secure distribution channels, and expand their presence in China's vast consumer market.

By the time leaders convene for the next Forum on China-Africa Cooperation summit in 2027, the focus can no longer be solely on access but on results that show measurable growth in African exports, deeper value-chain partnerships and stronger commercial linkages between African and Chinese enterprises. In this sense, the road to the FOCAC 2027 summit is not merely diplomatic; it is increasingly defined by markets, consumption and the rising visibility of African products within China's evolving economic landscape.

At the same time, improvements in logistics



LI MIN / CHINA DAILY

networks, cross-border e-commerce platforms and digital payment systems are making it easier for African producers to access Chinese markets. These technological developments allow even small enterprises to connect directly with Chinese distributors and consumers, expanding the potential for more diversified and inclusive trade relationships.

The policy direction emerging from the two sessions suggests that China's future economic growth will rely increasingly on innovation, services and domestic consumption. For the 53 African economies, this shift represents expanded opportunity. With tariff-free access to the Chinese market and Chinese consumers' growing interest in distinctive global products, African countries can strengthen their economic engagement with China while diversifying their export profiles and moving

further up the value chain.

As preparations advance for the 2026 CIEE, the 2027 CAETE and the 2027 FOCAC summit, these platforms will continue to shape the next phase of China-Africa cooperation. Within the context of China's evolving consumption landscape, they pave the road through which 53 African countries can drive their products into one of the world's most dynamic consumer markets.

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LI JIE

## Growing presence

Renminbi internationalization will remain incremental, market-driven and closely linked to the broader evolution of China's financial system

China's 2026 two sessions — the annual plenary sessions of its top legislative and political consultative bodies convened in March — delivered a clear policy signal globally: China will continue to pursue steady, market-driven renminbi internationalization as a core part of its financial opening-up. Chinese policymakers will follow a stability-focused and incremental approach. While China has no intention of challenging the existing global currency order, that order itself is evolving.

Each time the renminbi's international role expands, a familiar question arises: Is China trying to replace the US dollar? The short answer is no. But the more interesting question is why the renminbi's global presence has been steadily growing in recent years. Part of the answer lies in China's own financial and economic development, while another lies in the changing structure of the international financial system itself. Signals emerging from this year's two sessions suggest that Chinese policymakers are increasingly aware of this broader shift.

For decades, the global monetary system has revolved around a single dominant currency. The US dollar remains the backbone of international finance, accounting for roughly 57 percent of global foreign exchange reserves and the majority of cross-border financial transactions. This arrangement has delivered efficiency and deep liquidity. But it also creates concentration risks. Recent geopolitical developments have made those risks more visible. Financial sanctions, geopolitical tensions and concerns about the resilience of global payment systems have reminded many countries that the international monetary system is not purely economic — it is also political.

Under such circumstances, diversification becomes a natural response. This is where the renminbi enters the picture. China has never framed renminbi inter-



WANG XIANGYING / CHINA DAILY

nationalization as a race to replace the dollar. The processes of expanding the use of the renminbi in trade settlement, deepening domestic financial markets and building the infrastructure needed for cross-border financial activity have largely aimed at facilitating trade settlement and mitigating dollar funding risks, rather than displacing the dollar in global reserve portfolios.

The results of this gradual strategy are becoming more visible. According to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, the renminbi rose to become one of the world's five most active currencies for international payments in January 2026. Meanwhile, the share of China's cross-border trade settled in renminbi

has increased steadily over the past decade, reaching around 30 percent of total trade settlement in recent years.

These developments reflect simple economic logic. When a country becomes one of the world's largest trading partners, it is natural for its currency to play a larger role in international transactions. China today is a major trading partner for more than 150 countries and regions, and it has remained one of the biggest contributors to global economic growth for many years. As trade networks expand, the use of the renminbi in trade settlement has also expanded.

Financial markets play an equally important role. China's bond market has grown rapidly over the past decade, and it is now

the second-largest in the world, with outstanding bonds reaching nearly 200 trillion yuan (about \$28 trillion). For international investors seeking diversification and relatively stable assets, renminbi-denominated Chinese bonds are becoming increasingly attractive.

At the same time, financial infrastructure supporting cross-border renminbi use continues to improve. China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, launched less than a decade ago, is gradually expanding its network of participating banks across different regions and financial centers.

Policy signals from this year's two sessions reinforce this direction. The Report on the Work of the Government delivered at the fourth session of the 14th National People's Congress states that China will expand high-standard opening-up, improve cross-border financial services and steadily promote the international use of the renminbi. These priorities indicate that policymakers see currency internationalization as part of a broader financial reform agenda.

Chinese financial regulators have also stressed the importance of maintaining currency stability while expanding its global use. At a recent policy briefing, officials from the People's Bank of China noted that the renminbi exchange rate has remained generally stable with two-way flexibility, while China will continue to improve cross-border financial services and deepen financial market opening-up.

Such statements highlight a key principle behind China's approach: renminbi internationalization should remain market-driven and gradual, rather than the result of abrupt policy shifts.

What may be emerging today is not a dramatic shift from one dominant currency to another, but a gradual diversification of the international monetary system. In such a system, several major currencies could share international roles in trade settlement, financial investment and reserve management.

Such a structure may actually prove more resilient than one overwhelmingly

dependent on a single currency. When multiple currencies are available, countries and companies have greater flexibility to manage financial risks and respond to global uncertainty.

In this evolving landscape, the renminbi does not need to replace the dollar to become more influential. It simply needs to become increasingly useful. China's policymakers appear comfortable with such a gradual trajectory. Rapid financial liberalization could expose the domestic financial system to volatile capital flows. Instead, China's strategy has been to expand the renminbi's global role step by step while maintaining financial stability at home.

That cautious approach may prove particularly valuable in today's uncertain global environment. Since the global financial crisis in 2008, episodes of volatile capital flows, monetary cycles and rising geopolitical tensions have repeatedly tested the resilience of international financial markets.

In such circumstances, stability itself becomes a form of credibility. Ironically, the fragmentation of the global financial system may ultimately accelerate the international use of the renminbi — not because China seeks to overturn the existing monetary order, but because many countries increasingly prefer having more than one option.

The message emerging from the two sessions is therefore one of continuity. China will continue deepening financial reforms, expanding market openness and improving financial infrastructure — all of which support the gradual internationalization of the renminbi. In the long run, such a steady approach may prove more durable than any attempt at rapid currency transformation.

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EDITORIALS from JoongAng Ilbo

## Parties under fire for political reform deal

The ruling Democratic Party of Korea and the main opposition People Power Party are facing criticism after jointly passing a revised Political Parties Act at the National Assembly late on Saturday night. The law allows local party organizations in electoral districts to operate a single office, which has prompted concerns that it could revive the problems associated with the abolished district party system. While both parties insist the change does not amount to restoring the old system, critics say their response ignores public sentiment and reflects a lack of accountability.

The district party structure was dismantled 22 years ago to curb excessive political spending and prevent parties from becoming dominated by powerful figures and incumbent lawmakers. Despite little change in public expectations or legal reasoning, the two major parties pushed ahead with the revision without holding a proper public hearing.

If the goal was to address the practical difficulties faced by local party officials without parliamentary seats, critics argue that lawmakers should have proposed safeguards. Instead, the bill was passed alongside long-delayed decisions on electoral district boundaries. Observers say the timing reflects shared interests between the two parties, particularly in regions where electoral competition is weak.

Smaller parties have voiced strong opposition, warning that the move will entrench a two-party system and deepen the role of money in politics. The speed of the process has also drawn criticism. The bill passed the plenary session in less than 12 hours. Critics argue that the rapid handling of such legislation undermines transparency and accountability.

A separate revision to the Public Official Election Act has also sparked debate. The amendment raises the proportion of proportional representation seats in metropolitan councils from 10 percent to 14 percent. While framed as a measure to expand opportunities for smaller parties, opponents argue that it ultimately reinforces the dominance of the two major parties.

The change is expected to require an additional 3 billion won (\$2 million) in public funds, but lawmakers have offered little explanation for the increased cost. According to critics, the lack of detailed justification highlights the disconnect between political decision-making and public accountability. Meanwhile, both parties have struggled to cooperate on judicial reform issues that affect governance and livelihoods.

This contrast has deepened public frustration. For many observers, the episode reinforces perceptions that political reform in Korea is moving in the wrong direction. Rather than beginning with efforts to reduce entrenched privileges, the latest legislative moves appear to strengthen them and may further erode trust in the political system.

## Homeowner tax debate fuels market concerns

Remarks by President Lee Jae Myung on revising the long-term holding tax deduction for homeowners have intensified controversy, raising uncertainty in the real estate market. In a post on X, Lee questioned why capital gains earned from rising home prices should receive significant tax reductions simply because a property was held for a long time, particularly when it was not used as a residence. His comments came in response to criticism from People Power Party floor policy chief Jeong Jeom-sig, who warned that such signals could encourage proposals within the ruling bloc to exclude even the owners of single homes from the deduction.

Lee went further by outlining possible measures, including a six-month grace period, followed by a partial reduction over another six months and a full abolishment of relief after one year. He also suggested codifying the changes in law to prevent future administrations from reversing them, arguing that this would remove incentives to delay implementation and make policy direction clearer.

The absence of a clear government or ruling party position has left the public confused. It remains unclear whether the system will actually be changed or how any revisions would be carried out. In the market, speculation is growing that after the June local elections, the ruling bloc will move to scale back the deduction and strengthen property taxes more broadly.

There may be a case for reviewing the tax system to improve fairness and curb speculative investment. However, any discussion of reform should proceed with caution, given the longstanding role the deduction has played in Korea's housing system. Introduced in 1989, the measure has served as a key tool for supporting housing stability and asset formation among middle- and lower-income households. Over time, the benefits were expanded, with the deduction rate reaching as high as 80 percent for gains exceeding 1.2 billion won (\$818,000). In 2021, eligibility requirements were tightened by separating holding and residency conditions, each set at 40 percent.

Altering a tax framework that has been in place for nearly four decades could have far-reaching consequences. Critics argue that the president's remarks risk equating long-term homeowners with speculative investors, a comparison that may not reflect reality. Market participants warn that abolishing the deduction and increasing the tax burden on single-homeowners could discourage property listings, trigger resistance to taxation and drive up rental prices. They also caution that abrupt policy changes could amplify uncertainty and weaken confidence in an already sensitive market environment.

# Debate grows over semiconductor bonuses



Members of a Samsung Group labor union hold a press conference in front of Samsung Electronics' Seocho headquarters in Seoul on April 17 to declare that they have secured majority union status as the representative body of workers. They said 30,000 to 40,000 members are expected to attend a mass rally on April 23 and warned they would go on strike from May 21 to June 7 if sufficient compensation is not provided.

Performance bonuses at SK hynix have become a major topic of conversation among office workers in Korea. After controversy last year, the company pledged to allocate 10 percent of its operating profit to bonus payments, removed any cap and committed to maintaining the system for a decade. With the semiconductor sector enjoying an extraordinary boom, some forecasts suggest annual operating profit could reach 250 trillion won (\$170.1 billion), which would translate into average payouts of about 700 million won for each of the company's roughly 34,500 employees. There are even speculative claims that next year's bonuses could approach 1.3 billion won per employee. While such projections may be overly optimistic, they have stirred both envy and frustration among workers.

The atmosphere at rival Samsung Electronics has also grown tense. Labor unions are demanding bonuses equivalent to 15 percent of operating profit and are prepared to strike if their demands are not met. Outside the company, however, public sentiment is less sympathetic. One-person protests have appeared near the company's headquarters, criticizing what some see as excessive demands. Compensation figures reaching hundreds of millions or even billions of won remain unfamiliar to many. While performance-based pay can boost productivity and morale, the scale and structure now being discussed raise questions about whether they are appropriate.

Economist Robert H. Frank of Cornell University has argued that people tend to overestimate headwinds and underestimate tailwinds when explaining success. Rather than acknowledging good fortune, individuals are more inclined to credit their own effort and ability. His book "Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy" (2016) examines this tendency. The insight helps frame the current de-

bate, as extraordinary rewards can obscure the broader conditions that made such outcomes possible in the first place.

The rapid rise of generative AI since late 2022 has acted as a powerful tailwind for the semiconductor industry. SK hynix, once considered an underdog, spent more than a decade investing heavily in high bandwidth memory, or HBM, a technology long seen as niche. Its current performance is clearly the result of sustained effort. But it is equally difficult to deny the role played by the sudden and unexpectedly strong surge in AI demand. Strategic misjudgments by established competitors also worked in its favor. Amid expectations of massive bonuses, it is reasonable to ask how much of this success reflects capability and how much reflects favorable conditions.

An even more important issue concerns the distribution of rewards. SK hynix has announced that bonuses will be paid over three years in an 8:1:1 structure, but they remain largely cash-based. By contrast, global technology companies such as Nvidia, Google and Apple provide a significant portion of compensation in stock, often in the form of restricted stock units. These are typically vested over several years, linking employee incentives to long-term corporate growth and shareholder value. This approach differs fundamentally from systems that distribute short-term gains primarily in cash. The contrast highlights differing views on whether rewards should emphasize immediate outcomes or sustained performance.

Employees are not the only stakeholders entitled to share in corporate success. Last year, SK hynix returned 2.1 trillion won in cash dividends to shareholders, less than half of the estimated 4.7 trillion won allocated to employee bonuses under the 10 percent pledge. If Samsung Electronics were to match its rival's bonus levels, total pay-

### CORPORATE SUCCESS IS EMBEDDED IN A [...] NETWORK OF SUPPORT AND CONTRIBUTION.

outs to employees could significantly exceed dividends to shareholders. This raises concerns about the balance of capital allocation. Excessive bonuses risk placing strain on the company's growth engine. While allocating 10 percent of operating profit to bonuses may be tolerated during periods of rising earnings, it could become contentious if profits decline, potentially sparking debates over shareholder value.

The performance of semiconductor firms does not emerge in isolation. Government support has played a role, including expanded tax credits for facility investment, policy financing and infrastructure for electricity and water provided by national and local authorities. Consumers who have absorbed higher prices for semiconductor-related products are also part of this ecosystem. These factors suggest that corporate success is embedded in a broader network of support and contribution.

Corporate profit distribution must consider broader social acceptance. This is especially true for companies often described as national champions or industries seen as central to the economy. Investor Warren Buffett once observed that someone sits in the shade today because someone planted a tree long ago. The current semiconductor boom is the result of past generations' efforts, as well as sustained national and social support. Sharing the rewards of success is important, but so is ensuring that future generations inherit a system capable of sustaining growth.



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## A path forward for conservatives

Conservatism in Korea faces what can only be described as an existential crisis. Nowhere is this more evident than in the main opposition, the People Power Party (PPP). With local election prospects projected at a lopsided disadvantage, the outlook is grim. Yet beyond electoral arithmetic, the deeper concern is the party's day-to-day paralysis. It has failed to follow through on a proposed name change, abruptly canceled plans to unveil a flagship campaign pledge and had its nomination committee chair resign twice. These are not isolated missteps but signs of a party struggling to perform even its most basic functions.

In an era increasingly defined by post-ideological politics, one might question whether conservatism must survive at all. Still, few would dispute the need for a credible opposition capable of checking a dominant governing force that controls both the legislature and the executive. Unchecked power breeds arrogance and risks veering into extremism. The question, then, is how to repair a malfunctioning opposition. Within political circles and the media, one common answer has been to focus on personalities. The so-called three-pronged alliance theory suggests that figures such as Oh Se-hoon, Seoul's conservative mayor, Lee Jun-seok, Reform Party leader and third-party candidate in the 2025 presidential election, and Han Dong-hoon, former President Yoon Suk Yeol's justice minister-turned-detector, could unite, inspire voters and deliver electoral gains.

But such approaches fail to resonate with the public. Attempts to overcome crises by changing the party's outward image have already been

tried, most notably when Yoon was picked as the PPP's presidential candidate in 2022. When the symptoms are severe, cosmetic fixes are insufficient. A more fundamental prescription is required. Politics must return to basics, reassessing its core responsibilities and executing them effectively to regain public trust. In this era, that responsibility should center on protecting society's most vulnerable.

A broader look at the world reinforces this view. Increasingly, societies are fragmenting. People exchange information within like-minded circles while openly expressing hostility toward those with different views. This is one of the unintended consequences of globalization. Since the 1980s, globalization has brought unprecedented wealth and improved living standards. Yet its benefits have been unevenly distributed, concentrated among a small elite, leaving many others with frustration and a sense of inferiority. While a tiny minority has accumulated wealth beyond what they could spend in generations, the majority struggles even to secure stable employment that offers dignity.

Into this environment has stepped what can be called the politics of anger. Rather than solving problems, it assigns blame to specific groups and uses that resentment as political fuel. The tariff war pursued by U.S. President Donald Trump, despite opposition from experts, reflects this logic. By attributing the decline of domestic manufacturing to foreign actors, it channels the anger of displaced workers into political momentum. Similar dynamics can be seen in political

### WHEN THE SYMPTOMS ARE SEVERE, COSMETIC FIXES ARE INSUFFICIENT.

polarization, ethnic and religious conflicts and even persistent gender tensions among younger generations.

In Korea, this form of politics has largely been employed by the progressive camp led by the Democratic Party. When social contradictions surface, they are often attributed to entrenched interests allegedly rooted in pro-Japanese collaborations, echoing how Trump frames the decline of the United States as the result of a "deep state."

Yet the politics of anger rarely solves substantive social problems. Its greatest harm falls on the most vulnerable. Despite the intensity of past campaigns, it is difficult to argue that everyday life has meaningfully improved. If the current government were to devote its full term to such efforts, it is unclear how that would materially benefit those in need. There is a reason this style of politics, once sweeping across the globe, is gradually losing its appeal.

The decline of a single party may not matter in itself. But a political landscape in which one force governs indefinitely without the possibility of alternation is troubling. For the health of Korea's democracy, conservatives must undergo a fundamental awakening.



Keum Tae-sup  
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# Empty classrooms demand school restructuring

Korea is approaching a critical turning point as the number of school-age children continues to decline due to persistently low birth rates. Since 2000, the country's fertility rate has fallen almost every year. From 2020, the number of newborns dropped below 300,000, marking the start of natural population decline. Although the fertility rate has edged up slightly from 0.72 to 0.8 over the past two years, the annual number of births remains just above 250,000.

The effects are already visible in classrooms. This year, an elementary school in Seoul opened its semester without a single first-grade student for the first time in the city's record. Nationwide, 210 schools reported no new enrollments, an 81 percent increase from 116 such schools in 2021. Smaller class sizes can allow teachers to better understand individual students and provide tailored instruction. However, when classes shrink too much, students lose opportunities to interact with peers and participate in group activities, through which they develop social skills. School closures can also force students to commute long distances to attend new schools.

These challenges are not new. A study titled "The Effects of School Closure Threats on Student Performance: Evidence from a Natural Experiment," published in the B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy, examined similar developments in Hong Kong. The research, conducted by the author along with Ming Chiu and Lawrence Ku, found that declining student populations increased per-student costs, placing further financial strain on schools and sometimes resulting in closures. In 2006, the number of elementary students in Hong Kong had

dropped by 9 percent compared to 2000. As a result, 12 out of 18 school districts experienced closures, and the total number of elementary schools fell from 709 to 670.

The study also explored how these changes affected student performance. For areas in which school capacity and facilities exceeded student numbers, schools competed to attract students by adopting new and often costly educational programs with uncertain outcomes. Students exposed to unfamiliar teaching methods experienced lower academic achievement compared to peers in other regions. When schools eventually closed, the negative impact on student performance was even greater. By contrast, closing underperforming schools and transferring students to better ones improved overall learning outcomes.

Without a long-term national vision and a coordinated strategy, Korea's fertility rate is likely to remain low or continue to decline. As student numbers fall, it will be impossible to sustain all existing schools. Institutions with large numbers of empty seats will face mounting pressure to restructure or merge. Given that most Koreans live in Seoul and the surrounding metropolitan area, consolidating schools based solely on student numbers risks accelerating population decline in regional areas.

Restructuring, therefore, must be approached with careful consideration of balanced national development. Policymakers should ensure that schools serving as regional hubs are maintained so that young students are not forced to endure excessively long commutes. At the same time, in areas where student populations

are too small, consolidation is necessary to ensure the viability of education. Schools that enhance human capital and prepare students for future economic and technological environments should be preserved, but those that fail to do so should be closed. In particular, institutions with strong competitiveness in specialized fields should be prioritized.

Once clear principles and direction are established, swift implementation is essential. Delays only increase costs and prolong uncertainty for students. Change is often met with resistance. People fear job losses, declining property values and the disruption of familiar routines. As a result, leaders frequently postpone difficult decisions and leave them to successors. This pattern can already be seen in Korea's universities, many of which continue to resist restructuring despite declining enrollment.

Although restructuring entails short-term pain, it can deliver long-term improvements in educational outcomes. Postponing change ultimately harms students by depriving them of better learning opportunities. Swift and decisive action can minimize disruption and allow students to adapt more quickly to new environments.

Schools must act without delay. Structural reform is not simply an administrative necessity but a critical step toward strengthening the country's competitiveness. By improving the quality of education and ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently, Korea can better prepare its children for the challenges ahead. The future of the nation's economy and its human capital depends on the decisions made today.



Joh Sung-wook

The author is a professor at Seoul National University College of Business School and a member of the Reset Korea economic division.

## STUDENT VOICE

### The case against cramming

BAEK INHWAN

I was cramming, hurriedly reviewing the notes and questions for my upcoming math test. Less than a day remained before the exam.

Tick. Tock. The clock in my room seemed to run faster than usual. Hours flew by as quickly as colored leaves fall in autumn. I thought that I had lots of time. Where had it all gone? And when? Probably while I was playing catch at the playground with my friends and chatting about how the Hanwha Eagles were doing.

Through the windows, people biking by the river lured me to distraction.

There was not enough time to study it all. A few days later, I got my test result. It was the lowest score that I had ever received. I was devastated. But this was not my first experience with cramming.

I once had to write a report and give a presentation on Norway. I thought it would be easy. I played until the day before the assignment was due, reading comic books and playing football with my friends. Then I started cramming. I asked Google for all the answers, trying to reduce the time needed to read articles about the Scandinavian country. During the presentation, I was missing some information that I was supposed to have, but I thought it went O.K.

Then came the Q&A session. "What does the flag of Norway mean?" In response, I shrugged. "Who is the king of Norway?" I replied, "I have no idea."

With each question, I felt myself getting smaller and smaller. It was an embarrassing time.

Eventually, I had to rethink my study habits. Reviewing everything in one sitting was mentally exhausting and ineffective. Cramming never seemed to work. But why not?

According to a study in the scientific journal Applied Cognitive Psychology, information learned through cramming is stored in our short-term memory. This often fades quickly after it serves its purpose, such as for an exam, or even before that. I knew this feeling well. During my last math test, I could remember studying a formula the night before, but when I looked at the problem, the numbers and steps had vanished from my mind.

Research from another journal, Science of Learning, shows that stress also impairs recall. The brain becomes overloaded when forced to absorb a lot of information in a single sitting. This, too, felt familiar. The night before my Norway presentation, I had seventeen tabs open on my computer. My eyes were frantically jumping between all of them, but I was absorbing nothing.

In contrast, consistently reviewing material allows information to be stored in our long-term memory. There's also much less stress. This sounded way better to me.

Recently, I've begun applying consistent study habits. As soon as I get home from school, I review my notes for upcoming tests. I study every day for a comfortable amount of time. After a few weeks, I noticed improvements in my ability to focus. I completed mock tests to check on my progress, and it seemed that the information was sticking in my brain.

When I hear my friends playing outside, it can still be hard to resist returning to old habits. However, I've learned to use this as fuel to concentrate harder and do my work well. I tell myself, "The pain of discipline is always less than the pain of regret." And I can always enjoy my free time with my friends once my daily review is done.

A few weeks ago, my latest test scores were released. I had the jitters. Would my new approach to studying pay off? When I looked down at the page, I was satisfied. My score was a record high.

The author is a student at Daedeok Elementary School.

# In the age of AI, teach how to assign work

As artificial intelligence makes it possible to generate assignments, reports and presentations almost instantly, educators are facing a pressing question: What should schools teach now? Many teachers and professors share this concern. Students use AI to complete their work, while instructors rely on AI to evaluate it. Learners, teachers and evaluators alike are leaning on the same tools. As this cycle repeats, unease is growing. The process of learning continues, but little learning seems to remain. Assignments, presentations and evaluations risk becoming empty forms, with substance fading away.

Some argue that AI use should be restricted, especially for younger students who may become overly dependent and fail to learn how to think for themselves. But banning AI is unlikely to offer a real solution. Pushing AI out of the classroom does not mean students will live in a future without it. Instead, a more fundamental question must be asked: What should be the purpose of education in the age of AI?

Until now, schools have developed in a direction that emphasizes training people to perform tasks well. Modern public education expanded access to universal schooling and fostered habits such as arriving on time and completing assigned work. It also contributed to cultivating active participants in democracy while equipping individuals with the skills needed in an industrial society. But AI is rapidly encroaching on this territory. Following instructions and executing tasks are becoming

areas where machines can outperform humans.

As a result, the purpose of education must also change. It is no longer enough to teach how to work. Education must now also teach how to assign work. One way to understand this shift is to recall the education of a crown prince during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). A crown prince was surrounded by numerous officials who could carry out any task upon command. Yet education was still essential. Even if the prince did not need to perform tasks personally, he had to learn how to give instructions properly. He needed to judge what was important, decide who should handle each task and determine whether the reports he received were accurate.

For this reason, Joseon had institutions dedicated to educating crown princes. They spent their days studying Confucian classics and undergoing examinations. One key text was "Seonghakjipyo" (1575), written by the scholar Yi I for King Seonjo (r. 1567-1608). In the book, Yi emphasized the importance of appointing capable people. He wrote that a ruler's foremost duty is to recognize talent and assign responsibilities effectively. Managing AI today is not so different. Not all systems are trustworthy. Some produce plausible but incorrect answers, fabricate information or rush to conclusions. It is therefore essential to distinguish reliable tools from unreliable ones and assign tasks accordingly.

The next step is learning how to give instructions to AI effectively. Students must

learn how to define goals clearly, write precise prompts, verify outputs and revise results on their own. Above all, they need to develop the ability to draw boundaries, deciding which tasks to delegate to AI and which to handle themselves.

If the content of learning changes, evaluation must also change. If grading is based only on the final product, it ends up evaluating AI rather than the student. Educators should instead look at what questions students asked, what judgments they made along the way and how they edited or discarded AI-generated responses. This approach can help cultivate students who are capable of designing tasks and critically assessing answers.

This issue is not limited to higher education. It applies equally to primary and secondary education. In the future, children will turn to AI whenever they encounter something they do not know. If assignments simply demand correct answers, little learning will remain. The process of reaching an answer is more important than the answer itself.

Being a good ruler is harder than being a good subordinate. The same is true in education today. Schools must go beyond teaching how to work independently. They must teach how to use AI without being controlled by it. Students need more than the ability to produce quick answers. They must learn to think with AI while making final judgments on their own.

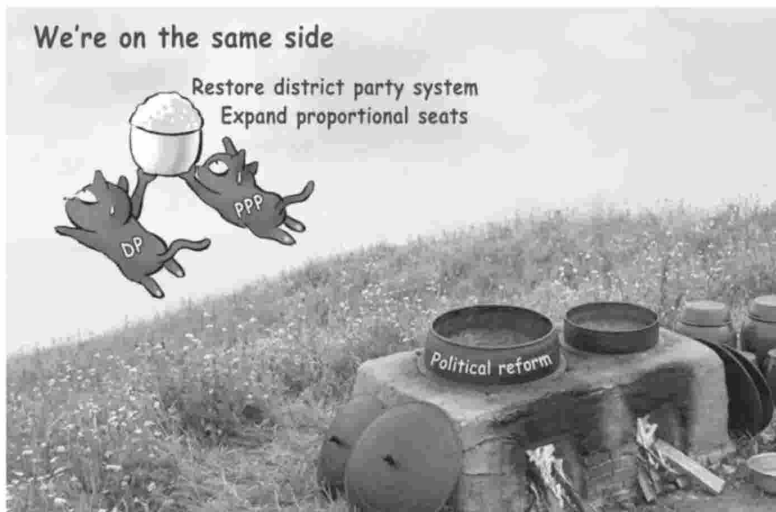
That is why education continues to matter, even in the age of AI.



Kim Byoung-pil

The author is a professor of technology management at KAIST.

## CARTOON from JoongAng Ilbo



The Democratic Party (DP) and the People Power Party (PPP) are facing criticism for pushing through revisions to the Political Parties Act and election law with unusual speed, despite their frequent clashes on major reforms. The measures, including allowing the establishment of local party offices and increasing proportional representation seats, are seen as serving shared political interests. Critics argue that the bipartisan deal reflects collusion that strengthens the dominance of the DP and PPP while sidelining broader political reform and public concerns.

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## TODAY IN HISTORY

- 1902** Scientists Marie and Pierre Curie isolate the radioactive element radium.
- 1908** Some 44 people die when trains collide at Sunshine, Victoria, Australia.
- 1945** Soviet forces penetrate Berlin defenses in World War II.
- 1957** The United States resumes aid to Israel; Japan protests to Soviet Union over nuclear tests.
- 1968** Pierre Elliott Trudeau is sworn in as Canada's prime minister.
- 1970** U.S. President Richard Nixon announces the withdrawal of 150,000 U.S. military personnel from South Vietnam.
- 1978** Soviet fighter planes force off-course South Korean airliner down in Soviet Union near Arctic Circle.
- 1987** PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat calls for sovereign Palestinian state "with Jerusalem as its capital."
- 1999** The worst in a rash of school shootings in the United States kills 15 people, including the two student gunman, at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado.

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the illegitimate comes in torrents.*  
An Arab maxim

# Opinion

## Threatening Gulf ports

ABDULRAHMAN AL-RASHED

**T**he fighting has not stopped since negotiations in Islamabad came to a halt. US President Donald Trump's dangerous decision to impose a blockade on Iran's maritime trade has disrupted the entire landscape, as Iran is now threatening to target Gulf ports.

On the battlefield, Israeli forces are advancing in southern Lebanon and every success they attain there weakens Iran's negotiating and moral position. Israel has already taken control of about a third of Lebanon's territory and it is close to seizing three of Hezbollah's key military strongholds: Bini Jbeil, Khiam and Taybeh. The Lebanese government has, because of this war, dared to take a historic step by entering direct negotiations with Israel, defying Hezbollah's threats.

The Iranians have rushed to request the resumption of negotiations with the US, suggesting a willingness to offer concessions to end the naval blockade.

The blockade is the most dangerous weapon that can be used against Iran. Impeding Iran's maritime trade could bring down the regime if it is sustained long

enough and enforced strictly. Of course, choking Iran at sea has consequences and could potentially reignite a broader war.

In a calculated move, Trump announced a blockade covering Bandar Abbas, Bushehr and other ports along the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, as well as preventing any ships from entering or leaving Iran through the Strait of Hormuz. This is expected to cost Iran an estimated half a billion dollars per day, in addition to weakening its political position, after Iran used its ability to threaten the Strait of Hormuz as a bargaining chip against the Arab Gulf states and the global economy.

One potential consequence, the Iranian regime has said, is retaliation through strikes on Gulf ports and a return to mutually assured destruction. Iran has previously shown that it is serious about such threats when it targeted its Arab neighbors, hitting vital civilian infrastructure in six Gulf states, as well as in Iraq and Jordan.

Can Gulf states withstand further losses if their ports (lifelines through which oil, gas and petrochemical products are exported to global markets) are targeted?

In war, they have few options. Gulf countries have already done what they



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could avert conflict. American forces were compelled to conduct military operations from naval fleets and bases in countries north of Iran, but Iran chose to strike Gulf facilities to impose costs on the global economy. It succeeded, as oil and gas prices doubled, followed by increases in the cost of transport, aviation and petroleum products, both direct and indirect.

For this reason, Iran will probably repeat the same strategy and again target Gulf states.

The calculations of the US revolve around balancing pain on both sides and estimates of how long this blockade would need to continue for Iran to be forced into concessions that allow its maritime trade to resume. The US is also considering the resumption of strikes after a two-week truce following assessments of what remains of Iran's arsenal and its ability to launch further missiles with precision.

At the same time, Iran is deeply wounded after 38 days of war. It has a leadership vacuum and its regional proxies, as seen in Lebanon, have been weakened. The question remains: will it still choose to play this painful game of brinkmanship?

Iran may be able to destroy a significant

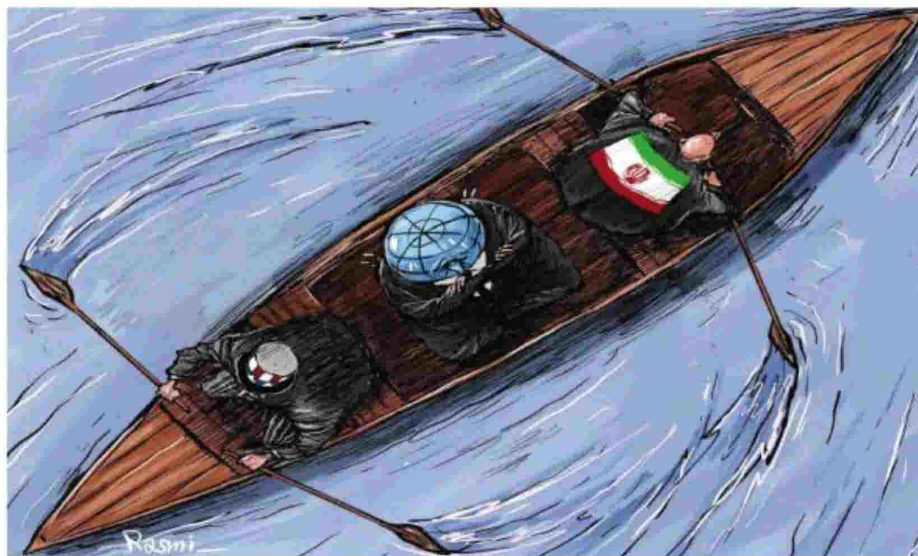
portion of Gulf maritime and energy infrastructure, but those states would recover. They have the ability to repair the damage and absorb major losses. Iran, however, would be gambling with the survival of its regime in a bet on this new round of confrontation.

The US has shown a willingness to continue fighting. It could be argued that more strikes that force Iran into surrender would be Trump's best option, as they would allow him to emerge victorious in the eyes of the world.

Indeed, the US suffered few losses in the previous round (13 dead, half of them in a plane crash in Iraq). Meanwhile, Israel is also in favor of continuing the war to extract greater concessions from Iran, with public opinion suggesting Israelis are willing to bear further costs if Iran ceases to pose a persistent regional threat.

Iran's new leadership may appear fanatical, but this same leadership has expressed a desire to return to negotiations. It has a strong interest in avoiding destruction that risks the very existence of the regime. A blockade and devastation would be less likely if the American and Iranian delegations were to return to the negotiating table.

**The Iranians have rushed to request the resumption of negotiations, suggesting a willingness to offer concessions**



COURTESY: JALAL FOUAD/AL-JAWAB

**Repression is not a side effect of the Iran regime, it is its language, its instinct and its method of survival**

## Iran regime deserves no defense

DALIA AL-AQIDI



Dalia Al-Aqidi is executive director at the American Center for Counter Extremism.

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**A**woman is to be executed by the regime in Tehran for taking part in the recent antigovernment protests. That fact alone should strip away every illusion, every excuse and every dishonest slogan used to sanitize the Iranian regime. A government that answers protests with execution is not misunderstood, it is brutal. It is not complicated, it is cruel. And it is not acting out of strength, it is acting out of fear.

Bitia Hemmati is not facing death because the regime believes in justice. She is facing death because the regime fears the truth. It fears women who refuse to bow. It fears young people who refuse to live on their knees. It fears a nation that has seen through the lies and no longer confuses intimidation with legitimacy.

For decades, Iran's rulers have relied on arrests, torture, sham trials and executions to silence dissent. This is not a temporary excess — it is the system itself. Repression is not a side effect of the regime, it is

its language, its instinct and its method of survival. Every few years, the world reacts with shock. Protests erupt, young people are arrested and families search for missing sons and daughters. Prisoners are forced into confessions, followed by death sentences handed down in the name of God by men who have turned faith into a tool of power.

Then the cycle repeats, because the outrage fades but the regime's machinery of fear does not.

That is why Hemmati's looming execution matters so much. It is not only a crime against one individual. It is a declaration. The regime is telling the Iranian people: we own your bodies, we own your voices and, if you challenge us, we will kill you. That is the message. Everything else is propaganda.

And yet, even now, there are protesters in the US and in Western capitals who defend the dictatorship, excuse this regime or treat it as a symbol of anti-Western resistance. That is a moral collapse.

This regime has brought misery not only to Iranians but to the wider region. It has attacked, threatened, infiltrated or destabilized countries across the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has faced Iranian-backed aggression. The UAE has been threatened and targeted. Bahrain has lived with constant subversion. Kuwait, Jordan and Qatar have all had to contend with Tehran's reach. Iraq has been pulled into its orbit. Its proxies have torn Yemen apart. Lebanon has been held hostage to its influence.

This is a regime that claims to speak in the name of Muslims while harming Muslim societies again and again.

So, let us stop pretending that this is a normal government with a few policy differences. It is a revolutionary tyranny that has fed on fear for decades. It survives by manufacturing enemies, crushing reform and teaching its people that even peaceful dissent can end at the end of a rope.

That is why every defense of this regime is a betrayal of its victims.

When the left in America waves away the crimes of Tehran, it is not standing with the people of Iran — it is standing against them. When activists reduce this regime to a geopolitical talking point, they erase the men and women whose lives it has destroyed. When they excuse Iran because it fits their ideological hostility to the West, they reveal that their concern for human rights is selective, shallow and hollow.

The woman now facing death is not just the victim of one ruling or one judge. She is the victim of an entire system built to crush courage. Her case is a reminder that this regime will not change, soften or reform.

For decades, Tehran has ruled through blood, fear and lies — demanding silence from the world and obedience from its people, while testing the conscience of anyone willing to see it for what it is. Iran is not merely governed by bad leadership, it is being held hostage by a regime that has turned cruelty into state policy.

And anyone still defending it has forfeited any claim to justice.

Opinion

# Palestinian municipal vote no indicator of public opinion

DAQUD KUTTAB



**E**lections for municipal councils throughout the West Bank and in one Gaza Strip city, Deir Al-Balah, will be held on Saturday. These will be the fifth local elections since the creation of the Central Elections Commission following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1993.

Before the creation of a Palestinian government, municipal elections provided a rare platform to gauge public opinion.

Elected mayors and councils often carried the political aspirations of Palestinians for freedom and self-determination. However, since then, municipal elections have had less of a political role and more of a service-oriented role.

The Palestinian leadership, under President Mahmoud Abbas, has tried its best to avoid competitive elections in major cities, even though these elections will not include Hamas supporters due to the conditions of participation. They worry that competing lists will be seen as a referendum against an unpopular Abbas.

The upcoming municipal elections will therefore fail to indicate the direction of public opinion. Major cities like Nablus and

Ramallah will not witness any competition because there is only one unopposed list in these (and other) localities. This can be attributed to the desire to avoid unnecessary competition at a time of political uncertainty. It also reflects the leadership in Ramallah's desire to avoid an election process that would reveal its own weakness and unpopularity.

Official statistics from the Central Election Commission show that 42 municipalities have a single unopposed list of candidates. So, we already know that the next mayor of Nablus will be a woman, Anan Al-Attir, a former deputy governor of the Nablus district. Businessman Yacoub Sa'adeh will be the

mayor of Ramallah. Slightly over 1 million Palestinians are eligible to vote in an electoral system based on an open list form of proportional representation. The public will be asked to select one electoral list and up to five candidates from that list. Women must make up at least 32 percent of all lists' nominees. Some 367 electoral lists were submitted, comprising 4,475 candidates and 284 village councils.

For the most part, candidates are either family or tribal representatives or belong

to the ruling Fatah movement.

All candidates must sign a document stating they will adhere to the international agreements the Palestinian government has signed. This condition eliminated Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Left-wing factions in the Palestine Liberation Organization felt that this condition — imposed by the international community — violates Palestinian sovereignty and independence. Consequently, they also decided not to participate.

While the municipal elections are taking place in their regular four-year cycle, 2026 is also expected to witness several other elections that will have an important political impact.

As part of a comprehensive reform plan presented by Abbas to the UN General Assembly last September, the Palestinian National Council will be revitalized in the fall of 2026. This does not necessarily mean that all members of the PLO's parliament in exile will be formally elected. The commitment made by Abbas states that elections for 350 delegates (much reduced from the previous 500-plus) will take place where possible.

A third of the Palestinian National Council's delegates are supposed to be

those elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council. The 132-person latter has been dissolved since 2018 by a decision of the Palestinian High Court. No decision or election date has yet been announced for the Palestinian Legislative Council elections. Abbas has declared that Palestinian legislative elections would take place one year after a ceasefire in Gaza came into effect. However, they might be postponed due to the unstable situation in the Strip and the West Bank, as well as the

issue of East Jerusalem participating via absentee voting at six post offices, as agreed in the Oslo Accords.

While the upcoming municipal elections will not provide any clear direction for

the Palestinian public, an important event taking place next month might. The Eighth Fatah Congress is due to convene on May 14. Although the PLO's main faction is supposed to hold its congress every four years, the seventh congress took place in 2016. It remains to be seen whether the upcoming congress will strengthen the position of Abbas and its vice president, Hussein Al-Sheikh, or if the popular imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghout and his supporters will emerge as a strong faction within the ruling movement.

## The Palestinian leadership has tried its best to avoid competitive elections in major cities

## Candidates are either family or tribal representatives or belong to the ruling Fatah movement

# The origins and fate of digital sovereignty

ROBIN RIVATON



**I**n June 2023, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman visited New Delhi to address entrepreneurs and investors. Asked whether three Indian engineers with \$10 million could build something comparable to OpenAI, his response was blunt: it was "totally hopeless" for startups with limited resources to compete with established players in developing foundation models. Nineteen months later, the Chinese startup DeepSeek demonstrated that a leading model could be trained at a fraction of the cost that many in Silicon Valley had considered essential.

Obviously, Altman was wrong in universalizing Silicon Valley's cost structure. But his broader point still holds: building an independent digital industry is extraordinarily difficult.

This asymmetry remains a defining feature of the global tech landscape. Among the world's major economies, only two — China and Russia — have managed to build digital ecosystems that are significantly insulated from US platforms. Other economies, such as India and Brazil, have deep pools of talent, abundant capital and large markets, but nothing approaching the

same degree of technological autonomy.

In most digital markets, the first entrant is American. Once such a platform reaches critical mass, local competition becomes structurally unlikely, not because of a lack of talent but because near-zero marginal costs leave little room for viable alternatives. When a product is already free, trained on vastly more data and deeply embedded in user habits, meaningful competition is effectively foreclosed.

Under these conditions, the only reliable

way to sustain domestic competition is to prevent foreign entrants from establishing dominance before local firms can scale.

China has done exactly that, though its digital sovereignty was not initially conceived as part of an industrial strategy. In the early 2000s, the Chinese government focused mainly on controlling information flows rather than cultivating national tech champions.

There was no master plan for companies like Tencent or ByteDance to become tech giants, nor any clear roadmap for building a self-sufficient consumer internet. The Great Firewall was built for political purposes; its economic consequences were, at first, incidental.

Daquid Kuttab is an award-winning Palestinian journalist and former Paris Professor of Journalism at Princeton University. He is the author of "State of Palestine Now: Practical and Logical Arguments for the Best Way to Bring Peace to the Middle East." X: @daquidkuttab

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## Only China and Russia have managed to build digital ecosystems that are significantly insulated from US platforms

## The window for building digital champions opens early, closes quickly and usually requires some form of protected market space

American companies found themselves shut out. Once Chinese firms achieved domestic scale, they did something American platforms had rarely been forced to do: rebuild increasingly large portions of the technology stack themselves.

The EU has taken the opposite approach. American artificial intelligence products entered European markets quickly and, despite some regulatory friction, faced no comparable structural barriers. Consequently, European startups are now competing for users who already have access to products backed by firms that have spent billions of dollars on computing infrastructure and model development.

The window for building digital champions opens early, closes quickly and usually requires some form of protected market space for domestic capacity to develop. China restricted foreign competition and only later incorporated that position into its industrial strategy; India had the talent but not the protection; and Brazil had the talent but not the capital controls. Europe, for its part, devotes far more energy to debating the ethics of AI

than to creating the industrial conditions needed to compete.

What the EU cannot do, despite a decade of trying, is regulate its way to digital sovereignty while leaving market access conditions unchanged. This tension is not new. In its 2020 Schrems II ruling, the Court of Justice of the European Union struck down the "Privacy Shield," the main EU-US data transfer framework, on the grounds that US surveillance law and the lack of effective judicial redress did not meet EU standards, particularly those set by the GDPR and the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Regrettably, instead of drawing the obvious conclusion, the EU negotiated

a new framework in 2023, relying on executive commitments by former US President Joe Biden's administration whose fate under Donald Trump remains uncertain. For a bloc willing to strike down its own data transfer framework on sovereignty grounds, outsourcing digital policy to another government is not a sustainable approach. Sooner or later, Europe will have to choose between openness and dependence — or have that choice made for it.

Robin Rivaton is CEO of Stonal, a European technology company, an AI startup to the French business confederation MEDEF, and an affiliate of the Paris-based think tank Fondaparc. He is the author of eight books.

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## The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

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## Lessons from the China shock 2.0

*The response should be better industrial strategies, not knee-jerk protectionism*

Three decades ago, "Made in China" became synonymous across the world with everyday household items ranging from appliances to toys. Today, as the FT's three-part series on the "China shock 2.0" highlights, the brand is now increasingly associated with high-end industrial products such as electric vehicles, solar panels and batteries. With Beijing's proven record for rising up the economic value chain – vertically integrating as it goes – it would be brave to bet against Beijing's industrial prowess soon stretching into next-generation technologies and even services. The rest of the world is yet to fully reckon with the idea that China is no longer catching up but years ahead on many fronts.

In the mid-1990s China accounted for

around 5 per cent of global manufacturing output. It now commands nearer to 50 per cent. This has been underpinned by a state-led, long-term industrial policy. The Chinese Communist Party's approach has leaned on subsidies and hyper-competition in strategic sectors to create expertise across the supply chain. Chinese firms account for at least 70 per cent of global manufacturing capacity for major green technologies.

The excess production that Beijing's strategy has generated has been sold around the world, aided by an undervalued exchange rate. Insufficient demand at home has only reinforced the country's export-reliant growth model, with China's trade surplus last year reaching a record \$1.2tn.

Ongoing calls for China to rebalance its economy towards domestic consumption and to address accusations of unfair trading practices are justified, not least because doing so will help Beijing strengthen its long-term growth trajectory. It would also give developing

nations more room to grow. However, in the west in particular, policymakers haven't helped themselves either. Industrial strategies have lacked China's long-term and holistic approach. Red tape, high energy costs, a lack of key skills and slow infrastructure development have sapped enterprise. Efforts to broaden trade ties have been lacklustre, limiting opportunities to build scale and economic resilience. US President Donald Trump's embrace of tariffs has made matters worse.

For all nations, some diversification away from China is necessary, particularly to reduce the risk of Beijing using dependencies as leverage, or where its products raise national security concerns. This may require countries to nurture a strategic foothold in specific sectors such as energy, defence and critical resources. But with tight public budgets, continued cost of living concerns and the urgency of meeting climate goals and driving growth, China's low-cost output and expertise cannot

*Improving competitiveness would help give more edge to national specialisms where Beijing lags behind*

now be sidelined. Trying to replicate entire supply chains is time-consuming, costly and a recipe for waste.

One option, which European nations are mulling, is to open the door to Chinese factories with judicious conditions, including knowledge transfer and local hiring. Where Chinese dumping or security risks are evident, swift and co-ordinated countermeasures are needed. But policymakers must also develop industrial strategies to bolster private sectors, by investing in skills, lowering internal market barriers and boosting free trade ties. The EU continues to miss an opportunity to drive scale by failing to complete its single market in key areas.

Improving competitiveness would help give more edge to national specialisms where Beijing lags behind, and support businesses to be agile and innovative more broadly. If nations focus too narrowly on responding to the latest China shock, particularly through protectionism, they may only sow the seeds of the next one.

## Opinion America

## Of course Trump thinks he's the Messiah

Ben Hickey



Jemima Kelly



the lead planner of a US combat search and rescue (CSAR) mission and was named CSAR 25:17, "which I think is meant to reflect Ezekiel 25:17".

"The path of the downed aviator is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men," Hegseth intoned. In Tarantino's classic, Samuel L. Jackson's character Jules Winnfield speaks a very similar line right before shooting someone dead. "The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men." (Nothing of the sort exists in Ezekiel 25:17.)

Vice-president JD Vance, meanwhile, who converted to Catholicism just seven years ago, might not have made quite such a mockery of his faith but was nonetheless happy to take shots at its leader in order to defend the man he seems to consider the truly almighty one. He took to Fox News to say that Pope Leo XIV, whom Trump had been insulting because of his criticisms of the war in Iran, should "stick to matters of morality" – as if a foreign war could not be classed as such – and should let Trump be the one to be "dictating American public policy". As for the president's post of himself appearing as the Messiah – sorry, a doctor – "people weren't understanding his humour".

Is it any wonder, when the sycophants Trump has chosen to surround himself with are the supposedly devout Christians in his life, that he seems to be finding it hard to figure out what is and is not blasphemous, and where exactly he fits in the hierarchy of godliness? After all, it's not as if the president himself has ever seemed particularly familiar with his "favourite book". And his followers have long described him as some kind of "anointed" figure and "saviour" – rhetoric that increased after he survived two assassination attempts in the run-up to the 2024 election.

Indeed, his "spiritual adviser", the televangelist Paula White-Cain, stopped only an angel's breath away from explicitly calling him Jesus on stage during an Easter event at the White House two weeks ago. "You were betrayed and arrested and falsely accused. It's a familiar pattern that our Lord and Saviour showed us," she said, as Trump did his best humble-servant-of-God face behind her.

Jesus rose on the third day, as White-Cain went on to say, and we could say Trump rose again on the third election (the second one, his disciples still assure him, was stolen). With such levels of fawning adulation around him, we can see how Trump got there. Not that he had to come very far, anyway. It's not as if he has ever shown any sign that he worships anyone but the man looking back at him in the mirror.

Donald Trump grumbled amid a broad-ranging backlash to the next day, which had prompted him to delete the post.

And so I shan't. I will instead turn to the responses from Christians, because it seemed like rather a lot of them did think that Trump was casting himself as some kind of Jesus-like figure, and were not happy about that. "We are a little bit beside ourselves," was the restrained response of John Yep, CEO of Catholics for Catholic, a non-profit that has hosted events at Trump's private members' club-cum-winter residence, Mar-a-Lago. "Not saying Trump is the Antichrist," came the slightly less understated comment from a writer on religion Rod Dreher, "but he's radiating the spirit of Antichrist, no question."

If you really wanted to see someone making an utter mockery of the Christian faith in recent days, though, that was a job for the thrice-married, crusader-tattooed, Evangelical father-of-seven Pete Hegseth. The Fox News anchor-turned-"secretary of war" got up for his latest prayer service at the Pentagon on Wednesday, asked for the gathered crowd to pray with him, and proceeded to solemnly quote a version of a passage from Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction*, which he explained had been handed to him by

jemima.kelly@ft.com

## Letters

## Do not overlook the external forces driving Sudan's conflict

The war in Sudan has unmistakable external dimensions as Mo Ibrahim concedes ("What happens in Sudan will not remain in Sudan", Opinion, April 15).

There is compelling evidence that the Rapid Support Forces militia operates as a proxy for a regional actor pursuing agendas that far exceed legitimate national interests. The militia's regional sponsor has co-opted several neighbouring states, whose territories are used as conduits for weapons transfers, training camps and drones targeting Sudanese civilians.

Western governments have contributed to the crisis, by granting the RSF a degree of legitimacy and financial support under the guise of curbing irregular migration. Some of them also tacitly supported the RSF's demand to remain a parallel force to the SAF, which contributed to the outbreak of war.

The external dimension is further underscored by the presence of thousands of foreign mercenaries fighting alongside the RSF. A New York Times report (September 21 2024), citing a confidential EU memo,

estimated their number at around 200,000 by February 2024.

To ignore these realities and portray the SAF and RSF as equivalent actors, as Ibrahim's op-ed seems to imply, risks prolonging the war. Instead, the international community should treat the RSF in line with how it has addressed groups such as Boko Haram, Isis and al-Shabaab.

Historically, military coups in Sudan have been plotted by political parties rather than the SAF as an institution. At critical junctures – October 1964, April 1985 and April 2019 – the SAF

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intervened to end military rule. Holding the SAF as a whole responsible for coups, as Ibrahim does, risks absolving the political forces behind them.

Today, Sudanese people and leaders have little appetite for renewed military dictatorship. When the wars end, Sudanese citizens have both the agency and the experience to shape a civilian future – provided external interference ceases.

**Babikir Elsididd M Elamin**  
Ambassador of Head of Mission,  
Embassy of Sudan, London

## Companies need experts, not watch-borrowers

Professor Amanda Goodall ("Why is it consultancy don't preach what they practise?", Letters, April 11) draws attention to the invaluable point that organisations perform better when they are led and managed by individuals with genuine domain expertise.

I recall my astonishment when, way back, I met several members of the newly appointed corporate board of a recently privatised company. None of them had any experience of the field in which the company operated, and consequently – none of the instincts or insights that would have supported their management. One of them, a former government minister, urged on me that running a large complex company was no different in principle from running a corner sweet shop. (Well, yes, perhaps, at the most superficial level imaginable!)

I accept that some "outsiders" may bring useful additional experience to a company, but I think it would be interesting to know what proportion of British company boards and managements meet the desirable criteria that Goodall refers to. I suspect that the proportion may be all too low.

Incidentally, a consultant I once met defined a consultant as: "Someone who comes into your business and borrows your watch to tell you what time it is."

**John Tippler**  
Spalding, Lincolnshire, UK

## A harsher view of economic 'resilience'

Martin Wolf says "the mix of chaotic politics and a resilient economy can't last" (Opinion, April 15). No one could question the former label, but what about the latter?

Can you really call a global economy resilient in which 363m people are at risk of acute hunger, according to the World Food Programme, while 826m people live on less than \$3 a day, according to the World Bank, where economic activities have driven us over seven of the nine planetary boundaries as identified by the Stockholm Resilience Centre?

Or in the UK, where housing is unaffordable in most of the country, young graduates are loaded with debt with few job prospects and 1.9m reported in work-related ill health, while our intelligence agencies report lack of food security is an acute threat?

We need economic systems that meet people's needs, that leave no one behind, that don't trash our planet and ensure we are providing a liveable future for coming generations. That's what resilience looks like.

And it is not just Donald Trump's fault that he is nowhere near that.

**Natalie Bennett**  
Green Peers, House of Lords,  
London SW1, UK



Kate Bush's hit 'Running Up That Hill' was given a recent TV revival

## Chatbots, power and a modern-day Castle

The arrival of executive chatbots in large corporations calls to mind Franz Kafka's unfinished novel, *The Castle* (Business Insight, April 15).

In *The Castle*, the protagonist is told that the authority he seeks, a mysterious castle bureaucracy, is accessible, yet he never manages to reach it, confirm his role, or speak with anyone who truly holds power.

The executive chatbot perfects this condition. Authority remains out of reach. One meets only an intermediary or administrator claiming to speak for the real power behind the door.

For the many thousands of employees across offices and cultures, already remote from the centre of power, there can never be certainty whether what the proxy conveys truly reflects the thinking and wishes of the authority it claims to represent. Still less whether that authority can be held accountable at all.

**Bernstein Woller**  
Basel, Switzerland

## MacArthur and Jobs were not small beer in Tokyo

Patrick McGee's article on Homer Sarasano's role in Japan's postwar manufacturing system transported me back to a pub in the outskirts of Tokyo in 2015 (The Big Read, April 11).

After a day of seminars in political economy and modern history, I hopped off the train and stopped at my local *tachinomi* ("standing bar"). A patron, who overheard my conversation with the bartender, turned to me, and said: "Oh, you're American? Well, I'd like to thank you!" He continued: "I'd like to thank you for two people. [General Douglas] MacArthur, because he let us keep the emperor. [The emperor's fate was a central question of the early occupation after the war, and America's man eventually decided not

to prosecute Hirohito for war crimes]. And I want to thank you for Steve Jobs, since he gave us the iPhone." He displayed his Apple proudly. "Let me buy you a drink!"

Taking credit where none was due, I obliged, though I suggested it should warrant a double.

**Dustin Wright**  
Historian and Chair, Department of World Languages and Cultures, California State University, Monterey Bay, CA, US

## Britain must electrify to reduce bills for good

As the UK government considers ways to shield households and businesses against rising energy bills ("UK ministers explore 'targeted' energy bill relief for those most in need", Report, March 5), it is clear that the latest price spikes show the need to accelerate the shift away from fossil fuels and towards electrification.

The gas crisis in 2022-23 exposed the vulnerability of the UK's energy system. Households and businesses were left exposed to volatile prices, with the then government spending around £55bn protecting households alone. The current crisis reminds us of our precarious circumstances.

It is a sensible long-term strategy to strengthen domestic energy security by developing homegrown electricity.

Yet homegrown power alone will not deliver lower, fairer bills. Without further measures connecting supply to demand, the benefits will not reach households or businesses.

The answer is electrification, which provides more secure heating, transport and manufacturing processes for homes and businesses, and will bring down bills for good. In recent weeks we have seen sales of solar panels increase across our businesses by more than 50 per cent, and have seen similarly impressive interest in heat pumps and electric vehicles.

As leaders of companies that supply energy to more than half of Britain's households and more than a third of businesses, we urge the government to do two things. First, ministers need to move levers away from electricity bills and shield households from any unnecessary grid upgrade costs. This will address the disproportionately high cost of electricity relative to gas and make electricity cheaper.

Second, we must enable households and businesses to access the technologies – from electric vehicles and heat pumps to solar panels and batteries – that shield them from price shocks driven by events far beyond our control. This is the moment to set out a clear plan not just for how we produce energy, but how we use it too.

**Greg Jackson**  
CEO, Octopus Energy  
**Chris Northrup**  
CEO, GOV.UK  
**Simone Rossi**  
CEO, EDF Energy

## When vinyl becomes the best subscription model

Jane Max is not alone in his vinyl revival ("Are you suffering from subscription fatigue?", Money, March 28). As a great fan of music streaming, I was quick to drop our tape cassette collection in the bin, and we only retain our CD collection thanks to my wife's good judgment. Vinyl remained unloathed in my mother's attic for decades until her recent passing.

What I discovered was a multigenerational collection huddled together like my childhood family. My mother's records sat alongside mine and my sisters and even my grandmother's Bakelite 78s. My father's collection, separated. Our teenage children were fascinated and on discovering an original pressing of Kate Bush's single "Running Up That Hill" (made famous again by the TV series *Stranger Things*) were hooked. The £1.99 price tag still attached.

A record player was purchased, and dinner is now often accompanied by the playing of a record. Max is right, putting on a record is "an event". But it is more. Streaming carries a frisson of uncertainty. To listen on my phone, I must bypass the other demands it makes of me, while a verbal request to Alexa may be refused and "similar" alternatives offered along with an additional subscription. But the record offers certainty and complete agency. I decide, I play and I listen. There is no algorithmic intermediary to negotiate.

For my most recent birthday, my 17-year-old daughter bought me Raye's current hit. A vinyl single complete with a B-side. My first such record for 40 years. But not my last.

**Mark Toon**  
Totnes, Devon, UK

## Pilgrims discover love at first bite in Lough Derg

Two letters on disparate topics in the FT refer to the rigours of a pilgrimage to Lough Derg in County Donegal ("Dublin airport holiday bug and the Lough Derg pilgrim?" "Bordering on Buddhism", April 11).

Yes, I like. As migrant pilgrims should know that the fasting, barefoot hiking, rigid prayer cycle and lack of sleep are as nothing compared with the penance imposed by Satan's torturers: the penance of Doherty.

**John Doherty**  
Gweedore, County Donegal, Ireland

## Correction

● Waymo's market share is around 12 per cent across the US cities and regions where it has services, not 7 per cent as wrongly stated in an article on April 17.

## Opinion

## Return of the e-merging markets

## INVESTMENT

Ruchir Sharma



At the height of the internet boom in 2000, Wall Street salespeople tried to add a digital lustre to emerging stock markets by rebranding them as “e-merging markets”. A quarter of a century later, amid the euphoria for AI, a similar story is unfolding. The same tech stars, South Korea and Taiwan, are driving a kind of retro rally. Over the past year, these two nations accounted for 75 per cent of emerging market returns, and most of those gains came from just three stocks – all big makers of semiconductors.

Korea and Taiwan have arguably sprung to the fore as the biggest beneficiaries of the global AI boom. Amid tight supply, AI-driven demand has driven up prices for semiconductors made by

TSMC, Hynix and Samsung to record levels. With America’s big tech companies on course to invest \$700bn in AI capex this year, their free cash flow is disappearing, but their heavy spending is boosting the profitability of the three north Asian giants. Together their profits are on track to top those of Apple, Amazon and Alphabet combined. Samsung is expected to increase operating profit more than sixfold this year to around \$185bn, surpassing every member of the “Mag Seven” American companies other than Nvidia.

As a result, with a boom from large and avid populations of local retail investors, these markets have gone parabolic in recent months – as was the case in 1999–2000.

Much has changed in the intervening decades. While the leading creator of stock market indices, MSCI, still classifies South Korea and Taiwan as emerging markets, they are developed countries in every other way. They now have per capita incomes over \$35,000, which is more typical of developed than developing nations. They have escaped the “middle income trap” and sustained rel-

atively high growth rates for decades by staying on the cutting edge of every tech revolution, both ranking top three in the world (alongside Israel) for R&D spending as a share of GDP.

That’s what set up South Korea and Taiwan to thrive in semiconductors, a cut-throat industry prone to busts and booms, none sharper than the one under way now. The surge has made this boom

South Korea and Taiwan have arguably sprung to the fore as the biggest winners of the AI boom

the most powerful of the past 10 global up cycles, with global semiconductor sales up over 60 per cent in the past year.

Investors are pushing the big north Asian chipmakers up the ranks of the world’s largest companies by market cap. TSMC is the most widely held stock, owned by 92 per cent of global equity funds. In comparison, Microsoft, the most widely owned US stock,

is held by 84 per cent of those funds.

It’s no secret that mega tech stocks have been dominating – some would say distorting – the US market for years. Today, by some measures, emerging markets have grown even more concentrated than the US, with the leading five stocks accounting for a greater share of the index. While the top US stock (Nvidia) represents 8 per cent of the US index, the top EM stock (TSMC) accounts for a record 15 per cent of the EM index. In fact, based on MSCI methodology, TSMC now constitutes a larger share of the EM index than all the stocks in India put together.

It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. China was expected to be the second biggest beneficiary of the AI boom after the US. Instead, still struggling to figure out how to profit from AI, Chinese giants led by Alibaba and Tencent have been registering paltry stock price gains compared with their counterparts in South Korea and Taiwan.

A rally of this scale raises the question of when will it end? A landmark study found that when a country or sector outperforms its equity index by more than

150 per cent over two years, a sharp correction is probable in the following two. And in emerging markets, the semiconductor sector has beaten the MSCI index by more than 180 per cent over the past two years. That puts them firmly in the danger zone, if history is any guide.

And outside of tech, not much new is happening in South Korea and Taiwan. They share burdens common to developed economies, including ageing populations and high consumer debt, which are crimping domestic demand. South Korea’s economy is growing at an unremarkable pace of around 2 per cent. A smaller and less diversified economy than South Korea, Taiwan is more directly affected by the semiconductor boom and is expected to grow faster, hitting a pace near 7 per cent this year.

When the AI arms race cools and demand for chips subsides, the spotlight on these nations will fade. For now, though, the e-merging markets are again having a moment.

The writer is chair of Rockefeller International. His latest book is ‘What Went Wrong With Capitalism’.

## The annoyance economy isn’t going anywhere

## TECHNOLOGY

Emma Jacobs



Relaxed, with stretches of time between ice creams, a Spanish beach holiday seemed the perfect moment to tackle an issue that has been weighing on me for months: cancelling a tech subscription. So I found myself passed between customer service assistants for over an hour, increasingly frazzled, before giving up. Big Tech, I’m sure.

This is one example of the “annoyance economy”, which, according to a recent report, includes myriad such annoyances (spam, robocalls and unseen fees, as well as unhelpful chatbots). All this leaves “people feeling overwhelmed, ignored, or jerked around” and costs “wasted time and lost money”. The total? \$165bn a year in the US alone.

Some throw yet more money at the problem. Kath Clarke, who provides remote (human) personal assistants to clients, tells me that most requests are not for fancy holidays or high-end restaurant bookings but “to take on the things [customers] absolutely dread: sitting on hold with the council, navigating endless customer service chatbots to sort a refund”.

Some annoyances might be accidental, stemming from dilapidated, byzantine systems, but others are deliberate, profitable for business but costly for the consumer. One woman phoned BBC Radio 4 to complain that, seven years after buying two pairs of leggings, she had discovered that the payment was not a one-off but a monthly subscription

I found myself passed between customer service assistants for over an hour before giving up

that eventually totalled £5,000.

Such tactics have been referred to as “sludge” – the opposite of “nudge”, the theory coined by behavioural economists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein to describe tweaks in “choice architecture” that encourage people to become healthier or to save. Sludge, wrote Thaler, is “essentially nudging for evil”.

This form of annoyance thrives in the workplace, too. Convulsed expenses software developers start racking up costs, while bureaucratic management slogs unnecessary hours from the working week.

According to Robert Sutton, co-author of *The Friction Project*, the best managers are those who see themselves as “trustees of others’ time”, seeking to reduce such sludge so staff can concentrate on their tasks. He cites one example of a senior manager at Google who decreed that written permission from him was required if any more than four job interviews were scheduled.

Will technology help dial down the annoyance? Neale Mahoney, professor of economics at Stanford University and co-author of the “annoyance economy” report, tells me that he worries “AI will make things worse. Dark patterns tailored person by person. Scam calls that impersonate a family member’s voice. Back-end fees calibrated to the maximum amount we are willing to pay”.

Policies to deal with all this are a work in progress. Last year, Amazon agreed to pay \$2.5bn in penalties and refunds after the US Federal Trade Commission found the tech company got millions of customers to subscribe to Prime, making it difficult to cancel. But Andrés Spicer, co-author of *The Art of Less*, says government crackdowns typically provide relief in one area while sludge gets worse in others.

For some, however, there are small pleasures to be had in turning annoyance into art. The Irish writer Ciaran O’Driscoll’s poem “Please Hold” encapsulates the specific hell of waiting on the phone, listening to “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik”. “The robot transfers me to himself. Your call is important to us, he says.”

Or in small acts of sabotage, like the man who dealt with his frustrations by encouraging the robo-assistant he was arguing with to call its delivery firm the worst in the world before describing itself as a “useless chatbot that can’t help you”. Silly, yes. But the annoyed among us must find our joy where we can.

emma.jacobs@ft.com

## Europe and the US are stronger together

## WORLD AFFAIRS

Rana Foroohar



The war in Iran has brought home, yet again, the sharp choice that Europeans face in a new great power conflict between the US and China. Should Europe side with the guys who decided to start a war of choice that threatens to wreak havoc on the global economy? Or get into bed with a country that will eventually destroy its industrial base?

It’s not an easy choice. But I think that despite President Donald Trump, who will eventually leave office, Europe is still better off siding with the US than China – and not just because Beijing is supplying Russia and now Tehran with military technology and support.

The only hope that either the US or Europe has of surviving the current geoeconomic moment is to create a new type of alliance – one based not on an asymmetric security relationship, of the kind that gave birth to Nato after the second world war, but a true partnership of equals based on deeper economic and industrial integration.

It’s not an easy moment to make this argument, but it’s important to do so, because the stage is currently

being set in both the US and Europe for what comes after Trump.

In America, the likely strong showing by the Democrats in November’s mid-term elections will affirm the need for a more “populist” – I’d say realistic – focus on issues of class and affordability, rather than progressive identity politics or the kind of centrist globalism that belongs to the 1990s.

Neither are winning solutions to the problems of the day. But while Democrats (and thoughtful Republicans) are starting to understand that it is still “all about the economy, stupid!” at home, there remains no coherent theory of how to engage with the rest of the world. It is high time we came up with one.

Finally, and belatedly, Europe is coming to terms with the intractable reality of Chinese mercantilism. Like many, I was amazed that Beijing didn’t grab the low-hanging fruit left by Trump after the announcement of his “liberation day” tariffs last year and decide to work with the Europeans to come up with a solution to the problem of Chinese goods dumping. That could have been the germ of a new trade paradigm. And it would have been the perfect moment for the Chinese to present some ideas, however half-formed or imperfect, to Brussels as a show of good faith.

Instead, China has doubled down on its export-led growth model, which has stretched much higher up the value chain into areas such as clean technology and robotics, where Europe and the US have important interests.

Beijing wants to keep a chokehold in

areas such as critical minerals and raw inputs for pharmaceuticals. It has shown no desire to be either a global policeman or a provider of global commons. As Hoover Institution fellow and China scholar Elizabeth Economy put it at a conference in Washington recently: “China wants the rights of being a superpower without the responsibilities.”

The question of how to deal with this trade challenge is, as French President Emmanuel Macron has said, a matter of “life or death”. Even increased investment carries risk “when integration becomes the source of subordination”, as Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney put it in his era-defining speech at Davos in January. While a certain amount of large-scale consumer and industrial demand could, in theory, be

The only hope is to create a new type of alliance based on economic and industrial integration

achieved by the sort of middle-power alliance Carney has advocated, a new system with both the US and Europe at its core would be far more effective.

As former Joe Biden advisers and China experts Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi have written, “allied scale”, in the form of economic and industrial partnerships between the US, Europe and large middle-sized countries, would represent more than twice Chinese GDP. It would also create far more resilience across crucial supply chains. The US, after all, is the only player outside China with a competitive advantage in AI, technology that will transform every industry and desperately needs to be underwritten with European values.

Unless that happens, the world will have only two options – control by American oligarchs or Chinese mercantilists.

That’s exactly the set of bad choices that the Biden administration was trying to avoid. And I suspect there are more than a few Europeans who now, just 15 months into Trump’s destructive second term, wish they had been more open to the Biden approach

to creating a new economic paradigm.

But even the Trump administration knows that the US can’t go it alone. Its efforts to develop a global critical mineral alliance to combat Chinese hoarding is an admission of that. The same is true of its new maritime strategy – including a 2027 budget request for \$65.8bn in new shipbuilding money – that will require working with partners in South Korea and Japan as well as Europe.

These are worthy ideas, even if they come from the Trump White House. Of course, Europeans are rightly sceptical of anything emanating from America right now. The French and British are, for example, putting together a coalition of nations to help free up the Strait of Hormuz once the war is definitively over, one that may not include the US or Israel. That’s an understandable reaction to the moment. But Europe alone – like America alone – isn’t a viable alternative to China. It’s not too soon to start thinking about what is.

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China’s trade surplus continues to grab headlines, with a surprisingly strong start to 2026. Other countries increasingly see this as evidence that China’s system unfairly supports manufacturers – at the cost of jobs elsewhere. The result has been an escalating cycle of tit-for-tat tariffs and trade barriers. But the rising surplus reflects slowing domestic demand, not trade changes. The cure, then, is to boost consumption in China – something no amount of tariffs can achieve. Fortunately, one powerful lever exists: a dramatic, permanent cut in the payroll tax.

China’s current account surplus peaked at nearly 10 per cent of GDP in 2007, following its accession to the World Trade Organization. This then evaporated, bottoming out at 0.2 per

cent of GDP in 2018. The rebound since has been dramatic, reaching 3.7 per cent of GDP in 2025. Given that China’s economy has more than doubled in size since 2007, as a share of global GDP the surplus now rivals its previous peak.

What explains this? Since onset of the property crisis in 2021, China has been undergoing a massive correction. Real estate investment is collapsing. In most countries, this would have triggered a full-blown economic crisis. China has avoided that fate in part through increased reliance on external demand.

Here the story diverges from conventional wisdom. Consumption is not the culprit. Overall savings has barely moved from pre-pandemic levels. Both consumption and incomes have held up remarkably well given the twin shocks of the pandemic and property collapse. Yet conventional wisdom is right about the solution. Stronger consumption is the best cure.

Accepting slower but more sustainable growth would also help. Targeting growth rates inconsistent with productivity trends and a shrinking working-

age population leads to distortive policies. A more moderate target would help narrow the surplus but also reduce imports, limiting the gains for trading partners. It is ultimately preferable to eliminate the surplus through stronger domestic consumption, allowing China to absorb more of its own output as well as more foreign output.

China has not been passive. The government has massively expanded

A payroll tax cut would put more money in workers’ pockets, especially those with a propensity to spend

health insurance coverage, significantly strengthened the pension system and broadened household access to financing. It has also delivered the fastest per capita consumption growth of any major economy since 2000. But even faster GDP growth has pushed consumption’s share of GDP down.

The language from the Two Sessions

in March and the forthcoming 15th five-year plan is therefore encouraging, particularly the explicit goal of gradually raising the household consumption share of GDP. But the scale of the challenge demands bolder action.

Low-hanging fruit exists: payroll taxes. China levies European-level payroll taxes, creating a large wedge between the cost of employing a worker and their after-tax income – around 38 per cent. These taxes are also highly regressive, applied to income below a ceiling of three times the average wage. Payroll taxes raised 6.5 per cent of GDP in 2024, against just 1.1 per cent for personal income taxes.

A dramatic, permanent payroll tax cut would therefore significantly boost consumption. It would put more money in workers’ pockets, especially lower-income workers with the highest propensity to spend. It would raise employment by lowering labour costs. And it would reduce informal labour by giving workers stronger incentives to participate in the social security system.

Such a cut does not appear to be on the agenda. The employer pension con-

