

India-EU pact

Markets opened cautiously; execution is key

INDIA and the European Union have finally sealed what Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called New Delhi's biggest trade deal ever — a long-awaited Free Trade Agreement that brings together two of the world's largest economic blocs. Branded the "mother of all deals", the pact creates a vast free trade zone of nearly two billion people and signals a strategic recalibration in an increasingly fragmented global economy. Meanwhile, the India-US trade deal has not been sealed though it has been in the works for several months. The deal with the EU is a signal to Trump that India can compromise — no matter what he says.

Economically, the agreement promises tangible gains. Over time, European cars, wines, medical devices and machinery are expected to become cheaper in India. At the same time, Indian exports — from pharmaceuticals and textiles to engineering goods and IT services — should find smoother access to European markets. Viewing the pact as a sentiment booster at a time when global growth remains uncertain, markets have already reacted positively. Strategically, the deal goes well beyond tariffs. For India and the EU, both wary of supply chain disruptions and Chinese dumping, the agreement is a deliberate effort to de-risk trade dependencies. It fits neatly into India's broader attempt to position itself as a reliable manufacturing and sourcing hub, and Europe's search for trusted partners amid geopolitical churn.

However, the celebratory tone must be tempered with realism. India has chosen to opens its markets cautiously. It has removed duties on only about 30 per cent of European goods initially. It reflects domestic sensitivities around agriculture, dairy and certain services. Notably, contentious issues such as carbon border taxes, labour standards and data flows have been postponed for now. The real test of the pact lies in its implementation. Its success depends on regulatory clarity, dispute resolution and the ability of smaller firms to benefit.

School counselling

Implement revised norms in letter and spirit

THE decision of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to make the appointment of socio-emotional and career counsellors mandatory in all affiliated schools is commendable. Schools now must appoint a wellness teacher and a career counsellor for every 500 students enrolled in Classes IX to XII. Qualification norms have been laid out and all appointed counsellors will have to complete a 50-hour training programme to maintain consistent standards. It may not be enough, but it is a step forward in providing a uniform mental health support framework and filling the gaps in the current arrangement. Implementing the new requirement in letter and spirit is now the big challenge. Much of it will depend on the approach of the school managements. They will have to make the leap from considering it as a diktat to be followed casually to enforcing it as absolutely essential for providing a more comprehensive school experience.

The CBSE move follows a public interest litigation filed before the Rajasthan High Court. It highlighted the rising mental health challenges among students, including academic stress and lack of structured career guidance. The high-pressure environment, it pointed out, requires both emotional and social support. The petitioners are hopeful of similar reforms in schools affiliated with state boards, and even in colleges and universities. Confidentiality forms a key part of the counsellors' conversations with students, parents and teachers, but as their role widens, they too need a support network. Provisions for feedback on case studies, regular seminars and upgraded training modules would help in what is an ever evolving learning process for all the stakeholders.

Sensitisation, coping strategies, skills for managing stress — counselling is a serious endeavour. Career guidance demands a perceptive outlook and informed insights. First and foremost, accord these professionals the respect they deserve.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, JANUARY 28, 1926

The problem of self-government

IN his farewell speech at Colombo, Ramsay Macdonald made a remark regarding the problem of self-government which deserves more than a passing notice. "He believed in self-government," he said, "and the problem had got to be solved in co-operation, goodwill and fellowship in connection with one another. That was ordinary common human sense". In one and a very important sense this is true, of course. A people cannot be self-governing, the several components of which are not actuated in their dealings with one another by a spirit of cooperation, good will and fellowship. In this sense self-government is a very different thing from mere independence. A nation may be independent both in its internal and external relations and be still under an autocratic ruler or under a Government in which the ruling power is exercised by one single section of the people, all other sections being kept in a state of subjection to it by force. But such a nation cannot be said to be self-governing in any accepted sense. The essence of self-government is that the sovereignty shall rest in the people as a whole, in other words, that each individual in the nation shall potentially or actually participate in the ultimate task of government on terms of equality with ever other. And this is possible only if there is mutual cooperation, goodwill and fellowship. If, however, Macdonald meant — and there is reason to believe that he did mean this — that the problem of self-government in such a country as India or Ceylon had to be solved not merely by cooperation, goodwill and fellowship among the component parts of the people, but by cooperation, goodwill and fellowship between the people of the country as a whole and the ruling authority, the remark is true in a very restricted sense.

NDS confirms the Trumpian playbook

The US National Defense Strategy leaves Europe vulnerable and Asia uncertain



SHYAM SARAN
FORMER FOREIGN SECRETARY

IN the wake of the National Security Strategy (NSS) document issued by the US White House on December 25, 2025, came the National Defense Strategy (NDS) document released by the US Department of War on January 23, 2026. The NDS elaborates a roadmap to implement the NSS, though it has some new points of emphasis, some notable elaborations of key objectives and several glaring omissions which reflect altered priorities or impulsive, personality-driven initiatives. The Board of Peace, originally for peace and reconstruction in Gaza, has been unveiled at Davos with an ambiguous and broader remit presided over by Trump in his personal capacity, and not as US President. Yet, it was not anticipated in the NDS. One should not, therefore, over-interpret the NDS since President Trump is unlikely to be bound by its logic. The tactical and transactional character of US external relations under Trump has rarely conformed to an overall, internally consistent strategy.

The NDS reaffirms the NSS priorities to homeland security and the overarching importance of hemispheric security, with the US exercising hegemonic control over its western hemisphere, ranging from the Arctic in the north (including Greenland) to the southern tip of Latin America. Curiously, Antarctica is not mentioned, though its strategic importance is self-evident. One wonders why.

The next priority reflects the NSS in focussing on the Indo-Pacific. However, there is a more detailed description of the posture towards China but no refer-



IMPULSIVE: Trump's Board of Peace was not anticipated in the National Defense Strategy. REUTERS

ence to other key partners and allies such as Japan, Australia and India and the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Japan is only mentioned in passing as being threatened by North Korean nuclear weapons. The Quadrilateral — the Quad — does not figure in the document nor does AUKUS, the nuclear submarine alliance of Australia, the UK and the US. South Korea merits greater attention as an ally that is capable of defending itself against North Korea and only requires critical support from the US. This fine example of burden-sharing is obviously not applicable to Japan.

The NSS had emphasised the importance of deterring the Chinese threat to Taiwan and its importance in keeping intact the so-called "first island chain", a defence perimeter which commands access to the Western Pacific. There was a commitment to the US maintaining a "military over-match" as part of the deterrence against China. This term is missing with the emphasis now on maintaining a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific which "allows all of us to enjoy a decent peace."

India should take Carney's suggestion seriously — that the 'middle powers' should work together to shape a new international order.

What would a "decent peace" look like? This is not spelt out but what follows is unusually conciliatory towards China: "Fortunately, this peace is compatible with the interests of our potential opponents if they keep their demands reasonable and cabined."

"We do not demand their humiliation or submission. Rather we demand only that they respect our reasonably conceived interests and those of our allies and partners who stand stoutly with us. If we can acknowledge this,

we can achieve a flexible and sustainable balance of power among the US and peace."

This sounds very much like "peaceful coexistence" that China advocates.

The NDS makes no mention of Taiwan and while deterrence remains the objective, the language and tone is different, perhaps reflecting the more optimistic outlook in the wake of the Trump-Xi Jinping summit held in Busan on November 30, 2025. The NDS makes the point that it would be unrealistic to think "that a threat to a person halfway across the world is the same as to an American."

Taken together, these articulations in the NDS can hardly be reassuring to Taiwan and US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.

To the extent that a shared concern over the expansion of Chinese power in the Indo-Pacific was a significant component in the perceived strategic convergence between India and the US over the past 25 years, the emerging and more positive equation between the US and China will necessitate significant readjustments in our foreign policy posture.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Tariffs and trade wars have no winners. — He Lifeng

Ajit, the stylish screen villain

SQUADRON LEADER KK SHARMA (RETD)

AJIT was born as Hamid Ali Khan on January 27, 1922 in Golconda, Hyderabad. The family belonged to the Borzoi clan of Pashtuns, whose ancestors had migrated from Kandahar to present-day Uttar Pradesh and eventually settled in Hyderabad. Ajit's father emphasised education. However, according to Ajit's son Shahzad Khan, young Hamid sold his schoolbooks and ran away to Bombay (now Mumbai). During his early struggle, he spent nights sleeping inside cement pipes, often harassed by local gangsters demanding protection money. Ajit faced these threats with sheer physical strength, eventually earning their respect and emerging as a local hero.

He began acting in the 1940s, initially working as an extra in films. Although he later secured lead roles, success eluded him. On filmmaker Nanabhai Bhatt's advice, he adopted the screen name Ajit as 'Hamid Ali Khan' was too lengthy. At the urging of his friend Rajendra Kumar 'Tuli', Ajit took on roles of the villain. Kumar was instrumental in getting Ajit the antagonist's role in '*Suraj*', where he was in the leading role.

From there on, Ajit redefined cinematic villainy, delivering memorable performances in films such as '*Zanjeer*', '*Yaadon Ki Baraat*' and '*Kalicharan*'. He became legendary for his iconic dialogues like '*Mona Darling...*', '*Lilly, don't be silly*' and '*Saara shehar mujhe Lion ke naam se jaanta hai*'. His other notable films include '*Naya Daur*', '*Nastik*', '*Shikari*', '*Mughal-e-Azam*', '*Bara Dari*', '*Opera House*', '*Halaku*' and '*Anand Math*'. Over a career spanning nearly four decades, Ajit shared the screen with stalwarts like Prithviraj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, Shammi Kapoor, Dharmendra and Amitabh Bachchan.

It is often noted with admiration that nearly every song featuring Ajit became an all-time hit, even when the films themselves were not major successes. These songs include '*Yeh Desh Hai Veer Jawano Ka*', '*Bhula Nahin Dena Ji*', '*Dekho Mausam Kya Bahaar Hai*', '*Main Khushnaseeb Hoon*', '*Aaja Ke Intezaar Mein*', '*Dil Ka Na Karna Aitbaar Koi*', '*Yeh Haseen Raat Yeh Bahaar Yeh Sama*', '*Zindagi Bhar Gham Judaai Ka*' and poet Pradeep's powerful '*Dekh Tere Samsaar Ki Haalat*'.

Ajit acted in over 200 films, predominantly portraying a sophisticated and stylish villain. Despite playing ruthless gangsters, his onscreen persona was marked by elegance, calm authority and refined mannerisms. He was often seen in bold checkered suits, wide sunglasses and striking jewellery, with his female accomplice frequently addressed as 'Mona'. He rarely engaged in violence himself, instead commanding a loyal gang of secondary villains — often played by actors like Jeevan, Ranjeet and Kader Khan, typically bearing westernised names like Peter, Michael or Robert.

Ajit retired from films in 1981 following a heart bypass surgery. He passed away on October 22, 1998 in Hyderabad. He is remembered as one of the most iconic villains in Indian cinema.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Honour constitutional vows

Refer to 'Our Republic's soul lives in we, the people'; the article aptly reminds us that a republic is measured by the lived reality of its citizens. While India has rightly prioritised national security, the constitutional assurances like dignity, equality and fraternity are far from reassuring. However, given India's economic progress, the glaring gap between the rich and the poor remains worrisome. Moreover, rising majoritarianism, the othering of minorities and vigilante violence have further fragmented society. When inclusion erodes, the idea of "We, the People" is diminished. The State must honour its constitutional promise, reduce inequality, protect dignity and strengthen fraternity in letter and spirit.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

Punjab's youth wants jobs

With reference to 'Punjab's promise and its paradoxes'; for a long time, Punjab's politics has remained trapped in farm-centric assurances, subsidies and Centre-state confrontations. While agriculture remains vital, it can no longer absorb the aspirations of Punjab's growing youth population. The young seek stable jobs, fair wages and dignified living conditions. What frustrates them most is the gap between promises made and promises fulfilled. Repeated assurances followed by policy inertia have deepened disillusionment. Skill development and entrepreneurship aligned with market needs must replace short-term populist measures. Punjab's leadership will have to place employment at the centre of governance.

HARISH MONGA, FEROZEPUR

Posthumous awards lack impact

The recent announcement to posthumously confer the Padma Vibhushan on the legendary actor Dharmendra is a well-deserved recognition, yet it brings a lingering sense of 'too little, too late'. While posthumous awards honour a legacy, they lack the profound impact of acknowledging greatness while the recipient is still alive, except in war or other acts of bravery, to witness the nation's gratitude. When the state delays such honours, the gesture feels more

like a footnote. We must celebrate our icons while they can still glow in the spotlight they so rightfully earned.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

When leaders ignored SYL row

Apropos of 'Khattar hopeful of SYL breakthrough ahead of Punjab-Haryana CMs' meet'; perhaps, AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal will not allow Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann to arrive at a conclusion. Only Devi Lal and Parkash Singh Badal had the heft to solve this contentious issue during their tenures as CMs of Haryana and Punjab, respectively. However, they chose to ignore it, despite strong bonhomie at a personal level. This topic arises only during Assembly elections just to browbeat the electorate.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Freebies vs govt schemes

Recently, the Supreme Court made the distinction between welfare spending and freebies. However, in 2013, the apex court had said that making promises in election manifestos was not to be considered a corrupt practice. The SC's oral pronouncement appears to criticise freebies implicitly by citing a better use of the State's largesse. It declares the State's obligation to honour the Constitution by formulating developmental schemes in place of freebies. Freebies can be seen as a waste of resources, not just hurdles in the way of free and fair elections. The distinction between wasting public funds in order to come to power and using these funds for development of the less privileged lays bare the difference between grabbing power and the actual responsibility of governance.

YASH PAL RALHAN, JALANDHAR

Bindra took cricket to heights

Former BCCI president late IS Bindra's association with cricket started in 1975. He played instrumental roles in the breaking of Doordarshan's monopoly in the broadcast of cricket matches and the organising of the 1987 World Cup in India. If today we see a lot of money in cricket, the credit goes to Bindra. Mohali will remain indebted to him for getting an international stadium in the region.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Why strategic autonomy still matters



MANOJ JOSHI
DISTINGUISHED FELLOW,
OBSERVER RESEARCH
FOUNDATION, NEW DELHI

THE chief guests at the Republic Day parade reveal the foreign policy zeitgeist of the nation in a particular period. The presence of two heads, European Council President Antonio Costa and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, tells us about how India is hedging its US relationship by reaching out to a near peer, at least in terms of financial resources and technology. Signing a trade deal with the EU as well as a defence and security pact underscores India's determination.

Recent developments in global politics suggest that the world may be entering a period of sharper uncertainty rather than a smooth transition. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney captured this mood by warning that the international system was experiencing a "rupture, not a transition."

His remarks were echoed by several European leaders who emphasised the need for middle powers to act collectively, lest they be

reduced to mere objects of great-power bargaining.

European leaders, including France's President Emmanuel Macron, have increasingly spoken the language of "strategic autonomy." The idea had limited traction so long as the transatlantic relationship appeared stable.

Today, however, doubts about American reliability have pushed even long-standing US allies to consider hedging strategies. Whether this moment proves to be a fundamental rupture or a passing storm remains uncertain. Deep historical, cultural and economic ties still bind the US to its allies, and NATO is, in fact, expanding its military capabilities. Yet uncertainty itself is a strategic condition — and it is one India can ill afford to ignore.

For India, the lesson is not that alliances are suddenly obsolete, but that excessive reliance on any single partner carries growing risks. Recent frictions between the US and India underline a basic reality: in a more transactional world, leverage matters.

India possesses significant latent leverage — its market size, its strategic geography and its role in balancing China — but this has not always been translated into bargaining power. In some cases, it has even diminished, as New Delhi has "voluntarily" curtailed oil imports from Russia and reconsidered its investment in the Chabahar port project under US pressure.



HEDGING: Signing trade and defence pacts with the EU underscores India's balancing act. **PII**

There is no question that India needs the US. Access to advanced technology, foreign direct investment and geopolitical support have been central to India's rise over the past two decades. Washington's approach towards India since the mid-2000s was marked by a degree of strategic generosity, allowing New Delhi considerable autonomy even as ties deepened.

This underpinned India's alignment with the US on issues such as Iran. Yet the political context in Washington has changed. The current American approach is overtly transactional, and India is no longer automatically viewed as a strategic bet worth sustained concessions.

The latest US National Defense Strategy signals a sharper focus on defending the Western Hemisphere and

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suggests that support to allies elsewhere may be more limited and conditional. Relations with China are framed less in terms of confrontation and more by managed competition and stability.

Taken together, this implies that American willingness to actively underwrite India's position vis-à-vis China may be more constrained than New Delhi has assumed since the Indo-US rapprochement that began in 2008.

The danger for India lies in mistaking comfort for trust. Over the past 15 years, India and the US developed a dense web of political, technological and defence ties at a measured and relatively frictionless pace. This created a comfort zone in which hard questions about autonomy, leverage and long-term divergence were postponed.

Trust, in international politics, is not an abstract sentiment but a function of converging interests — and those interests are now less aligned than before.

Despite these external uncertainties, India is an island of stability in an unsettled world. Over the past year, the ruling BJP has consolidated political authority and advanced reforms in labour codes, securities markets, foreign investment rules and the GST.

These measures are necessary to drive economic momentum, yet the economy continues to display signs of stress. Employment growth remains weak, capital inflows are insufficient and the out-migration of skilled talent continues. Meanwhile, India's external environment has become more complex, a military clash with Pakistan as well as political turbulence in Nepal and Bangladesh have added to regional uncertainty.

In reassessing its global outlook, India would do well to revisit the lessons of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. While the terminology has evolved, the core objective remains the same: preserving sovereignty by building independent capacities. Autonomy has never meant isolation. Rather, it has meant the ability to engage widely without being constrained by the preferences of any single power.

India's space programme offers a compelling illustration. Beginning in the 1960s with modest rocket experi-

ments, India gradually acquired foreign technologies and licences — particularly from France and the US — and adapted them into indigenous systems. External assistance played a role, but it was India's hard-nosed focus on domestic capability that ultimately produced strategic independence in space and missile technologies.

The capacities India must now develop are different in form but similar in spirit. Strategic autonomy today requires domestic capabilities in semiconductors and electronics critical for defence, artificial intelligence and robotics for surveillance, secure cyber infrastructure to protect critical assets and resilient space-based navigation systems such as NavIC.

On the economic front, it requires supply-chain resilience, digital sovereignty in payments and data governance and a determined effort to promote capital investment which will, in turn, encourage robust domestic research and innovation ecosystems.

Strategic autonomy, then, is not a slogan nor a rejection of partnerships. It is a recognition that power in the contemporary world flows from capabilities — technological, economic and institutional. India's task is not to distance itself from the US or any other partner, but to engage them from a position of greater strength. In an era of uncertainty and transaction, autonomy is not a luxury. It is a strategic necessity.

The 'gora saheb' more Indian than the 'brown saheb'



PAVAN K VARMA
EX-MP, DIPLOMAT & AUTHOR

IN the late 1980s, Mark Tully went to the Delhi Gymkhana Club wearing a *pyjama-kurta*. He was stopped at the entrance for not 'being appropriately dressed'. The irony was delicious. Here was a *pukka* 'gora saheb', dressed as an Indian, being stopped from entering a club because he was not a 'brown saheb'. In a sense, this incident illustrates quite aptly what Tully *saheb* was: a Briton more Indian than many elite Indians themselves.

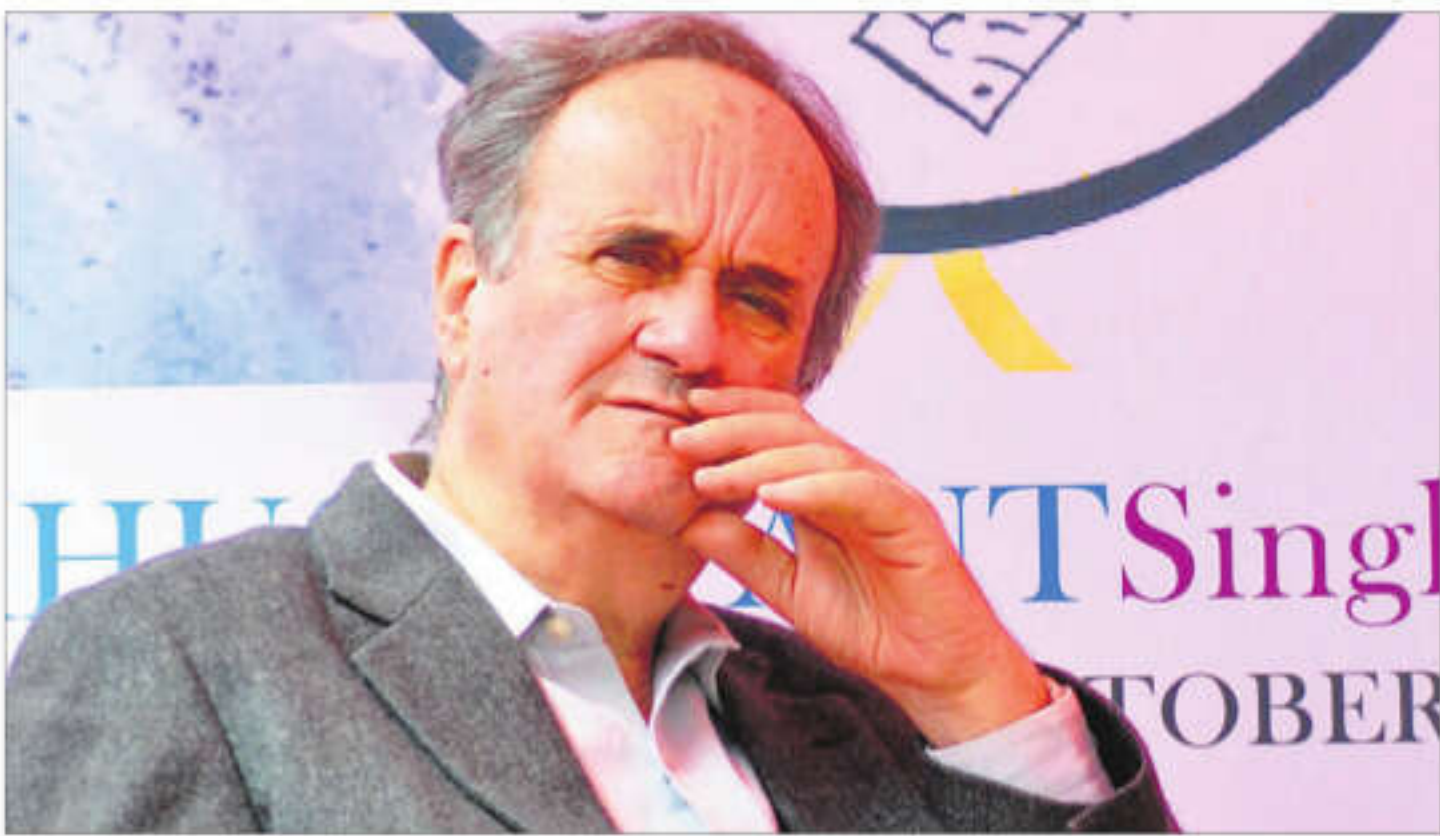
With his passing on January 25, at the age of 90, I have lost a friend of almost four decades and one of the finest journalists India — and the world — has seen. I first met Mark officially, as the pointsperson for foreign correspondents in the Ministry of External Affairs. But soon, we became close friends, meeting often at my home or at his in Nizamuddin East, where he also had the then rare commodity of Scotch whisky on offer.

In India, Mark Tully was an

institution. For as long as people can remember, the reports filed by him were the touchstone of balanced and authentic news. It was because of him that BBC Radio acquired such unprecedented traction in India. If you wanted to know what was really happening, you had to tune on to the BBC because Tully *saheb* would tell you the truth.

There are foreigners who visit India, and there are a rare few who are visited by India — entered, unsettled and finally claimed by it. Mark Tully belongs decisively to the latter category. To understand his life and work is to understand a certain kind of enlightened curiosity: patient, unshowy and deeply respectful of complexity. He was not a man who sought to explain India by casually defining it, but one who allowed himself to be instructed by it, even when it resisted easy comprehension.

Born in British India in 1936 in Kolkata, Mark Tully's earliest memories were shaped by the waning years of the Raj. That inheritance could easily have become a burden — a lens clouded by nostalgia or superiority. Instead, Tully made a conscious and courageous choice to unlearn. When he returned to India as a journalist for the BBC and later rose to become its bureau chief in New Delhi,



RARE FOREIGNER: India, for Mark Tully, was not a posting. It was a vocation. **FILE PHOTO**

he did so not as a custodian of imperial memory, but as a participant in an unfolding national story. India, for him, was not a posting. It was a vocation.

What distinguished Tully from many foreign correspondents was not merely longevity — though his decades-long engagement is remarkable — but temperament. He was not a parachutist, dropping in during moments of crisis and departing with neat conclusions. He stayed. He listened. He learned. And this gave his journalism a texture that was at once intimate and incisive.

During tumultuous periods — most notably the Emergency of 1975-77 — Tully

Tully's legacy is not confined to journalism or literature. It lies in an attitude — a way of seeing India that is neither defensive nor dismissive.

emerged as a lucid and credible observer. His reporting did not thunder with outrage, nor did it lapse into apologetics. Instead, it posed uncomfortable questions: how could a democracy so vibrantly argumentative acquiesce to authoritarian suspension? What did this episode reveal about the fragility, as also the resilience, of Indian institutions?

Tully understood that India's contradictions were not aberrations, but features of a civilisation negotiating modernity on its own terms. This sensibility found fuller expression in his books: *'No Full Stops in India'*, *'The Heart of India'*, and *'India in Slow Motion'*.

These books are not exercises in foreign fascination. They are meditations on continuity and change, faith and politics, aspiration and disenchantment. Tully was particularly drawn to rural India — not as a romantic refuge from modernity, but as the crucible where its consequences are most starkly felt. He wrote of villages grappling with development, of religious belief persisting amid economic uncertainty, of moral worlds that could not be easily mapped onto western categories.

His deep sympathy for India did not mean indulgence. Tully could be unsparing about corruption, communalism and the failures of governance. But his criticism was anchored in concern, not contempt.

What I really liked about him was that even if he had a different opinion, he was not dogmatic but always open to discussion in a well-informed and non-shrill manner. In due course, I realised that he believed that India's moral resources — its pluralism, its philosophical depth, its instinct for accommodation — were real, even if often under strain. This made him, paradoxically, more Indian in spirit than many who claimed the identity by birth alone.

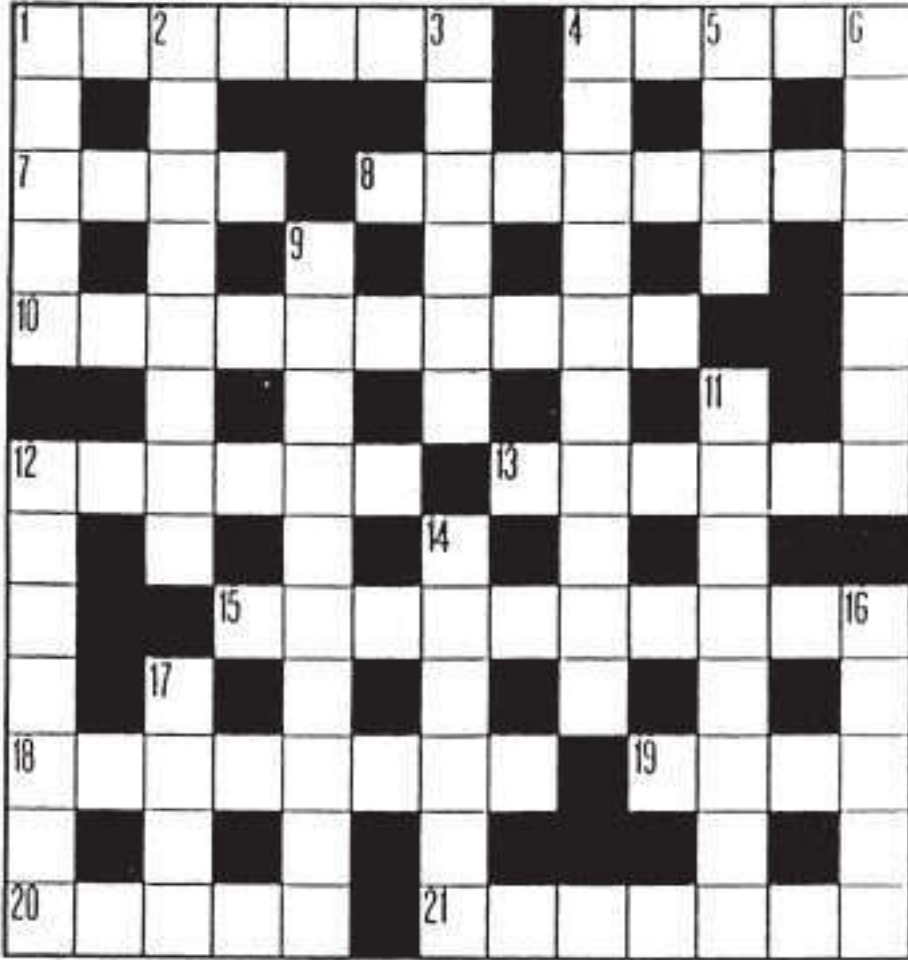
For Mark, India was home. This was not an act of rejection of Britain, but of affirmation of belonging to a place where he felt much more at home. Yet, what is noteworthy is that Tully's Indianness was never performative. He did not don it like a costume or rhetoric. It emerged organically, in his choice of friends and in his lifelong companionship with Gillian Wright, a translator and authority in Indian literature.

In this, Mark Tully represents a vanishing species: the empathetic outsider. At a time when global commentary is increasingly biased or polarised, his voice reminds us of the value of patience, of humility before another civilisation, of the discipline of doubt. He showed that it is possible to love a country without mythologising it and to criticise it without malice.

His legacy, therefore, is not confined to journalism or literature. It lies in an attitude — a way of seeing India that is neither defensive nor dismissive. For Indians, especially, Tully's work offers a mirror held by a friend: honest, steady and quietly affectionate. In choosing India, he allowed India to choose him in return. And in that mutual recognition lies the enduring significance of Mark Tully's life and work.

In his death, I have lost a true friend and India a superlative chronicler of its times.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Struck repeatedly (7)

4 Place where battle if fought (5)

7 Northeast US state (4)

8 Underhand plotting (8)

10 Elicit no response (4,1,5)

12 Volcanic rock used as abrasive (6)

13 An edible nut (6)

15 The Iron Duke (10)

18 Barely (4,4)

19 Tolerate (4)

20 Brushwood (5)

21 In dispute (2,5)

DOWN

1 Feeling greatly honoured (5)

2 Protesting indignantly (2,2,4)

3 Hold out enticingly (6)

4 Place of exposure to criticism (6,4)

5 Irritably over-sensitive (4)

6 A reactionary (3-4)

9 Destructive critical attack (7,3)

11 Military stronghold (8)

12 Self-important (7)

14 Most northerly US state (6)

16 Coolness in danger (5)

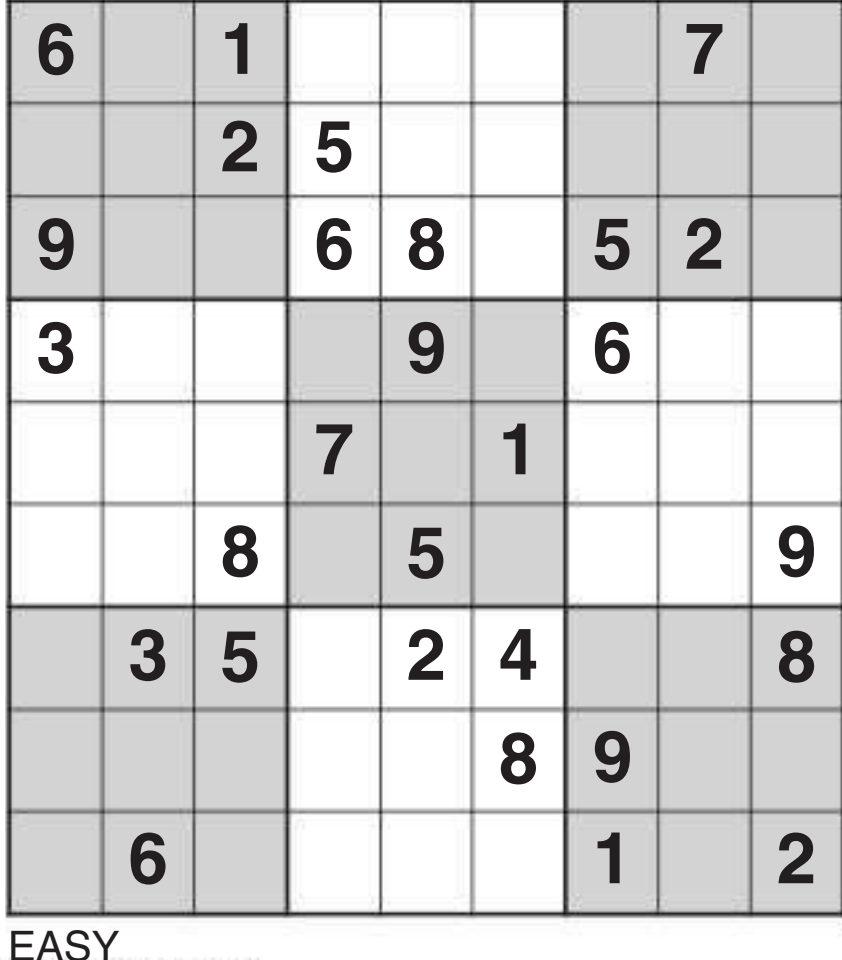
17 Aspersions (4)

Monday's Solution

Across: 1 Look daggers, 9 Oddness, 10 Outdo, 11 Rare, 12 Timeless, 14 Alight, 16 Critic, 18 Greeting, 19 Even, 22 Nurse, 23 Morello, 24 Cross swords.

Down: 2 Order, 3 Keep, 4 Assail, 5 Geometry, 6 Retreat, 7 Go great guns, 8 Loose cannon, 13 Chattels, 15 In error, 17 Animus, 20 Valid, 21 Trio.

SU DO KU



MONDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JANUARY 28, 2026, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Marghshirsh Shaka 8
- Marghshirsh Parvishite 15
- Hijari 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 10, up to 4:37 pm
- Brahma Yoga up to 11:54 pm
- Kritika Nakshatra up to 9:27 am
- Moon in Taurus sign

FORECAST

SUNSET:	WEDNESDAY	17:54 HRS
SUNRISE:	THURSDAY	07:16 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	16	09
New Delhi	18	12
Amritsar	19	09
Bathinda	19	09
Jalandhar	17	06
Ludhiana	19	08
Bhiwani	22	08
Hisar	20	09
Sirsa	19	09
Dharamsala	15	04
Manali	08	-02
Shimla	14	01
Srinagar	07	0
Jammu	18	10
Kargil	02	-08
Leh	01	-10
Dehradun	20	06
Mussoorie	13	06

TEMPERATURE IN °C

EASY

epaper.tribuneindia.com

A welcome turn on Punjab’s roads

Punjab’s reported 48 per cent reduction in road accident fatalities since the launch of the Sadak Surakhya Force (SSF) marks a significant and encouraging shift in public safety outcomes. For a state that once ranked among the country’s top three in road accident deaths, this turnaround deserves recognition—not only for its numbers, but for what it signals about governance and prioritisation.

Road accidents are often treated as an unavoidable consequence of growth, poor driving habits, or infrastructure stress. Punjab’s experience challenges that assumption. The creation of a dedicated, specially trained road safety force has demonstrated that focused institutional intervention can save lives. Faster response times, immediate first aid, and improved coordination with hospitals appear to have played a decisive role in reducing fatalities.

The deployment of SSF personnel along accident-prone highways and the use of well-equipped response vehicles reflect a shift from reactive policing to preventive safety management. Equally important is the deterrence factor—regular patrolling and enforcement can discourage traffic violations before they turn fatal. What makes this initiative noteworthy is its replicability. Road safety is not unique to Punjab; it is a national concern.

If other states are indeed studying this model, it suggests that Punjab has offered a practical template rather than a symbolic gesture. In a country where thousands die annually on highways, scalable solutions matter.

The reduction in deaths also carries broader social implications. Every prevented accident spares families from irreversible loss, financial ruin, and long-term trauma. Public confidence grows when citizens see the state respond effectively to everyday risks.

Sustaining this progress will require continued investment, transparent data reporting, and public cooperation. But the direction is unmistakably positive. Punjab’s experience shows that road accidents are not destiny—and that with political will and focused execution, safer roads are an achievable goal.

-Abhishek Vij

Students should limit screen time for better health

In today’s digital age, students are increasingly glued to screens, whether for online classes, social media, gaming, or entertainment. While technology has made learning more accessible and interactive, excessive screen time poses serious risks to the physical and mental well-being of young learners. It is high time that students consciously reduce screen exposure and focus on healthier alternatives.

Prolonged screen use can lead to eye strain, headaches, and blurred vision, conditions collectively referred to as digital eye strain. Sitting for hours in front of a screen also contributes to poor posture, back pain, and musculoskeletal problems. Studies have shown that excessive use of smartphones, tablets, and computers can interfere with sleep patterns, reducing both the quantity and quality of rest. For growing children and teenagers, inadequate sleep can hinder cognitive development, attention span, and academic performance.

Mental health is another area of concern. Excessive screen time, particularly on social media, is linked to increased stress, anxiety, and depression. Students often compare themselves with idealized online images, which can erode self-esteem and contribute to social withdrawal. Additionally, addiction to online games and videos can reduce face-to-face interaction, limiting essential social skills and emotional intelligence development.

To safeguard their health, students should set daily limits on screen use and incorporate breaks into study routines. Engaging in outdoor activities, sports, reading physical books, and spending quality time with family and friends can significantly improve overall well-being. Schools and parents must play a proactive role by encouraging screen-free hours and creating awareness about the importance of balancing digital exposure with real-life activities.

Ultimately, screens are tools meant to aid learning, not dominate life. By moderating their use, students can protect their eyesight, mental health, and physical fitness, ensuring a more productive and balanced lifestyle. Prioritizing health over screen time is an investment in both immediate well-being and long-term success. Moreover, parents and educators should model healthy screen habits themselves, as children often emulate adult behavior. Schools can introduce “tech-free” periods during the day, encouraging students to engage in hands-on learning, group discussions, and creative activities that do not involve screens. Communities can also organize outdoor events, sports competitions, and hobby clubs, offering students constructive alternatives. These measures not only reduce screen dependence but also foster physical fitness, creativity, and stronger social connections, contributing to well-rounded development.

Why the nose and fragrance could matter in corporate valuation



Parneet Sachdev
Chairman of Real Estate Regulatory Authority and a leading author

Arthashastra

When the sense of smell enters the law of trademarks, a subtle but profound shift begins: intangible aromas, once considered purely experiential, now count as brand capital. The recent decision by the Trade Marks Registry, India (under the Trade Marks Act, 1999) to accept, for advertisement, a “*rose-like fragrance smell reminiscent of roses as applied to tyres*” for Sumitomo Rubber Industries Ltd. has turned what was once largely theoretical into a present-day commercial reality (Live Law).

Under Indian Trademark Laws, registering a fragrance as a trademark is complex due to the requirement for graphical representation, which scents inherently lack. The Trade Marks Act, 1999, outlines that a trademark must be visually representable and distinctive, posing challenges for scent registration. While international precedents exist, such as in the EU and the US, where non-traditional marks like scents have been accepted, Indian courts have recognized non-traditional marks like colors and sounds. But fragrance marks face hurdles due to distinctiveness and non-functionality requirements. Future legal developments may allow for fragrance registration in India. - (AI Summary) However, recently, the Registry’s order accepted that a smell, so long as it is distinct and objectively represented, it can serve as a source-identifier under trademark law. In doing so, it opened the door to “non-conventional trademarks” in India, embedding sensory branding firmly in the country’s IP regime (Trademark Lawyer Magazine).

HOW DOES IT CHANGE THINGS Why does this matter? Because brand equity; the intangible value associated with a brand, has long been central to corporate worth. As defined in marketing theory, a brand is more than a name; it is a promise, a reputation, a set of expectations in the consumer’s mind. With smell-trademarks, companies gain a new dimension for building that equity. Smell triggers memory, emotion, nostalgia; it operates subconsciously, anchoring a product in sensory experience rather than mere utility. Consider, for instance, the globally

known case of Play-Doh. In May 2018, the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) registered the distinctive “*sweet, slightly musky, vanilla-like fragrance, with slight overtones of cherry, combined with the smell of a salted, wheat-based dough*” as a trademark for the toy modeling compound (Hasbro Newsroom).

The scent of Play-Doh, intangible, evocative, became legally protected brand property. That precedent is now being echoed in India. For Sumitomo Rubber, the rose-scented



and value chains. Firms will in time begin investing in fragrance-design laboratories, scent R&D, sensory-marketing agencies. In a country like India — with a vast manufacturing base and rising consumer aspirations — this could lead to creation of jobs, skill centres, exportable services centered on “sensory branding.”

RISKS Yet, this transformation is far from automatic. There are serious constraints — legal, technical, economic — that may limit how far smell-trademarks can meaningfully reshape industry economics. India, being a signatory to the *Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement*, adheres to international standards for intellectual property. TRIPS allows for the protection of various types of trademarks, including non-traditional marks, but it is unclear whether scent marks are explicitly included under TRIPS. However, some jurisdictions, such as the European Union and United States, have accepted fragrance trademarks under specific circumstances (taxtmi).

Registry’s order accepted that a smellcan serve as a source-identifier under trademark law. in India, embedding sensory branding firmly in the country’s IP regime

tyre mark transforms a minor sensory tweak into a proprietary asset.

ECONOMIC AND CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

From a purely legal footnote, smell-trademarks could evolve into a meaningful business strategy, if firms and markets treat them as part of brand capital. In a crowded, commoditised industries where technical differentiation is shrinking, smell offers a new vector of differentiation. Tyre manufacturing is mass-produced and heavily cost-driven. Yet with a rose-scent trademark, a tyre company can claim not only durability or performance but an aesthetic, sensory identity. If even a small segment of buyers values that, maybe luxury or lifestyle-oriented vehicle owners, the company will suddenly have the potential to secure higher margins, or at least brand loyalty. That additional premium, across millions of tyre units globally, may amount to a nontrivial revenue uplift over time. With this decision, smell marks have entered the terrain of intangible assets in the balance sheet. This can seriously influence corporate valuations and have immense effect during mergers or acquisitions. In markets such as India — where manufacturing, automotive, rubber-goods and lifestyle segments are large and growing — smell-IP could become a new category of “brand capital.” The implications are many. The rise of smell-marks could catalyse new sub-industries

regulators, courts and firms will need new instruments — standardized smell-charts, “electronic noses,” chemical-analysis, reference libraries. This will spur investments into a whole new industry and enforcement mechanisms.

A WHISPER OF AROMA- GLOBAL LAWS

The acceptance of a smell-trademark for rose-scented tyres may at first appear symbolic. In India, as manufacturing scales up and consumer aspirations shift, there is fertile ground. Imagine a domestic shoe-maker registering a signature “leather + sandalwood” scent, or a mattress-manufacturer trademarking a “fresh linen” aroma, or a retail chain protecting the aroma of its stores. Over time, such signature smells could become part of a product’s purchase appeal — just as colour, design, or packaging do today. For global firms operating in emerging economies, scent-IP might provide a low-visibility but effective differentiation strategy — harder for imitators to copy than colours or logos. For investors and financial markets, smell-marks may slowly emerge in valuations as intangible assets — akin to patents, trademarks, brand goodwill. That could influence capital flows, M&A activity, brand-driven growth strategies, and even credit ratings for companies that build strong sensory-branding portfolios.

The *European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO)* has accepted fragrance marks, including the smell of a specific flower or fruit, as registrable trademarks. The EU Trademark Regulation allows the registration of non-traditional marks, including smells, if they meet the distinctiveness and non-functionality requirements. In the U.S., fragrance trademarks have been recognized in certain cases. The *United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO)* has registered scents as trademarks under the Lanham Act, primarily in the context of consumer goods. A famous example is the “fresh cut grass” fragrance for the scent used in tennis balls, registered in the 1990s. The rose-scented tyre trademark is more than a curiosity—it is potentially the vanguard of a quiet revolution in how business defines value. As intangible as fragrance may be, it may soon become as concrete in corporate balance-sheets as trademarks, patents or brand goodwill. Smells signal a new frontier of brand building; for economies, a possible emergence of “sensory value chains”; for consumers, perhaps a new dimension of product experience. But whether scent-marks grow from niche novelty to mainstream asset class depends on vision, investment, regulation. Meanwhile, the customers of Sumitomo tyres can enjoy the smell of roses as they travel.

(Views expressed are the author’s own)

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Real progress begins when small, consistent actions quietly improve everyday life. -Aristotle

How community kitchens are restoring dignity, hope across India

In a country as vast and diverse as India, hunger remains one of the most persistent challenges. Yet, amid economic uncertainty, climate stress, and widening inequality, a quiet but powerful movement is reshaping how communities respond to food insecurity: community kitchens. From urban slums to remote rural villages, community kitchens—often run by volunteers, civil society groups, religious institutions, and local governments—are doing more than feeding empty stomachs. They are restoring dignity, building solidarity, and reaffirming the idea that no one should be left behind. Unlike charity-based food distribution, community kitchens function on inclusion. People from all backgrounds—daily wage workers, the homeless, elderly individuals living alone, migrant labourers, and even those temporarily facing hardship—eat together, often seated side by side. This shared space breaks social barriers that usually divide caste, class, and religion. States like Tamil Nadu and Kerala have long demonstrated the success of such initiatives. Tamil Nadu’s “Amma Unavagam” model, launched over a decade ago, continues to provide nutritious meals at subsidised rates, ensuring affordability without stigma.

The rise of youth-led environmental action in South Asia

Across South Asia, a new generation is redefining environmental activism—not through slogans alone, but through grassroots action, innovation, and community engagement. From the Himalayas to coastal villages, young people are stepping up to protect ecosystems, influence policy, and reimagine development.

Unlike earlier environmental movements that were often driven by academics or NGOs, today’s initiatives are increasingly youth-led. Students, first-time voters, climate educators, and young entrepreneurs are translating concern into practical solutions—cleaning rivers, restoring forests, and advocating for sustainable livelihoods. In Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, youth groups are reviving traditional water sources and documenting glacial changes using mobile technology. In Assam and Bangladesh, young volunteers are working with flood-affected communities to promote



climate-resilient housing and crop diversification. Coastal youth in Kerala and Sri Lanka are leading mangrove restoration drives, recognising their role in protecting shorelines from rising seas. Social media has amplified these efforts, allowing local struggles to gain global visibility. But what truly sets these movements apart is their rootedness in local realities. Many young activists come from communities already experiencing climate impacts—erratic rainfall, shrinking farmlands, or extreme heat. Their advocacy is informed not by theory alone, but by lived experience. Education plays a critical role in this transformation.

India-EU FTA: A Turning Point in India's Global Trade Strategy

At a time when the global economy is being shaken by wars, rising tariffs and growing uncertainty, India has chosen to respond not with hesitation, but with quiet confidence. The message from New Delhi is clear - India is open for business and firmly sure of its economic direction. The long-awaited India-European Union Free Trade Agreement (FTA), often described as the "mother of all trade deals," marks a significant milestone in this journey. This agreement is not merely about boosting trade figures or opening new markets. It reflects something deeper: India's rising credibility and growing negotiating strength on the global stage. By linking two massive economic zones that together represent nearly two billion people and around a quarter of the world's GDP, India has placed itself squarely at the centre of global economic

activity. What is particularly striking is not just the scale of these partnerships, but the pace at which India has moved forward in recent years. Traditionally seen as a slow and cautious negotiator, India has surprised many by signing multiple Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) in quick succession. Deals with countries such as the UAE, Australia, Japan and the EFTA nations, alongside ongoing negotiations with the UK and the EU, point to a clear and consistent trade strategy driven by decisive governance. There was a time when India was often labelled a "fragile" or "vulnerable" economy, overly dependent on global conditions. That perception is steadily changing. Today, India is emerging as a reliable, resilient and dependable trade partner. Nations are no longer viewing India simply as a vast consumer market, but as a



long-term partner they can trust in an increasingly volatile global environment. An important shift is also taking place in India's trade relationships. The country is moving beyond traditional dependence on major powers like the United States and China. Instead, it is building a diversified network of partnerships across Europe, West Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. This diversification reduces risk and strengthens

India's strategic autonomy in global economic affairs. This transformation rests on strong economic fundamentals, sustained reforms and policy continuity. Unlike many economies that respond to global shocks with panic-driven decisions, India has largely maintained stability and long-term planning. As a result, global investors and governments increasingly view India as stable, predictable and full of opportunity - a rare combination in today's

fractured world. Even external challenges have been turned into opportunities. The tariffs imposed during the Trump era, which unsettled many economies, encouraged India to widen its export base and explore new and underdeveloped markets. This shift was possible because India had already begun strengthening its internal resilience through robust domestic demand, financial discipline and a growing manufacturing sector. Behind this renewed confidence lies a government that has managed to strike a careful balance. A capable and coherent economic leadership has guided growth without compromising stability. India today is undertaking a difficult but essential task - supporting a rapidly growing middle class, expanding manufacturing under initiatives like "Make in India," and maintaining a strong welfare system to protect the vulnerable.

Crucially, deeper global engagement has not meant sacrificing national interests. In trade negotiations, special attention has been given to farmers, dairy producers and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Sensitive sectors have been protected, ensuring that economic openness does not come at the cost of domestic livelihoods. Taken together, the India-EU FTA and the broader trade push tell a larger story. It is the story of an India that is no longer viewed as an economic risk, but as a trusted global partner. It reflects a nation moving forward with confidence, backed by steady leadership, sound policies and growing international respect. After 18 long years of negotiations, the India-EU Free Trade Agreement is not just the closing of a chapter - it is the beginning of a new phase in India's rise as a central player in the global economy.

How reading spaces are transforming rural lives

In many rural parts of South Asia, access to books remains limited. Yet, a growing network of small, community-driven libraries is quietly transforming lives—one book at a time. Often housed in modest rooms, donated buildings, or even converted shops, these libraries are emerging through the efforts of teachers, students, retired professionals, and social workers. Their goal is simple: to make reading accessible, especially for children who have few educational resources beyond overcrowded classrooms. In villages across Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Bihar, and Nepal, such libraries are becoming centres of learning and imagination. Children gather after school to read storybooks, prepare for competitive exams, or explore subjects not covered in their textbooks. For many, it is their first exposure to literature beyond prescribed syllabi. The impact goes far beyond academics. Regular reading improves language skills, confidence, and critical thinking. Libraries also provide safe, quiet spaces—particularly important for girls who may lack such environments at home. Many of these initiatives rely on book donations, volunteer librarians, and community support. Some operate on innovative models, such as “take a book, leave a book,” mobile libraries on bicycles, or weekend reading circles. Digital tools are also being introduced, with tablets and offline educational content expanding access in areas with limited internet. Adults, too, benefit from these spaces. Farmers read about new agricultural



practices, women's groups access health information, and job seekers prepare for exams or interviews. Libraries often double as discussion forums, hosting debates, storytelling sessions, and cultural events that strengthen community bonds. What makes these libraries truly powerful is their sustainability. Because they are community-owned, residents take pride in maintaining them. Parents encourage children to attend, volunteers step in when resources are scarce, and local leaders recognise their long-term value. In a time when digital distractions dominate attention spans, these small libraries stand as reminders of the transformative power of reading. They prove that meaningful change does not always require large budgets—sometimes, it begins with a shelf of books and a shared belief in education. By nurturing curiosity and knowledge, rural libraries are planting seeds that will shape future generations—quietly, patiently, and positively.

How local innovations are making healthcare more accessible

In many parts of South Asia, access to quality healthcare has long been shaped by geography, income, and infrastructure. Yet, across small towns and rural regions, local innovations are steadily narrowing this gap—bringing essential health services closer to people who need them most. Mobile health clinics are among the most impactful developments. Operated by state health departments, NGOs, and community trusts, these clinics travel to remote villages on fixed schedules, offering basic diagnostics, maternal care, vaccinations, and health counselling. For residents who once travelled hours for medical attention, timely care is now available at their doorstep. Telemedicine has further expanded reach. With the help of digital kiosks and smartphone applications, patients can consult specialists located in urban hospitals without leaving their villages. This has proven particularly valuable for managing chronic illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, and respiratory conditions, where regular follow-ups are crucial. Community health workers remain the backbone of this progress. Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs),



auxiliary nurse midwives, and trained volunteers act as the first point of contact between households and the healthcare system. Their familiarity with local customs and languages builds trust and encourages early medical intervention. Innovations in diagnostics are also playing a role. Low-cost testing kits, portable ultrasound devices, and rapid screening tools are enabling early detection of diseases that once went unnoticed until advanced stages. Early diagnosis not only saves lives but also reduces treatment costs for families. Mental health, long overlooked, is gaining attention through community-based programmes. Peer counselling groups, helplines, and school-based awareness campaigns are helping reduce stigma and encourage open conversations around emotional well-being. Importantly, many of

these initiatives emphasise preventive care. Nutrition education, sanitation drives, and lifestyle awareness programmes aim to reduce illness before treatment becomes necessary. This shift from reactive to preventive healthcare marks a significant change in public health thinking. Challenges persist—staff shortages, digital connectivity issues, and funding constraints continue to test the system. Yet, the steady expansion of locally adapted solutions demonstrates that healthcare reform does not always require large-scale infrastructure alone. Sometimes, it begins with innovation, trust, and community participation. As these models continue to evolve, they offer a hopeful vision: healthcare that is accessible, affordable, and rooted in the realities of everyday life.

Lessons from a life forged in fire



Surbhi Dhan
Multi-talented personality with interest in reading, parenting and spiritualism

Life rarely unfolds the way we plan it. Dreams are made, paths are chosen, and yet destiny often intervenes with turns we never imagined. The life of this writer from urban Punjab offers powerful lessons on how adversity, when faced honestly, can become a teacher rather than a destroyer. From a young age, she knew she wanted more than a life defined only by routine or expectation. Growing up in a society where women were largely expected to prioritise domestic roles, she quietly nurtured a desire for independence and self-identity.

Education became her ladder. A bright and consistent student, she believed financial freedom and professional success were within reach—and they were. Acceptance into one of the country's top business schools felt like validation that life was finally moving according to plan. But life had other ideas. Circumstances forced her to step away from that dream. At the time, it felt like failure. Only later did she realise one of life's most important lessons: **not every setback is a loss—some are redirections.** What seems unfair in the moment may be preparing you for a path you could not yet see. Rooted in deep spiritual values of Satsang, Seva and Samarpan, her upbringing taught her that faith is not something to be displayed, but lived. This grounding would prove crucial later, when logic, effort, and even hope seemed insufficient. Marriage and motherhood soon followed. With twin daughters



and a settled domestic life, she believed she had finally created stability. Then came the moment that changed everything. At just twenty-seven, she was diagnosed with metastatic cancer. In an instant, the future collapsed into uncertainty. As a young mother with one-year-old twins, she faced a reality that most people associate with much later stages of life. From this moment emerges another hard truth: **life does not wait for us to be ready.**

Yet, her story is not about illness alone—it is about what happens inside a person when survival becomes the only goal. She realised that while the body fights disease, the mind fights fear, despair, and helplessness. This inner battle is rarely discussed, yet it determines how one endures suffering. One of the strongest lessons from her journey is about **acceptance.** Acceptance, she explains, does not mean liking what has happened. It means stopping resistance. Denial, grief, and mourning

are natural—but staying stuck in bitterness slowly destroys from within. Accepting reality, however painful, allows movement forward. Another lesson is **gratitude.** When everything feels broken, gratitude feels almost offensive. Yet she learned that gratitude is not denial of pain—it is perspective. Even in hospital corridors, she realised that someone else was suffering more, that small comforts still existed. Gratitude, she found, is a way to prevent the mind from drowning in despair. Perhaps the most transformative lesson is **taking responsibility.** Not blame—but responsibility. Blaming others, fate, or even God may feel comforting, but it drains strength. When she stopped asking “Why me?” and started asking “What can I do now?”, she regained control. Forgiveness—of others and of herself—became emotional survival, not moral superiority. Her reflections also warn against anger and resentment.

These emotions may feel justified, but they quietly damage the mind and body. Learning when to respond, when to communicate, and when to ignore became essential skills for preserving inner peace. Importantly, she does not claim to be extraordinary. Her strength did not come from perfection or fearlessness. It came from repeatedly choosing to stand up again—mentally and emotionally—even when it felt impossible. The central lesson of her life is simple but profound: **you may not control what happens to you, but you always control what it makes of you.** Her story encourages us to stop waiting for life to be fair and start learning how to live wisely within it. To focus less on outcomes and more on process. To understand that surrender is not weakness, and acceptance is not defeat. This is not just a story of survival. It is a reminder that every life, no matter how broken it feels, still holds the power to be rewritten.



BCCL listing redefines PSE IPO narrative

On January 19 this year, Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL), India's largest producer of coking coal and a subsidiary of Coal India Limited, listed on the stock market through an Initial Public Offering (IPO). Despite challenging global market conditions, the BCCL's IPO created capital market history as the highest ever recorded in India's mainboard IPO market. The 46 crore shares that were on offer to raise an additional ₹1,070 crore received over 90 lakh applications and were oversubscribed 147 times. This successful IPO listing of an Indian Public Sector Enterprise (PSE) is not a one-off but a trend that has been consistent over the past several years. Over the past 7-8 years, close to 15 Public Sector Undertakings have been listed in the Indian stock exchanges and have not only been able to raise the required money but also create a tremendous amount of shareholder value and retailer wealth.

Shareholder value creation
Prior to BCCL, since 2017, India has seen more than 10 large core engineering, construction-, railways-, defence-, and energy-related PSEs get listed in the stock markets. They have consistently created value for both retail shareholders and the largest owner of PSE stocks – the Government of India. Among the companies analysed, the cumulative market capitalisation rose from ₹1.4 lakh crore at listing to ₹8.53 lakh crore as on December 31, 2025 – a whopping 513% increase.

The companies analysed were Cochin Shipyard, Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders, RITES Ltd., IRCON International, Rail Vikas Nigam Ltd., Indian Railway Finance Corporation, Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation, RailTel Corporation, Housing and Urban Development Corporation, Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL), and Indian



S. Mahendra Dev

Chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM)

Investors today are increasingly discerning and are willing to back PSEs when they see clarity of purpose, operational strength, and credible execution

Renewable Energy Development Agency.

While the study excluded services sector IPOs, such as banking and insurance, whose performances are driven by additional extraneous factors, the Government has also benefited tremendously from the listing of services-related PSEs.

In summary, the IPO route has not only provided Indian PSEs robust mechanisms to raise capital for productive use without depending on the Government's budget process but also provide phenomenal returns to the Government and to its retail shareholders.

PSUs funding initiatives
Earlier, Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) had to rely on budgetary provisions from their administrative ministries for capital investments and other expansions. This required extensive discussions with a large group of stakeholders and a longer cycle for realising the money. In today's age when the modern enterprise is recognised for its agility in decision-making and execution, the budget route can no longer be looked at as the only medium for raising or receiving investments.

Not surprisingly, a reverse trend has quietly begun to take shape where PSUs have started to fund critical missions. For example, in January 2025, the Ministry of Mines launched the National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM) to secure a long-term sustainable supply of critical minerals and strengthen India's critical mineral value chain. The Cabinet approved an expenditure of ₹34,300 crore for NCMM of which only ₹1,500 crore is being sourced from the Government's budget. In a truly 'Whole of Government Approach', more than 50% of the Mission's expenditure, an amount of ₹18,000 crore, is being funded by PSUs across various administrative ministries. Quite aptly, the investments being raised by these PSEs are being plowed into

technologies and know-how that are being used to reduce coal-based carbon emissions.

The above example may now become the norm in the Government's funding of critical and strategic missions in which the PSEs are tapped in as strategic investors as seen in the NCMM.

Administrative quality
Markets are known to be remarkably brutal and unforgiving as they only reward consistent performance and shareholder value creation. One of the most striking elements of the BCCL narrative is its journey from being perceived as a loss-impacted PSU to a value-driven, strategically critical enterprise. Today, BCCL accounts for nearly 58.5% of India's domestic coking coal production, placing it at the heart of the steel and infrastructure value chain. This strategic relevance was not lost on investors. In an economy focused on infrastructure expansion, manufacturing growth, and self-reliance, BCCL represents more than a coal producer; it represents energy security and industrial continuity.

The performance of other PSEs is evidence of a broader shift in how PSE assets are being positioned and perceived. Investors today are increasingly discerning and are willing to back PSEs when they see clarity of purpose, operational strength, and credible execution. PSEs have also used the recent autonomy granted from their administrative ministries and the transparency expected from the reporting framework of market exchanges as an opportunity to bring in administrative quality, strategic planning and speed in execution. This renewed confidence is already shaping the next phase of PSE market participation as more IPOs are being planned. The old narrative that PSE IPOs are uninspiring has been put to rest, and in its place stands a powerful new reality – when the story is real, the markets listen.

A political dust storm over Singareni

Congress and BRS play mudslinging over 'irregularities' in coal mining tenders

STATE OF PLAY

B. Chandrashekhara
chandrashekhara.bhalki@thehindu.co.in



Singareni Collieries Company Ltd (SCCL), the 140-year-old State Public Sector Undertaking in Telangana, has been in the news for all the wrong reasons in recent weeks. The Opposition Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) and the ruling Congress have been sparring over alleged irregularities in tenders for removal of overburden (the layer of soil, rock, and ecosystem that lies above a coal seam) in the coal mines.

The ruling party has been pushed onto the back foot by the BRS and has struggled to mount an effective rebuttal. The BRS has alleged that the tender norms were tailored to benefit senior Congress leaders and their relatives.

Buoyed by the encouraging results in the Gram Panchayat (GP) elections held in December last year, the BRS has stepped up its attack on the ruling party. The Congress claimed that candidates backed by it won about 60% of the 12,733 Sarpanch posts, which is seen by the Opposition as an underperformance by a ruling party. The BRS claimed over 40% success rate in the GP polls held on non-party basis. Ahead of the upcoming election to urban local bodies, which is fought on party symbols, the party has upped its game.

The row over the Singareni tenders erupted when senior BRS leader and former Minister T. Harish Rao alleged irregularities on January 19. The BRS's main target in the matter is not Deputy Chief Minister M. Bhatti Vikramarka, who handles the portfolio of Energy under which the SCCL op-

erates. Rather, it is Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy. The party says the Chief Minister got the 'site visit certification' system introduced in the tenders with a view to favour his brother-in-law S. Srujan Reddy's companies, with bids quoted at a value much higher than the estimates prepared by the company.

Soon after the BRS raised the allegations, Mr. Harish Rao, party working president K.T. Rama Rao, and party leader R.S. Praveen Kumar received notices from the special investigation team (SIT) in the phone-tapping case, asking them to appear before it for examination as witnesses. The Opposition party wasted no time in playing the victim card, alleging that the leaders were served notices as part of the ruling party's plans to harass them for making the "scam" public.

In a vain bid, Deputy Chief Minister Vikramarka tried to rebut the allegations, stating that the norm/condition of site visit certification was in practice in many Central PSUs, Departments and PSUs of other States, and that in SCCL too, it was introduced in 2018 when the BRS was in power. He also read out some documents which impose the site visit condition, as an attempt to turn the tables on the Opposition party. However, the BRS took it as another opportunity to corner the ruling party.

"Mr. Vikramarka read out only the portions that were convenient for him to do some mudslinging on the Opposition and did not tell people the fact that the site visit condition introduced by SCCL when the BRS was in power was only for establishing coal handling plants (CHPs) and not for the overburden removal contracts," Mr. Rao said.

The BRS claims the site visit condition for overburden removal contracts was introduced as recently as May 2025 and some of the tenders finalised till that time from December 2023, when the Congress assumed office, were as per the old procedures without the site visit condition. Those tenders were locked for values/rates lower than the SCCL's estimates, saving money for the company, it says.

The BRS is of the view that all the overburden removal contracts given after May 2025 merit cancellation on the same grounds on which the Naini mine development and operation (MDO) contract, which too had the condition of site visit, was cancelled. The party has demanded a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) or any other Central agency or a sitting judge into the Singareni contracts, saying that a probe by a State agency would be unfair since the Chief Minister's kin are the main beneficiaries.

It remains to be seen whether the government will order a probe into all overburden removal contracts since June 2014, when Telangana was formed. This would be in line with probes ordered in cases such as the sinking of a portion of the Medigadda Barrage under the Kaleshwaram project, to clear itself of the charges and instead fix the BRS by exposing any misdeeds.

Future of work: India's youth under the new Codes

The four Labour Codes aim to promote formalisation of employment and improve ease of doing business; gap in coverage of benefits is a major challenge

DATA POINT

Devika Vinod
Meenakshi Shekhar

India's Labour Codes came into force in November 2025, marking the most significant labour law reform since Independence. By consolidating 29 central laws into four Codes, the reform aims to simplify compliance, universalise minimum wages, expand social protection, and modernise workplace regulation. Policy debates often portray the Codes as a balancing act between labour flexibility and worker protection.

Prior to the consolidation, India's labour regime was fragmented across multiple Central and State laws governing wages, industrial relations, social security, and working conditions. With labour on the Concurrent List, this resulted in uneven enforcement and wide inter-State variation. Crucially, most protections applied only to the formal sector, leaving informal, contract, and casual workers, who form the bulk of the workforce, outside the scope of regulation. Against this backdrop, the government introduced four Labour Codes between 2019 and 2020.

In 2024, India's median age was under 30, compared to around 40 in China and 50 in Japan. With nearly half the population still young, understanding how these changes affect youth employment is critical.

Despite its demographic advantage, India faces a pronounced youth employment crisis. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24, labour force participation among those aged 15-29 stood at 46.5%, far below the 76.4% observed among those aged 30-59. Youth unemployment is 10.2%, compared to less than 1% for older adults.

Gender disparities further widen these gaps. Only 28.8% of young women participate in the labour

force, compared to 63.5% of young men. In urban areas, unemployment among young women reached 20.1%.

Across all PLFS rounds, young workers are more likely than adults to be unpaid family workers within self-employment. They are disproportionately concentrated in informal employment. In 2023-24, nearly 90% of young workers were informally employed. Even within regular salaried jobs, 60.5% of young regular workers lacked social security, compared to 50.5% among workers above 30.

Contractual insecurity is also higher among youth. In 2023-24, 66.1% of young regular workers had no written contract, versus 53.6% for older ones. Only 16.5% of young workers had long-term contracts exceeding three years, compared to 35.4% among adults.

Young workers are also overrepresented in platform-based gig work. A NITI Aayog estimate suggests that 77 lakh workers were engaged in the gig economy in 2020-21, a figure projected to rise to 2.35 crore by 2029-30.

Against this backdrop, the new Labour Codes aim to promote formalisation while improving the ease of doing business. The introduction of a statutory national floor wage could raise earnings for young workers clustered in low-paid, entry-level jobs. If firms increasingly rely on fixed-term contracts, the Codes mandate parity in wages and benefits with permanent workers.

The requirement of appointment letters for all workers and guaranteed wage payments, even during leave, strengthens baseline employment security. The Code on Social Security extends welfare schemes covering health, maternity, disability, education, and skill development to unorganised workers. Gig and platform workers are explicitly recognised in national law, with provisions for registration from age 16 and the creation of National and State Social Security Boards. Unlike the earlier Unor-

ganised Workers' Social Security Act (2008), which had limited impact, the new Code offers clearer institutional mechanisms.

Labour market transparency is also enhanced through mandatory vacancy reporting to career centres. The Industrial Relations Code further affects youth employment by reducing hiring frictions through a higher retrenchment threshold. It provides legal clarity for contract labour and fixed-term employment categories dominated by young workers while extending benefits such as leave, health cover, social security, and gratuity to fixed-term employees after just one year of service.

However, several challenges remain. Many provisions for unorganised and gig workers mirror those under the 2008 Act, including a size-based definition of enterprises with fewer than 10 workers. PLFS 2023-24 shows that 42.7% of young workers lack written contracts, and nearly one-fifth of them work in enterprises with more than 10 workers, leaving significant gaps in coverage. Discretionary language in provisions for gig workers and weak statistical definitions of digital platform employment complicate coverage, especially given widespread multiple job-holding. Despite the Second National Commission on Labour having urged the government as early as 2002 to modernise labour protections in response to technological change and evolving work arrangements, two decades later, policy follow-through and statistical innovation have been slow.

These gaps point to an urgent need for stronger labour data systems and proactive worker registration. Identifying gig and platform workers in national surveys, instead of subsuming them under broad self-employment categories, would strengthen policy design and protection.

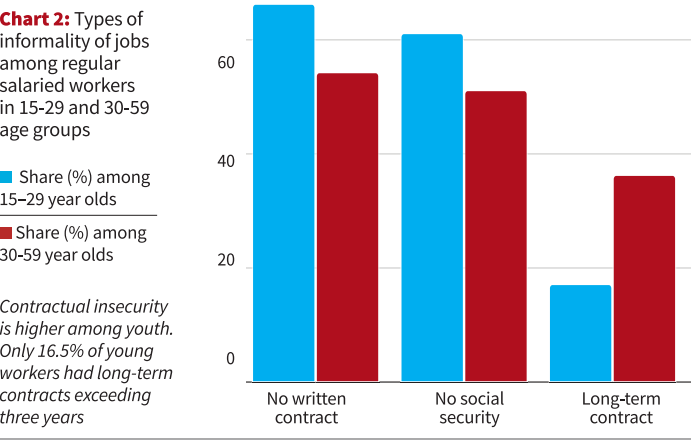
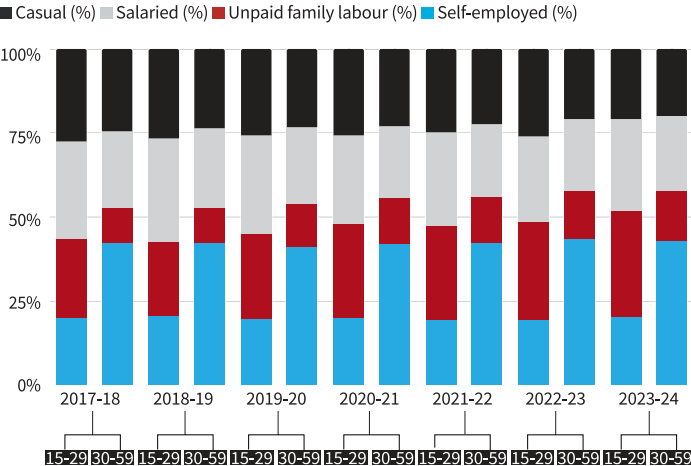
Devika Vinod is a Research Associate at CAFRAL. Meenakshi Shekhar, Ph.D is a Research Director at CAFRAL.

Labour shift

Statistics used in this article are from Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)



Chart 1: Composition of employment among 15-29 year olds and 30-59 year olds across PLFS rounds between 2017 and 2024



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 28, 1976

Kalinadi Vital for South, Says Pant

Ambika Nagar (North Kanara), Jan. 27: The giant Kalinadi power project would open up possibilities for the southern States to take advantage of one another's thermal and hydel capacities for the common good of the entire region, the Union Minister of State for Energy, Mr. K. C. Pant, said here today.

It was one of the most important power projects of the country, he said while unveiling a plaque at a function at the Naghari power house site to mark the signing of the loan agreement for the hydel project in Kuwait today.

Mr. Pant said the loan of Rs. 45 crores being provided by Kuwait represented an important step in the direction of strengthening of relations between the two countries. It was only proper, he said, that developing countries helped each other and enlarged their area of co-operation.

Mr. Pant spoke of the special interest shown by the Centre in the Kalinadi project right from the beginning and referred to the Central assistance of Rs. 25 crores given during 1972-74 and the Rs. 5 crores provided by the Life Insurance Corporation. During 1975-76, an additional Rs. 10 crores had been allocated on the understanding that the State would find Rs. 5 crores.

Mr. Devaraj Urs, Karnataka Chief Minister, said the Kalinadi project would open the door for further economic development of the State.

Describing the Kalinadi project as a complex one consisting of 10 dams, Mr. Urs said the first stage would help produce 910 mw., the second 210 mw., and the third 100 mw., making a total of 1,231 mw.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 28, 1926

'Looking in' in London

London, Jan. 27: "Looking in," the new verbal coinage, denotes the receiving of tele-vision programme, which will begin to be broadcast from a small London station next week under the licence granted by the Postmaster-General to a new company to exploit the patent of the Glasgow inventor named John Baird for special receiving apparatus adaptable to any valve set. Demonstrations have been successfully conducted, though experiments will be necessary to give sharper definition to figures.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The decrease in India's power emissions in 11 months

38 in million tonnes. Discharges by Indian utilities declined 38 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, or 4.1%, in the 11 months to the end of November, according to estimates based on monthly government statistics compiled by energy think-tank Ember. REUTERS

The area of Ukrainian land captured by Russia in January

500 in square kilometre. Russian forces captured 17 settlements and took control of more than 500 square kilometres of territory in Ukraine so far in January, Russia's top general, Valery Gerasimov, said on Tuesday. REUTERS

Number of Syrians displaced in the SDF civil war

1.73 in lakh. The International Organisation for Migration has registered more than 1,73,000 people displaced in the civil war between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian government. The government forces captured most of the SDF-held territory in Syria's northeast. PTI

The duty on EU wines in India under the new FTA agreement

20 In per cent. European wines are set to enter the Indian market at lower prices under the bilateral free trade agreement as India will provide import duty concessions under the pact, an official said. Under the pact, the duty on EU wines would fall from 150% to 20% (for expensive ones). PTI

Days for which Israeli Hostages Square clock was operational

844 A clock in a Tel Aviv square that became a rallying point for Israelis demanding the release of hostages taken during the October 2023 Hamas attack will be turned off on Tuesday, 844 days after it began counting their captivity. REUTERS
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What's happening in Syria's Kurdish regions?

How was the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria or Rojava established? Why did the Shaara-Abdi agreement fall through? Why does Turkiye support the Syrian government forces? What has been the U.S.'s position? What does the ceasefire agreement demand?

EXPLAINER

Stanly Johny

The story so far:

When Bashar al-Assad's regime collapsed in December 2024, many hoped it would mark the end of Syria's years-long civil strife. Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly Abu Muhammad al-Golani), who emerged as the country's interim leader, pledged to form an inclusive administration. But the past year has been marked by a resurgence of sectarian violence against the Alawites in the west and the Druze community in the south. In the latest flare-up, fighting broke out in the country's northeast, between government forces and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF has been pushed out of parts of eastern Syria it once controlled, and, despite a ceasefire, a tense standoff persists between Kurdish militias and government forces in the country's Kurdish areas. The renewed violence now threatens to unravel the autonomy Syria's Kurds have exercised since the 2011 civil war.

Who are the main Kurdish actors?

Syria's Kurds, who make up roughly 10% of the country's population, have long demanded autonomy for the Kurdish-populated regions in the north and east. When the Assad regime was forced to withdraw troops from the northeast in 2012, amid the civil war, Kurdish parties, councils and militias moved swiftly to fill the vacuum by establishing their own administrative structures. Several Kurdish regions (called 'cantons') came together to declare autonomy from the Syrian state, and establish the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), also known as Rojava.

The main party in Rojava is the left-leaning Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose ideology is rooted in the 'democratic confederalism' championed by Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Another major political actor is the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), which is aligned with the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party. The main armed militia in Rojava is the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is aligned with the PYD, the ruling party. The YPG and its women's brigade YPJ gained prominence in 2014-15 as they defeated Islamic State (IS) jihadists in Syria's Kobane, a predominantly Kurdish region. After their victories against the IS in Syria's north and east, the U.S. started offering them air cover in the battles against jihadists. In 2015, with the blessings of the U.S., the Kurdish leaders formed the SDF with Arab and other minority militias, with the YPG being its core component.

Why did fighting break out?

The question of Kurdish autonomy emerged immediately after the Assad government fell. Mr. Sharaa, formerly the chief of al-Qaeda's Syria branch, wanted to establish a centralised regime in Damascus – an idea pushed back by the country's ethnic and religious minority communities. In March 2025, Mr. Sharaa and SDF commander Mazloum Abdi signed an integration agreement, laying out principles for integrating the SDF and other administrative units into the Syrian state. But the Kurds were clear on one point – they did not want to forfeit the autonomy they had built over more than a decade. In an interview with *The Hindu* in



Taut relation: Members of the Syrian Democratic Forces queue to settle their status with the Syrian government in Raqqa, Syria on January 27. REUTERS

May, Salih Muslim Muhammad, co-chairman of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) said that "nobody wants another centralised regime in Syria".

The Shaara-Abdi agreement promised to flesh out the details of integration by the end of the year, but that deadline passed without progress. Tensions mounted as Damascus proposed deploying its troops in Kurdish regions. While the Syrian government wanted to extend its control across the country which it thinks is essential for reasserting its sovereignty, Kurdish leaders argued that losing military control of the north and east would imperil their autonomy. As talks stalled in early January, Mr. Sharaa's forces moved into the Arab neighbourhoods of Aleppo, which were controlled by Kurdish forces. Fighting soon followed and government forces asserted control within days, forcing the SDF to withdraw to the northeast.

What does Damascus want?

While the Syrian state forces withdrew in 2012 and other rebel and jihadist groups were preoccupied with their battles against Damascus during the civil war, the IS exploited the vacuum to establish a solid presence in Syria's east. But the YPG, the Kurdish militia, emerged as critical foot soldiers in the war against the IS. The first major defeat the IS faced was at the hands of the YPG. In the following years, the YPG (or the SDF, the expanded version) became the key anti-IS force on the ground in Syria while the U.S. provided them air cover. They controlled the regions they liberated from the IS and established Rojava. The Assad regime tolerated Kurdish autonomy because it was preoccupied with other problems.

Now, Mr. Sharaa, who has been emboldened by the international recognition he has achieved, wants to end Kurdish autonomy. He has taken a two-pronged approach. On January 16, amid ongoing fighting between government forces and the SDF, Mr.

Sharaa issued a decree formally recognising Kurdish as a "national language" and offering citizenship to all Syrian Kurds. He also declared Newroz, the new year festival celebrated by Kurds, as a national holiday. But he said nothing about Kurdish autonomy. His plan is to give cultural concessions while taking control of the Kurdish militias militarily.

Where do Turkiye and the U.S. stand?

Turkiye sees the PYD (the political party) and the YPG (the militia) as extended arms of the PKK (the Turkiye-based Kurdish group which has been designated as a terrorist entity by Ankara and its Western allies). Mr. Sharaa and his group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) are close allies of Turkiye. Ankara backed Mr. Sharaa's plan to integrate the Kurdish administrative and military structures into the Syrian state. When Kurds resisted the move, in December 2025, Turkiye warned against them. In the past, Turkiye had carried out military operations to push Kurdish forces away from the Syria-Turkish border and create a buffer. Now that a peace process is under way in Turkiye between the government and the PKK, Ankara believes weakening of the SDF across the border would strengthen its hand and weaken the overall Kurdish push for confederal autonomy.

The U.S. on the other side backed the SDF in the fight against the IS. The U.S. still has some 900 troops in Syria, mostly in the Kurdish northeast. But Washington has warned up to Damascus after Mr. Sharaa, a former designated terrorist who carried a \$10 million State Department bounty on his head, captured power. Mr. Sharaa visited Washington in November 2025 and met Mr. Trump after which Syria announced that it would join the U.S.-led coalition to fight the IS. Now that the U.S. has Damascus, it doesn't need the Kurds to maintain its presence in Syria. The U.S. and Turkiye also find common ground in establishing a centralised Syria, by strengthening the hands of Sharaa, so

that the influence of Iran and Russia could be gradually neutralised.

What lies ahead?

After seizing the SDF-held regions of Aleppo, Mr. Sharaa's forces turned to areas between Aleppo and the Euphrates River. These predominantly Arab-populated regions were captured by the SDF between 2015 and 2019 after it drove out the IS. SDF positions subsequently collapsed across Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, both former IS strongholds. Reports also emerged of internal cracks within the SDF, with some Arab militias breaking ranks with YPG commanders. Dozens of IS members escaped from a prison in Hassaka which was caught in the crossfire. On January 18, Mr. Abdi, the SDF commander, agreed to a ceasefire and integration deal. Mr. Sharaa insists that the military integration of the SDF be undertaken on an "individual basis" – not as units. The ceasefire agreement also asks the SDF to hand over Raqqa and Deir al-Zour provinces "administratively and militarily" to the government; to integrate all administrative institutions in al-Hassaka into government structures; to hand over all border crossings and oil and gas fields; and to expel all non-Syrian members of the PKK from Syria.

But there seems to be serious disagreements on the degree of autonomy Kurds would retain. The agreement affirms the need "to protect the special character of the Kurdish areas". The SDF seems ready to give up Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, but they don't want to give up their positions in Kobane, al-Hassaka and Qamishli. While the Sharaa regime wants to end the SDF's local monopoly on the use of force, the SDF doesn't want government troops to be deployed in Kurdish areas. A Kurdish representative based in Europe told *The Hindu* that the autonomous administration has called for a general mobilisation. "Kobane is now under siege. But Kurdish fighters are defending their positions," he said.

THE GIST

Syria's Kurds, who make up roughly 10% of the country's population, have long demanded autonomy for the Kurdish-populated regions in the north and east. In the latest flare-up, fighting broke out in the country's northeast, between government forces and the Kurdish-led Syria Democratic Forces (SDF).

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CACHE

The impact of India-EU FTA for AI and semiconductor tech

The India-EU Free Trade Agreement moves beyond supply chains to operationalise joint R&D in advanced semiconductor integration. It also formally links the European AI Office with India’s National AI Mission

Vasudevan Mukunth

In a milestone, India and the European Union (EU) have hailed the conclusion of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) while launching a ‘Comprehensive Strategic Agenda’ for 2030. Among other measures, the pact moves beyond supply chains to operationalise joint R&D in advanced semiconductor “heterogeneous integration” and chip design. It also formally links the European AI Office with India’s National AI Mission to jointly develop safe, human-centric AI and take advantage of what the agreement called India’s vast “multilingual datasets” and Europe’s research infrastructure to secure strategic autonomy in critical technologies.

The three diplomatic phases

The AI and semiconductor aspects represent the maturation of three diplomatic phases. The first phase began with the ‘India-EU Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025’. At this stage, discussions on “technology” were largely confined to general matters of cybersecurity, 5G networks, and data protection and there was no specific mechanism for a more concrete collaboration between the bloc and India on hardware such as semiconductors, or specific AI model development.

In the second phase, around 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and EU President Ursula von der Leyen launched the India-EU Trade and Technology Council. This body in turn created the Working Group 1 on Strategic Technologies, which moved the relationship from diplomacy to involving technical experts. In fact the new deal has credited this group with managing its “technology and innovation” aspect.

In the third and final phase, in 2023, India and EU signed the Semiconductor Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This MoU was primarily defensive in the sense that it focused on improving the resilience of supply chains and on providing early warnings of shortages. Between 2023 and the present deal, the MoU evolved into a more ‘offensive’ partnership, so to speak, with a focus on creating new technologies, including through designing and prototyping, in addition to monitoring existing supply chains.

On ‘heterogenous integration’

Perhaps the most significant technical detail in the document is “heterogeneous integration” because it recognises that India is years away from building cutting-edge logic fabrication facilities, for example, those that manufacture chips with nodes of 2-3 nm, and thus pivots to “advanced packaging”. Heterogenous integration involves stacking different types of chips, such as logic, memory, and sensors, into a single package. Such combinations are critical for AI. Contemporary AI accelerators like Nvidia’s Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) bank more on how memory is packaged next to the processor instead of only the raw transistor size. By targetting this, the EU and India are trying to capture the value-added segment of the supply chain that is also less capital-intensive than a



Huge boost: Semiconductors being inspected at the Tessolve Semiconductor Private Limited, at Electronic City-Phase II, in Bengaluru on September 19, 2025. MURALI KUMAR, K

fabrication facility but which is just as critical for performance.

The agenda also explicitly connects semiconductor manufacturing to AI utility as the text says the deal will focus “on design and prototyping for AI applications”, thus creating a vertical market. While in 2023 the focus was on “making chips for cars”, following a crisis in their availability, the new goal is to make chips that AI models require.

India possesses roughly 20% of the world’s chip design talent (on the flip side most of them work for U.S.-based firms like Intel and Qualcomm). The EU has the research infrastructure, such as IMEC in Belgium and Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft in Germany, but lacks the design scale. And the deal effectively creates a mechanism to unify India’s designer capital with the EU’s physical capital, to create indigenous AI hardware and reduce their reliance on US intellectual property.

Finally, the operational vehicles for the deal’s semiconductor strategy are the so-called Blue Valleys – a regulatory

exclave that aligns Indian with European standards, allowing component manufacturers in India to flow directly into European supply chains without new certification requirements. In other words, the Blue Valleys will effectively extend the EU Single Market technical standards to Indian soil.

A common market for AI

Likewise, the AI section of the new deal also sets up a “common market” for AI where Indian data can flow into European models while having European regulations govern Indian AI companies (this is an example of the Brussels effect, whereby the EU exports its laws outside its borders through market mechanisms instead of direct force).

Previously, if the EU had a technical question about Indian AI policy, it would go through diplomatic channels (specifically, the External Action Service to the Ministry of External Affairs). The deal now indicates a direct line: the European AI Office, which is the EU’s

regulator, can interact directly with the IndiaAI Safety Institute, India’s technical auditor. As a result, the technical staff at these agencies could have a formal mandate to coordinate without requiring political permissions for every interaction.

Further, perhaps the most concrete part of the AI section of the deal is the point about “testing and evaluation”. Currently, the world doesn’t have a common definition of what constitutes safe AI. The EU’s priority might be gender bias while India’s might be political neutrality – which means a developer will have to make their model pass two tests ahead of clearance. But now, by collaborating on testing, the two agencies will likely co-author and rationalise the checklists for the models. So if the European AI Office develops a specific mathematical test to measure the rate or scope of hallucinations in a large language model, it can share that test with the IndiaAI Safety Institute for India to adopt. In fact, the point of linking these agencies is to eventually reach a point where one accepts a safety certificate issued by the other. Going ahead this will require the agencies to align their audit procedures and staff training.

For Indians this could be a civil liberties backdoor of sorts. That is, because European audit manuals are strongly rooted in the EU’s Charter of Fundamental Rights, Indian users might unknowingly gain digital protections that the domestic political climate currently sidelines. EU safety benchmarks aggressively penalise algorithmic bias against minorities and restrict invasive biometric surveillance. If Indian developers must clear these hurdles to ensure their models can be exported to Europe, the AI products deployed domestically will be embedded with European regulatory attitudes. Thus Indian users could interact with AI agents that are technically constrained from reinforcing majoritarian narratives or profiling of vulnerable communities.

However, there is also the possibility of this opportunity devolving into a stratified ecosystem akin to India’s pharmaceutical sector, where some manufacturers rigorously adhere to safety protocols for exports to U.S. and European markets while cutting corners for domestic supply. That is, Indian firms might engineer ‘clean’ and more bias-free algorithms specifically for the EU market to secure lucrative contracts while deploying invasive or unrestricted versions at home, where enforcement remains lax.

Financial instruments

In order to fuel all these ambitions, the agenda musters two financial instruments. First, the text requires both sides “explore options for association of India to Horizon Europe”. If this happens, it would elevate India to the highest tier of partnership available to non-EU nations and allow Indian entities to lead consortia and compete directly for grants from the EU’s €95.5-billion research budget (₹10.4 lakh crore). This could be a bonus for the semiconductor sector as it will allow Indian chip startups to bypass the often risk-averse domestic capital markets.

Second, and on a related note, the deal also places the European Innovation Council at the helm of a new startup partnership. The Council specialises in what it calls “patent capital” for high-risk technologies such as quantum computing and novel chip architectures that traditional venture capitalists often avoid. By linking the Council with the Start-up India platform, the agreement creates a dedicated cross-border funding corridor for ‘hard’ technologies and fills a gap left by private investors, and could help ensure the deal’s design ambitions are backed by the necessary funds.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

“I am starving. Are you ready to leave?”
“No, I have a couple of things to do.”
“...make it snappy, will you? We’re late as it is.”
“Make it snappy? What does it mean?”
“It’s an informal expression meaning ‘hurry up’. For example, the manager needs 20 copies of this article. Make it snappy, will you?”
“I don’t want to sit here all day. Make it snappy.”
“I’d like you to go through this document. Make it snappy.”
“Drive me to the airport. And make it snappy. Does that sound OK?”
“Yes. But remember, it’s an informal expression. Now get dressed, will you? You don’t have to wear anything snappy.”
“...snappy again?”
“When you say that somebody is a snappy dresser, it means...”
“...let me guess. It probably means someone who wears very fashionable clothes. Someone who dresses very well.”
“Exactly! Some of our cricket players are snappy dressers.”
“With the kind of money they make, people expect them to be snappy dressers. My Principal is no snappy dresser.”
“He may not be a snappy dresser, but he is snappy most of the time!”
“Not snappy again!”
“When you accuse someone of being snappy, it means he/she speaks to people in an unfriendly manner.”
“Like your friend Bala? He tends to be snappy most of the time.”
“Yes, he tends to be snappy when his blood pressure goes up.”
“The snappy old clerk who used to sit in the Principal’s office has retired.”
“I am sure the students were happy to see him go.”
“By the way, does ‘snap at’ mean the same thing as snappy?”
“I guess you could say that. When you snap at someone, you speak to them in a sharp, unfriendly manner.”
“The new bank manager tends to snap at people.”
“When I asked my boss for a raise, he snapped at me.”
“When I asked the theatre manager if there were any tickets available, instead of snapping at me, he gave me two tickets.”
“That was nice. How was the movie?”
“It was quite good. Have you seen it?”
“I plan to see it next week. I’ve heard the songs. They are quite snappy.”
“Snappy again! What does it mean in this context?”
“Why don’t you guess?”
“OK. You said that the songs were snappy. Well, the songs in the movie that I saw were quite catchy. They were lively and made you feel like dancing.”
“Good job! Anything that is snappy is performed in a lively manner.”
“I see. When the singer began to sing a sad song, everyone booed him. The audience wanted something snappy.”
“That’s a very good example. For the annual day function, my boss wants us to put up a snappy production.”
“Do you think you can do it?”
“No problem. It should be a snap. When you say that something is a snap, it means it can be done easily. For example, answering Sujatha’s question was a snap.”
Published in The Hindu on June 8, 1999.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Marking the anniversary of Jane Austen’s seminal novel, this quiz probes *Pride and Prejudice* from its thematic artistry to its publication quirks

Prathmesh Kher

QUESTION 1

What was the working title Austen gave to *Pride and Prejudice*?

QUESTION 2

Which 19th-century novelist’s work influenced Austen’s ironic treatment of social manners?

QUESTION 3

Who bore the financial risk for the publication of the first edition of *Pride and Prejudice*?

QUESTION 4

Pride and Prejudice was originally published with a credit attributed to “the Author of *Sense and Sensibility*”. What was the credit on *Sense and Sensibility*?

QUESTION 5

What is the now-acclaimed opening line of the book?



Visual Question: Identify this 1985 television adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* that aired on Doordarshan. PRASAR BHARATI

- Questions and Answers to previous day’s daily quiz:**
- Name the four countries across which the Kurds are found. **Ans: Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran**
 - This religious minority among the Kurds was targeted by the Islamic State. **Ans: Yazidis**
 - This post-World War I treaty promised Kurdish autonomy but was never ratified. **Ans: The Treaty of Sevres**
 - Abdullah Ocalan abandon Marxist-Leninism for this model. **Ans: Democratic Confederalism**
 - This large-scale chemical attack was carried out by the Baathist regime carry against Iraqi Kurds in the 1980s. **Ans: Halabja massacre**
 - This Kurdish group was suspected of assassinating Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme. **Ans: Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)**
 - The decree granting Kurds national language status was issued in this year. **Ans: 2026**
 - This all-female Kurdish militia gained global attention during the fight against IS. **Ans: The YPJ**
- Visual: This medieval Kurdish commander became a central figure in Islamic resistance to the Crusades. **Ans: Saladin**
- Early Birds:** Tamal Biswas| Suchit Narottam| Tito Shiladitya| Arun Kumar Singh| G. P. Ramachandran

Word of the day

Clamant:

conspicuously and offensively loud; given to vehement outcry; demanding attention

Synonyms: crying, exigent, insistent, blatant, clamorous, strident, vociferous

Usage: There is a clamant public demand for a new law to protect stray dogs.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/clamantpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈklæmənt/, /ˈkleɪmənt/

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

To make sense of cosmic rays, CERN team tracks a fragile nucleus

Why is finding out how deuterons survive particle collisions in the Large Hadron Collider important? If scientists have to predict how light nuclei form in high-energy collisions in space, like when cosmic rays strike interstellar gas, they need to know which formation mechanisms are possible and which ones nature forbids

Vasudevan Mukunth
CHENNAI

The hydrogen atom is the lightest in the universe and it consists of the simplest nucleus: a single proton. But while helium is the second-lightest element, its nucleus isn't the second simplest. That distinction belongs to the deuteron, the nucleus of the deuterium atom, which contains one proton and one neutron. (Deuterium is an isotope of hydrogen.)

However, the two particles are bound with a very low binding energy, making deuterons seem fragile relative to the energetic, messy environment created when particles collide at nearly the speed of light at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC). Yet experiments have repeatedly observed deuterons (and anti-deuterons) emerging from these collisions. How do they survive this environment?

Coalescence scenario

Physicists have come up with two broad explanations. One, called direct emission, assumes the deuterons are produced directly from a hot source, meaning their formation doesn't involve a different particle (or particles) condensing from a soup of energy, then decaying to form deuterons. The other idea, called coalescence, holds that the proton and neutron are produced first, then they stick together later if they get close enough.

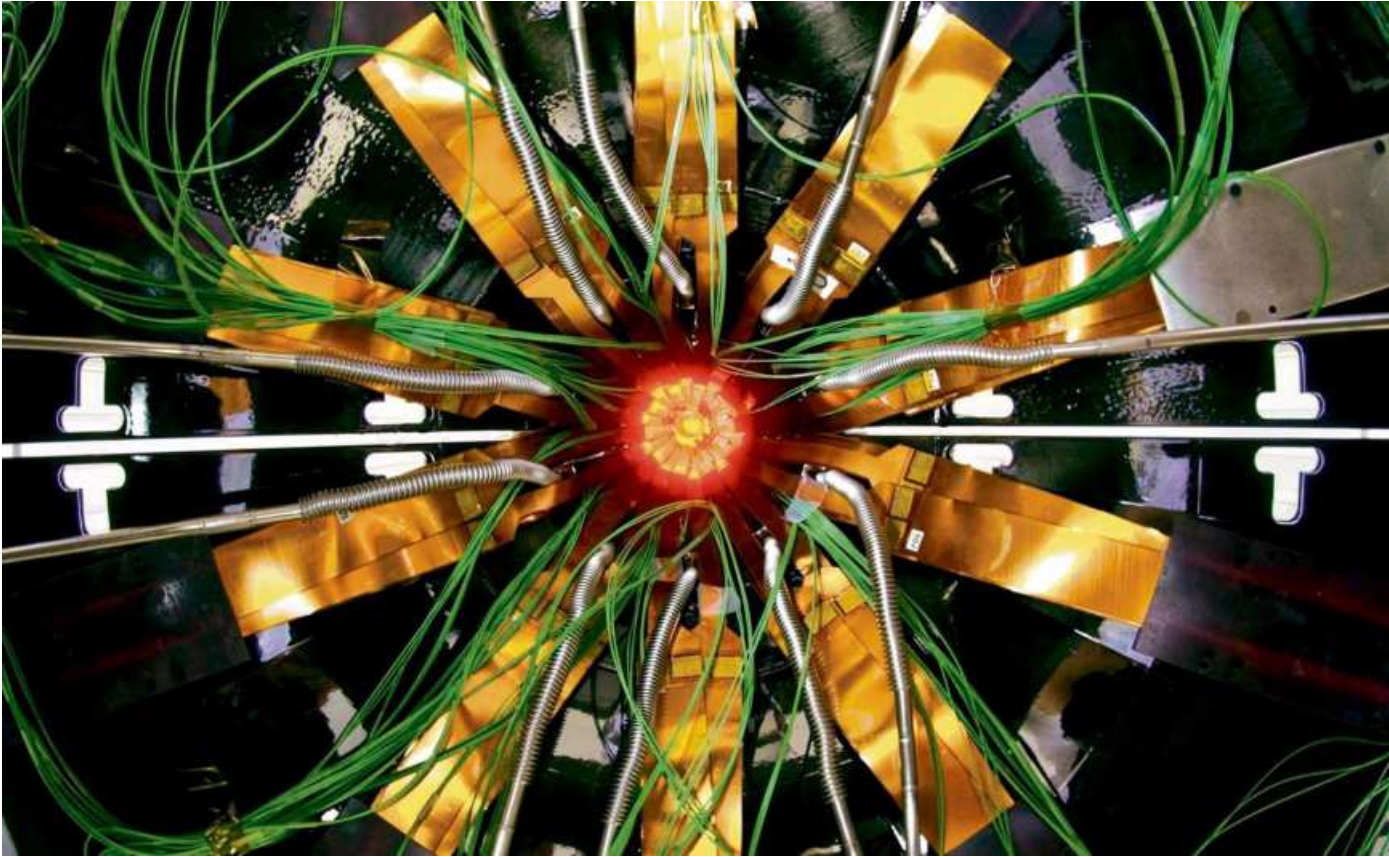
The problem is a proton and a neutron can't fuse if they have too much energy, so there has to be a third particle to carry away the excess energy. That third participant can be a type of particle called pion that acts like a catalyst, i.e. it will enable the reaction without becoming part of the final deuteron.

Finding out whether this is possible matters beyond collider physics. If scientists have to predict how light nuclei and antinuclei form in high-energy collisions in space – such as when cosmic rays strike interstellar gas – they need to know which formation mechanisms are possible and which ones nature doesn't 'allow'.

Delta resonance

A new study out of the ALICE collaboration at the LHC has provided the answer. The collaboration works with the ALICE detector, one of nine detectors on the LHC. At four points on its ring, the LHC smashes together opposing beams of protons at high energy. The collisions produce a morass of particles and reactions between them. The detectors have computers and sensors that are triggered when they identify reactions of interest and which they record and analyse.

For the new study, the ALICE



Close watch: A view of the ALICE detector, one of nine detectors on the Large Hadron Collider in 2007. CERN

collaboration used a technique called femtoscopy to infer how and when particles were produced by checking whether two particles come out with very similar velocities more often than chance would predict. Its basic object was a ratio called the correlation function. The numerator was how often a given pair (a pion and a deuteron) is seen with a small relative momentum. The denominator was how often such pairs would form assuming they had no affinity for each other.

The team was looking specifically for a particle called $\Delta(1232)$ resonance. (' Δ ' is pronounced 'delta'.) The resonance is a very short-lived excited version of a proton or a neutron that quickly decays. $\Delta(1232)$ in particular decays into a pion and a proton or neutron. If a deuteron is later formed using that same proton (or neutron), then the pion and the deuteron would appear to be 'linked' in the data by having a correlated momentum.

ALICE reported just this signal in the pion-deuteron data, meaning many of the deuterons are formed after the Δ decays, rather than directly at the start.

Where a nucleus is born

If the pions were only bumping into deuterons that already existed, some of those collisions should have broken the deuteron apart (which is fragile, remember). In that case, the data should've shown a dip around the Δ region. ALICE, however, found a positive signal, meaning deuterons were forming

The study noted that scientists can use the insight on deuterons to build more realistic models of reactions induced by cosmic rays, which are energetic protons and atomic nuclei which often collide with other nuclei in outer space

after Δ particles decayed and the pions from the same decay were correlated with the new deuterons.

Norwegian University of Science and Technology physics professor Michael Kachelriess called the finding a "great achievement" to *Physics World*.

From the size of the Δ signal, the team estimated that around 62% of deuterons were produced following Δ decays. They figured if they included other short-lived resonances as well, about 80% of deuterons would be formed by coalescence.

This seems to be the answer to why deuterons can survive the LHC's high-energy collisions. Resonances usually travel a short distance before they decay, so the coalescence that forms deuterons happens slightly later and slightly away from the most violent part of the collision. Thus the deuterons are also 'born' into a less extreme environment.

Cosmic rays, dark matter

In sum, most deuterons aren't born as readymade nuclei at the instant of collision but are instead assembled

shortly afterwards from existing protons and neutrons, with help from pions nearby. This should change how theorists model the way nuclei (and anti-nuclei) are produced in high-energy particulate reactions.

In fact the ALICE team's paper, published on December 10, noted that scientists can use this insight to build more realistic models of reactions induced by cosmic rays.

Cosmic rays are very energetic protons and atomic nuclei hurtling through space and which often collide with other nuclei in outer space. When scientists are studying telescope data of these collisions or are modelling them in the lab, e.g. for astronomy research or because they're sending a probe to that part of space, they'll need to know which signals are coming from which sources.

"These findings not only explain a long-standing puzzle in nuclear physics but could have far-reaching implications for astrophysics and cosmology," the ALICE team said in a statement.

"Light nuclei and antinuclei are also produced in interactions between cosmic rays and the interstellar medium, and they may be created in processes involving the dark matter that pervades the universe. By building reliable models for the production of light nuclei and anti-nuclei, physicists can better interpret cosmic-ray data and look for possible dark-matter signals."

mukunth.v@thehindu.co.in

THE GIST

The neutron and proton in the deuterium nucleus are bound with a very low binding energy, making deuterons seem fragile relative to the energetic, messy environment created when particles collide at nearly the speed of light at the LHC

Yet experiments have repeatedly observed deuterons (and anti-deuterons) emerging from these collisions

Most deuterons are not born as readymade nuclei at the instant of collision but are instead assembled shortly afterwards from existing protons and neutrons

BIG SHOT



First stroke: Conservationists release a juvenile Indo-Pacific leopard shark off Maiton Island, in Phuket, Thailand on December 8, 2025. The Thai government, aquariums, and NGOs came together in a project last year to release seven leopard shark pups in a bid revive their population in the wild. REUTERS

QUESTION CORNER

Leaps and bounds



Q: How did kangaroos evolve to hop?

A: For a long time, biomechanics experts believed that giant, extinct kangaroos were simply too heavy to hop. While the largest modern kangaroos weigh around 90 kg, their prehistoric relatives were much larger and weighed more than 250 kg. And scientists previously calculated that if you took the anatomy of a modern kangaroo and scaled it up to that weight, the forces generated by hopping would snap their ankle tendons and fracture their bones.

However, a January 22 study has challenged this limit: by looking at the fossils rather than relying only on mathematical scaling from modern kangaroos, researchers have found that kangaroo ancestors didn't just grow larger: they also evolved a different skeletal structure to handle the immense weight.

The study identified two major adaptations that made hopping mechanically possible for these giants. First, their weight-bearing foot bones, the fourth metatarsals, were significantly shorter and thicker than those of modern kangaroos. This compact shape made the bones more resistant to bending forces, preventing fractures upon landing. Second, their heel bones, called calcanea, were much



A kangaroo near White Cliffs, an Outback area in the state of New South Wales, Australia. AFP

wider, providing a large area for the gastrocnemius tendon to attach. This suggested the animals possessed thick tendons capable of withstanding the tensions required to lift their bodies.

There was one trade-off, however. While the adaptations allowed them to hop without injury, the giants likely sacrificed speed and energy efficiency. Unlike modern kangaroos that bounce efficiently over long distances, the extinct giants probably hopped only for short, high-power bursts, perhaps to escape predators.



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

States of debt

States must curb populist spending

The Reserve Bank of India’s study of State budgets of 2025-26 indicates an urgent need to make States follow the path of fiscal prudence. The trend is shifting — while the consolidated gross fiscal deficit of States was on a declining trajectory from the FY21 high of 4.1 per cent of GSDP, it has now begun to creep up. At 3.3 per cent of GSDP in the budget estimates for FY26, the gross fiscal deficit of States is the highest in the past decade, excluding FY21.

Further, 13 States have budgeted for a fiscal deficit above 3.5 per cent of GSDP, with larger States such as Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Punjab estimating their respective GFD-GSDP ratios to cross 4 per cent in FY26. Given the tendency of most States to overestimate their revenue receipts, the actual deficit numbers for FY26 can be much wider. Lower growth in direct and indirect tax revenue of the Centre for FY26 will also lead to lower devolution, which can further stress their fiscal situation. The silver lining in State finances has been the increase in capital expenditure, largely led by the 50-year interest free loans given by the Centre. Capital expenditure has been centred around irrigation, water supply, transport and urban infrastructure. But the red flag being raised by the RBI’s study regarding profligate spending under revenue expenditure must be heeded.

The report highlights that many States have included doles in the form of farm loan waivers, free electricity, subsidised transport, allowances for unemployed youth and direct cash transfers to women in the Budgets for FY26. While some giveaways are probably acceptable, they will increase fiscal stress when revenue receipts are under pressure. The payouts related to the Eighth Pay Commission will increase revenue expenditure from FY28. Market borrowings of States is likely to exceed the ₹12.45 lakh crore budgeted for FY26. At an aggregate level, the outstanding debt of States stands at 29.2 per cent of GDP, far higher than the 20 per cent level mandated by the FRBM review committee. The ratio ranges between 17.8 per cent to 46.3 per cent with several States having debt levels above 30 per cent of their GSDPs. Off-budget borrowings of States are also increasing; outstanding guarantees given to state public sector undertakings stood at 3.9 per cent of GDP by the end of March 2024 and may have risen in FY25. In order to improve transparency, the Centre must adopt a uniform accounting framework by 2027-28, as mandated by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India.

A shift from fiscal deficit-to-GDP ratio to debt-to-GSDP ratio as a budgetary metric is expected to provide some leeway in spending. States should seriously consider ways to augment own tax revenue. Compliance needs to be improved through higher digitisation. Amnesty schemes, land and asset monetisation, and market-linked pricing for some public utilities are some ideas. Above all, spending with an eye on poll outcomes must be curbed.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

A second ICE killing in Minneapolis: midnight in America

Following the fatal shooting earlier this month of Renee Good by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent, his colleagues received reassurance that they continued to enjoy “federal immunity” for their actions. “Anybody who lays a hand on you or tries to obstruct you is committing a felony,” the White House deputy chief of staff, Stephen Miller, had previously stated. Words have consequences. Ms Good, a US citizen and mother of three children, had in fact been attempting to drive away from a protest in Minneapolis, where ICE’s deportation snatch squads have terrorised migrants and those who have attempted to defend their rights. On Saturday, in the same city, ICE was responsible for a second shocking death. Alex Pretti, a 37-year-old intensive care nurse, was shot multiple times in the back after being wrestled to the ground and pepper-sprayed. LONDON, JANUARY 26

讀賣新聞

THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Strength of Alliance Cannot Be Measured by Numbers

It is commendable for the United States to prioritize deterrence against China, but using this as a pretext for demanding significant increases in defense spending from allies is far too reckless. The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump should deepen cooperation with its allies to build necessary and effective deterrence, not focus solely on numbers. The U.S. Defense Department has released its National Defense Strategy, a guiding document for U.S. defense policy. It defines China as “the second most powerful country in the world — behind only the United States,” and explicitly outlines a policy of building a robust defense against China along the “First Island Chain,” connecting the Nansei Islands, Taiwan and the Philippines. TOKYO, JANUARY 27



GETTY IMAGES

Some broad goals for the Budget

TRIPLE AGENDA. Targeting growth, fiscal consolidation and inequities at the same time would depend on the mix and balance of policies



MRIDUL SAGGAR

The 1.46 billion population of India may have varied aspirations from the forthcoming Union Budget, but it is neither feasible nor desirable to meet them all. Therefore, it is best to focus on the imperatives before the forthcoming Budget.

To my mind there are three of them. First, the Budget must build on fiscal sustainability. Second, it should contribute to reduction in income and wealth inequalities. Third, it ought to aim at the above two in a manner that keeps the economy on a sustainable high growth path.

The Budget should not try to over-achieve, nor under-achieve and if it succeeds in striking the right balance in the middle ground, the results will be extraordinary.

FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY

The improvement in fiscal position over the last five years has been remarkable. With the budgeted GFD/GDP ratio likely to be met in 2025-26, the GFD stand compressed by 4.8 percentage points (ppt) of GDP from the pandemic high of 2020-21. It will also have brought down Central government liabilities by about 5.4 ppt.

Furthermore, if the Union government succeeds in achieving the budgeted primary revenue surplus of 2.1 per cent of GDP, a consolidation of 6-ppt of GDP in this metric would go down as an unbelievable magical story. The only time we have seen a larger surplus in last 50 years was in 2007-08 on the back of

fiscal rules kicked in by the FRBM Act, 2003. The Budget 2026-27 should stay on the course of further fiscal consolidation targeting a GFD/GDP ratio of 4.2 per cent or less. This will bring in multiple benefits. It will create space for stimulus if the economy faces a downturn from external shock. Also, bond yields, relentlessly firming over the last eight months, will get checked, helping in softening lending rates.

The government borrowing programme is still under pressure because of increasing recourse to it by States. Lowering it may revive investor sentiments and prompt global rating firms to change the outlook on our sovereign rating from stable to positive.

Also, if we face a grey swan event of getting engulfed in geopolitical conflicts, we will have scope to increase security spending. Preserving fiscal ability to respond to future shock is extremely important.

FISCAL RISKS DOWN THE ROAD

The forthcoming Budget is aligned to further fiscal consolidation. The trend may deviate, thereafter, as the 2027-28 and the 2028-29 budgets will need to implement the Pay Commission awards with accumulated arrears. The latter Budget will also face political cycle risks given that the next general elections will follow.

The Budget must disconnect from the past by radically cutting revenue spending by downsizing government, stepping up capex, and also crowding in private capex by derisking projects

It is an outright bad financial practice and a downright anomaly that while firms are expected to build all kind of reserves to take care of investment fluctuations, dividend equalization, various contingencies besides general reserves, the government budgets continue with cash accounting and escape providing for known future liabilities. One hopes that the 16th Finance Commission would have grappled with this and made suitable recommendation to shift to accrual accounting.

If the 2026-27 Budget fails to extend the consolidation trend, it will seriously affect the credibility of the medium-term target of reducing the Centre’s debt/GDP to the pre-pandemic level of 50 per cent of GDP by end-March 2031 from about 56.1 per cent currently. Outstanding liabilities of the States & UTs jumped from 28.4 per cent to 29.2 per cent as per the budgets of 2025-26.

A rollback by the Centre will help keep a lid on the country’s public debt-to-GDP ratio. So, fiscal credibility critically depends on this Budget.

TARGETING INEQUALITY

While global average per capita income has increased rapidly since middle of the 20th century, inequalities in income and wealth have spiked. India has been countering this through varied intervention programmes — cheap food distribution, employment generation programmes, flagship health insurance scheme, etc. Yet, while social safety nets have increased, they haven’t dented inequalities. Opportunity inequalities and inadequate human capital formation can further exacerbate it.

It is time to examine if the taxation policy can more directly achieve the intended results without retarding

growth. Heterogeneous impacts of fiscal policy need to be studied more carefully in India, and the statistical authorities must develop panel data to support such research.

Following the Arias-Osorio (2025). methodology, the recently released World Inequality Report shows that the top 1 per cent population in India owns about 40.1 per cent of total personal wealth and top 10 per cent hold 65 per cent of it. Personal wealth includes financial assets (equity and bonds) as well as non-financial assets (land and housing). This metric suggests, inequality levels in India are about double that in most OECD countries.

Fiscal policy is a powerful tool to address inequalities, keeping in mind that Keynesian multiplier critically depends on income distribution. It can be boosted by increasing marginal propensity to consume through redistribution.

Is it possible to have the holy trinity of fiscal policy targeting growth, fiscal consolidation and inequities at the same time or is this an impossible trinity? The answer lies in the recognition that budgets are non-linear in outcome and depend on the mix and the balance and associated policies.

The Budget must disconnect from the past by radically cutting revenue spending by downsizing government, stepping up capex, also crowding in private capex by derisking projects. Reintroducing accelerated depreciation benefits can be considered. Spurring investment will help as the capex multiplier is 2-2.5 times in relation to neutrality we observe with revenue spending or tax cuts.

The writer is Professor at IIM Kozhikode and was formerly RBI Executive Director & MPC member. The views are personal

Govt forced to walk a fiscal tightrope

Budget should protect capex, ease pressure on middle-class finances, broaden tax base without compressing consumption

Harsimran Sandhu

India today stands at a crossroads. The Finance Minister has declared that reducing the debt-to-GDP ratio will be a central policy priority. The intent is sound. According to the International Monetary Fund, India’s general government debt — the combined borrowing of the Centre and States — is estimated at around 80-82 per cent of GDP, which is elevated by emerging-market standards. Yet the path to lowering that ratio is far from straightforward.

In theory, governments reduce debt in three ways: cut spending, raise revenues, or grow faster. In India’s case, each option runs into hard constraints. More than 80 per cent of government revenues are pre-committed to fixed overheads-salaries, pensions, interest payments, subsidies and welfare — politically sensitive or contractually binding items. What remains discretionary is capital expenditure. This is why some economists have suggested trimming capex to restore fiscal balance.

But this is where arithmetic collides with reality. Government capex has been the single most important growth engine over the past three years. Infrastructure spending has supported private investment, employment and confidence. Cutting it may improve near-term fiscal optics, but it risks

slowing GDP growth, weakening the denominator of the debt-to-GDP ratio. Fiscal consolidation that undermines growth often delays, rather than accelerates, debt reduction.

If spending cuts are constrained, revenues must do the heavy lifting. Here, warning signs are emerging. After a post-pandemic recovery, India’s revenue engine is losing momentum. In December, net GST collections grew by about 2.2 per cent year-on-year, reflecting weak domestic demand even as import-linked GST remained resilient. This slowdown is tied to a deeper structural pressure point: the weakening financial position of households. India’s growth model has long relied on domestic savings to finance government borrowing and private investment. That foundation is eroding. According to RBI data, net household financial savings declined to around 5.1 per cent of GDP in FY 2022-23, among the lowest levels in decades, reflecting rising leverage and slower asset accumulation.

HOUSEHOLDS UNDER PRESSURE

Household debt climbed to about 41.3 per cent of GDP by end-March 2025, up from roughly 36-38 per cent a few years ago. The rise signals not excess exuberance, but growing financial strain across income groups.

The middle class sits at the centre of this squeeze. Per capita household debt



SAVINGS. Declining trend ISTOCKPHOTO

is rising not because families are splurging, but because incomes are failing to keep pace with costs. Salary growth outside high-end services and government employment has slowed materially. For most urban salaried households, nominal wage increases are modest and real wage growth is close to flat.

What sharpens the pain is the nature of inflation. Headline inflation may appear manageable, but services inflation (a part of the consumption basket most relevant to the middle class) remains stubbornly high. Education, healthcare, housing rents, insurance premiums and transport costs have risen faster than general inflation. As a result, households are borrowing to maintain living standards, while savings are depleted by necessity rather than choice.

A leveraged middle class is a cautious middle class. Consumption weakens,

discretionary spending is deferred, and risk appetite falls. This feeds directly into slower government revenue growth and a more hesitant private investment cycle. When growth slows and uncertainty rises, domestic politics rarely rewards restraint. Populism becomes the default response. Subsidies, loan waivers, public hiring and administered returns on small-savings schemes expand.

The looming Eighth Pay Commission threatens to push fixed expenditures higher, while monetary easing struggles as administered savings rates remain elevated.

This is the backdrop against which the 2026 Union Budget will be framed. It cannot chase debt reduction through blunt expenditure cuts, nor rely on optimistic growth assumptions. Choices must be calibrated: protect growth-supporting capex, ease pressure on middle-class finances, broaden the tax base without compressing consumption, and restore fiscal credibility gradually.

India’s margin for error has narrowed. Fiscal consolidation, growth and household balance sheets are now inseparable. Getting that balance right in Budget 2026 will determine whether India’s ambition translates into durable prosperity or stalls under the weight of arithmetic.

The writer is Professor of Finance, IMT Ghaziabad

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

Landmark deal

Negotiations have been concluded and the India-EU trade deal finalised after almost 20 years of talks. Leaders from both sides hailed it as a major breakthrough in economic cooperation. Tariffs will be cut for over 90 per cent of goods traded by value. European exporters stand to save roughly €4 billion a year, and Indian goods get significantly better access to EU markets. EU automakers will rejoice over the huge tariff cuts. The will now go through legal vetting and approvals both from the European and Indian parliaments.

The signing and enforcement are expected later in 2026 or by early 2027.

In a strategic context this “mother of all deals” is a shining example of pragmatism amid global trade tensions and diversifying supply chains while positioning India and the EU as stable partners.

R Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

Push farm R&D

This refers to ‘More funds for farm R&D’ (January 27). India’s poor outlay on R&D is a part of a gloomy picture of its overall R&D

expenditure — its gross expenditure on R&D remains stuck at 0.64 per cent of GDP.

However, though agricultural economy contributes less than 20 per cent of GDP, nearly half of total labour is engaged here, marked by low incomes and fragmenting land holdings. Therefore, raising their productivity, reducing crop losses due to natural forces, and improving their quality of life through higher investment in agro R&D will enhance their share in GDP growth.

YG Chouksey
Pune

Power reforms

Apropos the Editorial ‘Switching on reforms’ (January 27). The fallout options from the Bill, to be introduced in the upcoming Budget session of Parliament could be significant. Large industrial consumers may directly contract renewable energy producers, accelerating India’s clean energy transition. Competition among multiple discoms could drive the adoption of digital billing systems and smart grids, improving transparency and efficiency. Shifting electricity subsidies to

State budgets strengthens discoms’ financial position, enhancing their creditworthiness and enabling access to bank loans for expansion and modernization. The presence of multiple suppliers in a single area can empower consumers with greater choice, including green power options. Overall, these reforms could modernise India’s power sector by fostering competition, transparency, and sustainability.

O Prasada Rao
Hyderabad



Develop J&K with care

Infra projects shouldn’t destroy livelihoods, ecology

Bilal Gani

Recently, the Ministry of Railways proposed a 27-kilometre railway line from Awantipora to Shopian in South Kashmir. According to estimates, more than five lakh apple and other fruit-bearing trees would need to be felled for the project. Farmers are resisting the proposal, arguing that it would destroy millions of livelihoods, while experts warn that it could severely damage the fragile ecology of an ecologically sensitive region.

Jammu and Kashmir has one of the lowest landholding ratios in the country, averaging just 0.5 hectare per household. Although the region urgently requires infrastructural upgrades — particularly improved road and rail connectivity — such development should not come at the cost of environmental degradation and economic displacement. After the abrogation of Article 370 and the formation of J&K as a Union Territory, there is a massive push in infrastructure development in the region. The government has facilitated infrastructure growth by amending laws and accelerating central schemes, leading to significant land transactions for development projects like tunnels, railways and industrial estates.

LAND ACQUISITION

Between 2019-20 and mid-2022, the government of India acquired over 2,359 hectares of land in J&K for redevelopment and public works. This includes state-owned (“khalisa”), forest, and other public lands taken for infrastructure purposes. The purpose behind such a large acquisition is to upgrade the infrastructure ecosystem of the region. In October-November last year, the peak season of apple harvesting, the national highway remained closed for weeks, leading to rotten apples and loss of thousands of crores to apple growers of the region.

Improved infrastructure is essential to create an efficient delivery system of agriculture and horticulture produce from the region to mainland India. But the proposed railway project is being built through orchards and paddy fields from Pulwama to Shopian districts in South Kashmir. The massive axing of apple and other fruit trees will ruin the livelihoods of millions of farmers and impact growth. The economy of the region is decelerating at a faster rate with high inflation and rising



APPLE FARMING. Hurt by unplanned development IMRAN NISSAR

unemployment rate. Loss of orchards will only add to the misery of the masses, whose livelihoods depend on them.

Apart from economic consequences, unplanned development has the potential to destabilise and destroy the environment in the region. Over the years, climate change has been impacting the agriculture and horticulture sectors, which are the mainstay of the region’s economy. Per estimates, more than 11,000 hectares of paddy land have been lost in the last five years, creating severe food scarcity. The fluctuating weather phenomenon is impacting the glaciers and wetlands which severely affects the water bodies. Drying of water bodies leading to the shrinking of agricultural land which in turn lead to shifting of this land into non-agricultural and residential areas.

Climate change in the region has been precipitated by the accelerating deforestation and unregulated urbanisation. The construction of new highways and tunnels through mountains and forests has disturbed the ecological equilibrium and affected the weather patterns.

The resistance by the farmers and activists to the proposed railway and highway projects in the region flows out of the fear that such projects will permanently destroy their source of income, thus leaving them without alternatives.

It is essential that local farmers and experts are consulted before announcing any such mega-project which requires precious land. The government can reroute the proposed railway project and halt the newly-announced highway projects to prevent irreversible damage to horticulture and ecological landscape of the region. Development must be sustainable and should not come at the cost of destruction of lives.

The writer is a faculty member of Political Studies, Government Degree College Beerwah, J&K

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 28, 2006

Mittal Steel launches bid for Arcelor

The Kolkata-born global steel baron Mr L.N. Mittal has launched a €18.6-billion (\$22.7 billion) takeover bid for Arcelor, the world’s second largest steel producer. Mittal Steel NV, the largest steel producer of the world, offered the shareholders of Arcelor a premium of 27 per cent over the stock’s closing price on the (Euronext) Paris Stock Exchange.

Bombay HC stays Ganesh Bank-Federal Bank merger

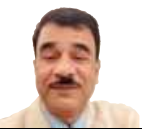
The Bombay High Court has stayed the merger of Ganesh Bank of Kurundwad in Maharashtra with Kerala-based Federal Bank Ltd by issuing an interim order. However, the moratorium on the Ganesh Bank continues. The court order follows a petition by a group of persons including the Ganesh Bank Chairman challenging the Government orders of moratorium and subsequent merger.

Sensex crosses 9,800-mark

The BSE-30 Sensex reached within a sniffing distance of the 10,000 mark, as stock markets rallied on foreign fund buying and better-than-expected third quarter earnings. The Sensex ended at 9,870.79 points, up by 185.05 points (1.91 per cent) on Friday, just 129.21 points away from the 10,000-mark.

India-EU deal, a conditional win

SUPPORT NEEDED. The trade deal creates opportunities, yet much depends on how adjustment costs are managed



SAURABH BANDYOPADHYAY

After nearly two decades of intermittent negotiations, India and the European Union have finally moved towards a comprehensive trade agreement that is being billed as both economically significant and strategically consequential.

Given the scale of the two markets and the breadth of the proposed commitments, the deal has the potential to reshape India’s engagement with advanced economies. Whether it becomes a genuine win-win, however, depends less on tariff cuts alone and more on how adjustment costs and regulatory frictions are managed.

At its core, the agreement seeks to lower tariffs and reduce non-tariff barriers across a large share of bilateral trade, with liberalisation to be phased in over time.

Market access for European automobiles, wines, and industrial machinery is expected to improve, while Indian exports such as textiles, gems and jewellery, chemicals, marine products, and selected services gain preferential entry into the EU.

Sensitive sectors, particularly agriculture and dairy, remain largely protected — reflecting political realism on both sides.

The economic asymmetry that the deal seeks to address is clear. The European Union is currently India’s second-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade in goods and services exceeding €120 billion annually. Yet India accounts for less than 3 per cent of the EU’s total external trade, while the EU represents a far larger share of India’s high-value exports and inward foreign direct investment.

Average applied tariffs in India on many industrial goods remain several times higher than those faced by Indian exporters in Europe, especially in automobiles, wines, and capital goods. The agreement narrows this imbalance



FOCUS. The deal seeks to address economic asymmetry REUTERS

while retaining safeguards for India’s most sensitive domestic sectors.

From the EU’s perspective, improved access to a large and fast-growing consumer market is a commercial prize at a time when global trade is becoming more fragmented. Lower tariffs and clearer investment rules reduce costs for European firms and help diversify supply chains away from excessive geographic concentration.

For India, the gains are not limited to exports. Deeper integration with the EU can attract higher-quality investment,

Without complementary domestic policies — access to finance, skilling, and easier regulatory compliance — trade openness can quickly become politically contentious

India-EU: Major goods trade

India’s major exports to the EU	€ bn
Engineering goods & machinery	18-20
Gems & jewellery	15-17
Chemicals & pharmaceuticals	12-14
Textiles & apparel	8-9
Petroleum products	7-8
EU’s major exports to India	€ bn
Automobiles & auto components	10-12
Industrial machinery & equipment	9-10
Electrical machinery	7-8
Chemicals & specialty chemicals	6-7
Aircraft, medical & precision instruments	4-5

Source: Eurostat; India Department of Commerce (FY2023-24). Values rounded

embed domestic firms into global value chains, and support the shift towards more technology- and skill-intensive manufacturing and services.

ADJUSTMENT PRESSURE

However, trade liberalisation is never distribution-neutral. While consumers and competitive exporters stand to gain, adjustment pressures will be felt by firms that have grown under high tariff protection, particularly smaller and less productive enterprises. In sectors such as automobiles and select manufacturing segments, the pace and sequencing of tariff reductions will matter as much as the headline numbers. Without complementary domestic policies — access to finance, skilling, and easier regulatory compliance — trade openness can quickly become politically contentious.

Regulatory standards form the second major fault line. The EU has consistently pushed for strong commitments on sustainability, labour norms, and

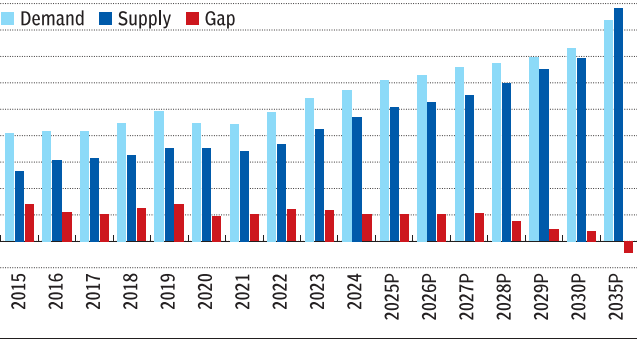
STATISTALK.

Compiled by Sai Prabhakar Yadavalli | Graphic KS Gunasekar

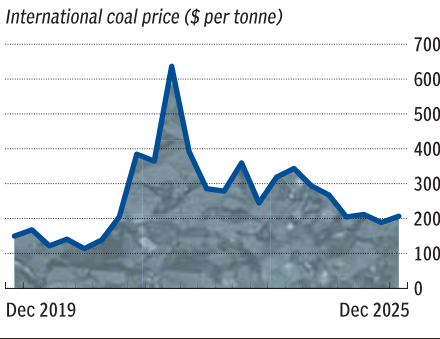
Coal production and utilisation in India

India has set itself a net zero emission target by 2070 and power generation will be led by non-fossil fuels like solar, wind or nuclear. But coal production and utilisation will continue to be robust in the economy, as the red herring prospectus of Bharat Coking Coal indicates. The supply gap is expected to narrow by 2035 as mines and production will match demand. Even though power, the largest end use of coal, is expected to show marginal growth, demand from steel, cement, and other industries utilising coal for captive-power use is expected to drive demand. Coal prices, on the other hand, have been declining from their peak in 2022 and are expected to arrest the decline from 2026

Domestic coal supply has lagged demand

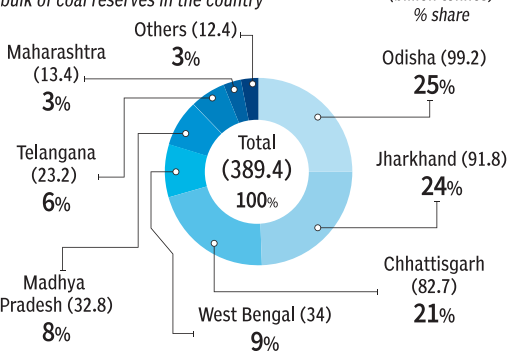


Coal price decline may be at an end



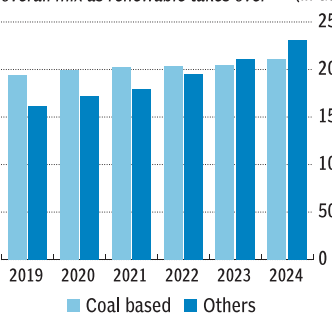
Coal reserves across India

Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh form the bulk of coal reserves in the country



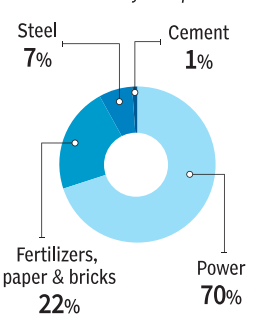
Installed electricity generation from coal

Coal based power generation reduces in overall mix as renewable takes over



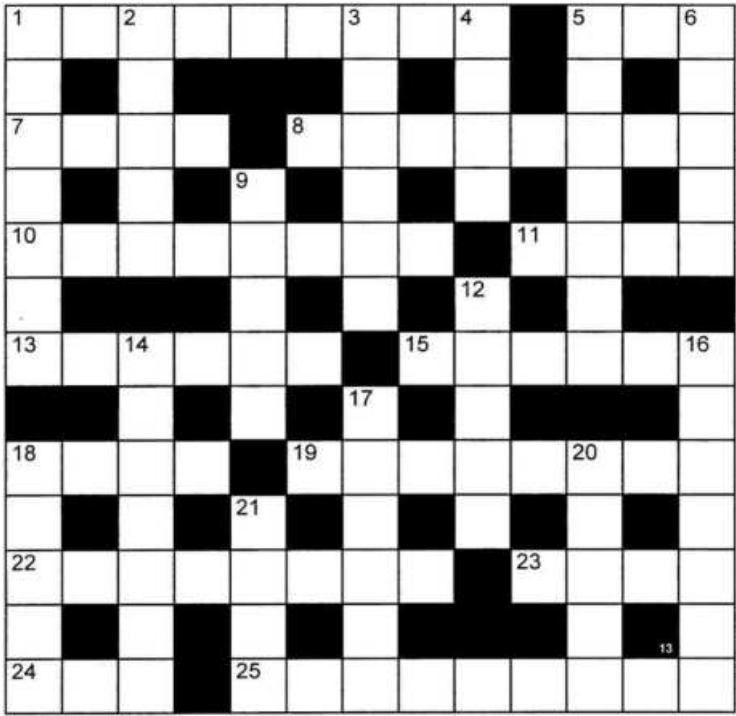
Coal demand by end-use in FY24

Power generates the largest demand for coal followed by steel production



Source: Bharat Coking Coal RHP

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2606



EASY

ACROSS

- Modified, limited (9)
- Lever (3)
- Among, in the midst of (4)
- Exceed one's credit limit at bank (8)
- Bulldog quality (8)
- Gentle, soft, calm (4)
- Piece of ceremonial observance (6)
- Burn superficially (6)
- Vulpine (4)
- Restyling of a person (8)
- Go to live in a foreign country (8)
- Smoke-stack (4)
- Change colour of material (3)
- Fitted for the matter on hand (9)

DOWN

- Twenty-five per cent (7)
- Strange, foreign (5)
- Offer hospitality (6)
- Move swiftly (4)
- Structure preventing passage (7)
- Was at the oars (5)
- Fight, scrimmage (5)
- Mass of fallen rock (5)
- Woven fabric (7)
- Gather in (7)
- Stumble, hesitate (6)
- Ground enclosed for sport (4)
- Device regulating flow (5)
- Bird's crawl (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2605

ACROSS 1. Infamy 4. Trench 9. Alimony 10. Siren 11. Path 12. Bawl 13. Her 15. Read 16. Asks 19. Rot 21. Echo 22. True 24. Abode 25. Failing 26. Expose 27. Repeat

DOWN 1. Inappropriate 2. Fritter 3. Moot 5. Restless 6. North 7. Hundredweight 8. Hyrax 14. Faceless 17. Service 18. Shift 20. Troop 23. File

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Made oneself eligible for final round, but was limited (9)
- It measures the atmosphere in a drinking-place (3)
- If surrounded, help is needed to keep male in (4)
- Do too much crayoning to get beyond one's credit (8)
- Obduracy with which it can yet be made (8)
- It's not severe on ale (4)
- A ceremonial form of trial socially acceptable inside (6)
- To burn it up - along the road? (6)
- It may be cunning to be described as a dog with a brush (4)
- Exceed expected profit with a change of appearance (8)
- Make me a tiger or go and live abroad (8)
- There may be a lot of hot air in an organ pipe (4)
- Colour part of the card yellow (3)
- When about ten, Pinter wrote to the point (9)

DOWN

- A fourth part of the mercy shown (7)
- One in lean form that's strange to one (5)
- Ask one to put net out around six (6)
- Hurry up and throw it at the board (4)
- It prevents access to advocate the street lost (7)
- Looked to be involved in argument as one moved the boat (5)
- Do away with a bit of it (5)
- Mass of rock one will almost show on television (5)
- Material for printed words may lie higgledy-piggledy (7)
- Henry might starve but for this 21 (7)
- May waver after confusing about fifty (6)
- Those taking part in hunt may be at point (5)
- Rival version containing a one-way device (5)
- Cut the 16 short (4)



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Win-win deal
for India, EU

The signing of the FTA signals a pragmatic approach in the midst of global churn

India and the EU first launched their free trade negotiations in 2007, when the world was a very different place. Global growth seemed to have overcome cyclical disruptions, globalisation appeared almost invincible, and the prevailing economic sentiment was overflowing with unbridled optimism. These talks were suspended in 2013. Both India and Europe had their share of problems by that time, rooted mostly in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Since the time talks were relaunched in 2022 and gained momentum, the world has been dealing with the scars of a once-in-a-century pandemic’s economic disruption and, in more recent times, a US government that has been forcing the my-way-and-not-the-globalisation-highway diktat down the world’s throat. If globalisation, not just in the sense of freer markets but also fairer markets, has to be salvaged from its current crisis today, it needs powerful bilaterals that can revive everybody’s confidence in the dying art of multilateralism.

It is in this larger backdrop that the Indo-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) announced in New Delhi on Tuesday can rightfully claim to be a game changer. Put together, India and the EU account for about one-fourth of the global economic output and population. If one were to take out the US and China, India and the EU will have a share of almost 40% and 30% in the rest of the world’s GDP and population. It is not without reason that the agreement is being called the “mother of all trade deals”. The ratification of the deal will take some time — such deals always do, and also because of the procedural logistics of each EU member-country ratifying it individually. Trade deals are often about the fine print, where lawyers, not leaders, have the final say. But the preliminary details released after PM Narendra Modi’s bilateral with the EU leadership suggest a pragmatic and courageous attitude from both partners to see the agreement through.

India has offered significant — in fact, the largest ever — tariff concessions to the EU on many of its key export interests such as automobiles, alcoholic beverages, etc. It has done so while safeguarding its larger livelihood concerns in sectors such as dairy and farming. Europe, on the other hand, will ease India’s market access in sectors where India’s exports have a promise of growth and employment generation. It has also shown willingness to tweak its non-tariff barriers to rightfully accommodate an emerging market partner’s concern about trade being both free and fair. That both parties have been able to agree on hitherto controversial subjects such as carbon tariffs, intellectual property rights-related issues, and data privacy concerns suggests that the issue-specific friction was successfully overcome by the lubricant of the larger good. Analysts will come up with their projections about what the Indo-EU FTA will entail in terms of a tangible increase in trade, both overall and across sectors. However, what is equally important to note is that the trade deal being finally worked out is more than just numbers.

As far as India is concerned, it finally represents a big leap of faith in embracing market openness vis-à-vis a large economic block with the confidence that the competition that follows will lead to creative destruction in the economy rather than creating insecurities. If India has to resurrect exports as an engine of growth, there is no other way but to embrace this larger philosophy. For the EU, getting the deal quickly ratified will reflect a crucial pivot from what many commentators see as inertia and regulatory cholesterol, which has made it a laggard in terms of growth and innovation, to the extent that it is being squeezed by both the US and China. Last but not least is the message the signing of the deal will send to the other side of the Atlantic.

The India-EU deal was finalised against the backdrop of the US’s moves over the past year, including levying a steep 50% tariff on Indian exports last August, and, more recently, downplaying Europe’s role in NATO and arm-twisting it over Greenland. Reports from the US suggest differences within the administration and the Republicans on the delay in the trade deal with India; Washington must feel a tinge of regret over what could have been as it watches from the sidelines India sign a mutually beneficial trade deal with its (India’s) biggest trading partner, the EU. The India-EU defence partnership, also announced Tuesday, is likely to significantly increase that heartburn. Then, it is only to be expected that if a major power starts behaving unreasonably, other large powers will seek to forge alliances to their advantage.

Neither India nor the EU seeks a world where they would be seen as a hegemon — but Tuesday’s deal should make it clear that they will not accept a world with a belligerent hegemon either.

New beginning for a
transformed world

The India-EU FTA comes at a time of a hostile and disruptive trade environment. It can bring significant economic benefits for both

Few visits during a Republic Day parade (and few summits) have been as consequential in symbolism and substance as the visit of this year’s chief guests, European Union (EU) Council president António Costa and Commission president Ursula von der Leyen (and the India-EU Summit the following day). A rare, clear, cool and sunny morning on Republic Day resembled an early spring morning in Europe. Amidst the dark geopolitical clouds, it might have well been a reflection of PM Narendra Modi’s description of the moment, as the “beginning of a new era”, and the repeated echo of a new beginning by the visiting leaders.

As the two EU leaders watched the marching military contingents, including from the EU, in the Indian Capital, they signalled a new EU recognition of the salience of power in the world, not just of rules. And that Europe, buffeted by three major powers, is prepared to build new partnerships, with India at the centre, not at the periphery. For India, the visit sent a message of preference for action over arguments. It was a high point in the evolving strategy of diversifying strategic and economic partnerships in response to geopolitical turmoil and trade disruptions.

The visit resulted in major outcomes and a roadmap. Political goals and defence and security partnership will be important, but realism suggests limits to their global impact. Within the broad framework of convergences, both the EU and India face complex peripheries, major power challenges, and occasionally competing, if not conflicting, objectives.

However, the defining — indeed, the transformative — outcome is the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the largest and the most comprehensive that India has so far signed. There is optimism because success has come after a long history of vast gaps in ambitions, rigid positions and multiple failures; it comes at a time of a hostile and disruptive trade environment; and it can bring significant economic benefits for both.

The data speaks for itself. The EU is India’s largest trading partner. The growth is rapid, fastest for the EU in the Indo-Pacific. India-EU trade grew 90% over the past decade; Indian exports at over 100%. Manufactures account for 81% of India’s exports. India enjoys a surplus in both goods and services. EU’s FDI stock rose from €82 billion to €140 billion in just five years from 2019 to 2023. Besides the potential, it highlights the growing trade-investment linkages as markets adjust to geopolitics and concentration risks.

The India-EU FTA builds on these positive trends and synergies. No two FTAs are alike. Each FTA is a negotiated balance of interests in terms of coverage, exclusions, sectoral differences, concessions, rules of origin, time

frames and more. This is a high-quality and comprehensive FTA that goes beyond trade issues to create a framework for economic partnership. It has ensured more favourable coverage and a phasing schedule for India. The FTA safeguards India’s sensitive sectors, covers 99.5% of India’s exports, and provides duty-free access to over 90% of the goods immediately on entry into force. It improves market access and competitiveness in labour-intensive sectors, creates new opportunities in the industrial sector and gives unprecedented widening and easing of India’s access in the services sector. It will lower cost of EU imports for Indian consumers. It can accelerate investments, deepen India’s

integration into the global value chain — the bulk of global trade — and foster collaboration in technology and innovation. Europe’s industrial and technological capabilities can aid India’s goal of becoming a manufacturing power and export hub, and create quality jobs for the youth. India’s scale and innovation can restore European global leadership in many areas.

The FTA is reinforced by agreements on mobility and migration, defence and security partnership, green hydrogen and clean energy transition, India’s association with EU’s €100 billion research and innovation programme, and the setting up of India-EU startup and innovation hubs in India. Together, they can help India and the EU co-develop self-sufficiency, sovereignty and competitiveness in the building blocks of the digital age — semiconductors, AI, quantum, clouds, communication and



This is a high-quality and comprehensive FTA that goes beyond trade issues to create a framework for economic partnership.

REUTERS

applications — and in leading the response to global challenges, from food and health security to a healthier planet.

The FTA does more. For India, it locks in predictability and stability in the world’s second-largest economy with a GDP of \$22 trillion amidst rapid changes in trade policies. It advances the longer-term policy of expanding FTAs at a time when multilateralism is yielding to plurilateral and bilateral agreements. With EFTA and UK agreements, it covers the whole of Europe. Overall, the share of FTA-covered trade for India will jump over 50%, more aligned with the estimated global trend. For India and the EU, it reflects a determination to counter the weaponisation of trade, pursue connections over barriers, agreements over coercion, and build bridges across the multiple layers of global fragmentation. At a time when trade, technology and investment flows are aligning with geopolitical trust, the FTA and allied agreements serve a strong global purpose.

Much work remains. The text will go through legal cleaning and the ratification process. In the EU, if this is in the exclusive competence of the EU, it will need the approval of the European Council alone, not of member States. But, in accordance with the Treaty of Lisbon, it may require the “consent” of member States by a simple majority in Parliament. There can be political or legal opposition to the process, as in the

case of EU-MERCOSUR agreement. The India-EU text has been negotiated keeping sensitivities on both sides in mind and is likely to get quick approval. The EU could exercise the provision for provisional approval pending the vote. The FTA may take a year to come into force. The agreements on investment protection and geographical indicators will be taken up next. CBAM is on the table.

An FTA is an enabler. It opens the door. Gains are not automatic. External agreements are most effective when domestic policies are conducive. India will have to continue with domestic reforms to improve ease of doing business and trade, lower the cost of capital, expand access to finance, develop infrastructure, improve human skills, and strengthen the capacity of the small- and medium-scale exporters. A concerted government-industry partnership is needed for the full spectrum of activities needed to promote exports and support exporters in FTA markets.

Disputes also grow with trade. They will need to be managed and resolved.

As the anchor of the visit, the FTA reflects a shared commitment to transform their partnership for the benefit of their 1.9 billion people and assert their influence in shaping the new global order that secures their interests and mirrors their ideals.

Jawed Ashraf, a former ambassador, currently serves as chairman, FTPO. The views expressed are personal

Carney’s WEF speech:
Missing true courage

Canadian Prime Minister (PM) Mark Carney’s recent World Economic Forum speech has been widely praised as courageous — bringing much-needed candour about the “rules-based international order”. He invoked the metaphor of Vaclav Havel’s greengrocer — the ordinary figure who quietly endured an oppressive system until he and others found the collective courage to improve their lives. It is an evocative image. It is also entirely wrong.

Canada was never the greengrocer. Canada was one of the mall owners. It helped design the building, sat on the management committee, enforced the rules, collected rents, and benefited from the security, financial architecture. It was embedded in Nato’s security umbrella, the dollar-anchored financial system, western trade regimes, development institutions, and the rule-writing bodies of global governance. By Carney’s own admission, Canada prospered under this order. It did not silently suffer. It accumulated.

The greengrocer changed because he discovered agency. Canada is changing because it lost power. Because the articles of association have been rewritten, US President Donald Trump did not merely introduce unpredictability; he revealed dependence. Tariffs, alliance conditionality, transactional diplomacy, weaponised finance, and open contempt for multilateral etiquette demonstrated that the protections Canada assumed were institutional were, in fact, discretionary. Middle powers did not own the order; they were licensees to it.

This is not moral awakening. It is just a loss of franchise.

Carney’s tone is that of someone finally brave enough to “tell the truth”. There is an unspoken hypocrisy in this posture. He steps forward in moral armour, presenting realism as courage and necessity as virtue. But he wasn’t resisting the system when it rewarded him. His country was a well-paid mercenary of the old regime. Moral courage is not acknowledging the limits of an order when its benefits weaken. Carney describes the old order not only as a fiction, but as a “bargain”. That word deserves scrutiny. A bargain implies a trade-off: Gain in exchange for pain. So what exactly was Canada’s bargain? There was clearly gain, as Carney admits — “We prospered”. Where, then, was the pain? What material sacrifice did Canada bear?

The trade-offs existed. They were not borne by Canada, but by societies whose development paths were narrowed by trade and intellectual-property regimes. By countries disciplined through debt, conditionality, and sanctions. By regions destabilised through proxy wars and regime change. By populations subjected to selective humanitarianism and uneven application of international law.

For much of the Global South, there was indeed a bargain — growth traded for dependency, sovereignty traded for liquidity, stability traded for policy autonomy. Canada paid none of this price. Other countries did.

Carney repeatedly invokes “values,” as though the term itself carries moral substance. Values functioned less as governing principles and more as aesthetic language — the legitimising grammar of a power system. They did not constrain the order. They gave it a moral texture that allowed its beneficiaries to see themselves as stewards rather than winners.

This is why “values” were rarely required to be specified. Democracy, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law floated as self-evident universals when spoken from western capitals. If India today speaks of civilisational values, *dharma*, social harmony, spiritual humanism, organic community, plural sacred geographies, and duties preceding rights — would these be accepted as benign universalism? Or would they be met with suspicion, scrutiny, and demands for translation into Enlightenment vocabulary? One vocabulary is presumed neutral and universal. Another is presumed suspect.

If we are entering a genuinely plural world, this cannot continue. “Values” can no longer operate as an unexamined moral shorthand. Any society that invokes them must now specify what it means, how those values arbitrate real trade-offs, and how they function in a world of civilisational diversity, inequality, and competing historical experiences.

Carney suggests that middle powers must now coordinate around shared interests in a more openly transactional world. But this immediately exposes a contradiction he does not address. What happens when other middle powers pursue their own interests in ways that diverge from expectations of western “values”? Consider India’s decision to continue purchasing Russian oil after the Ukraine war began. From India’s standpoint, this was not ideological. It was developmental. India remains a lower-middle-income country with vast energy dependence.

Discounted Russian crude materially reduced inflationary pressure, protected fiscal stability, and supported poverty-reduction objectives. Is this legitimate self-interest? Or does it violate the “values-based” order Carney still gestures toward? If middle powers are now to act out of interest, who adjudicates which interests are acceptable? Would Canada’s strategic adaptation count as prudence, while India’s counts as moral failure? If so, then nothing substantive has changed. Only the rhetoric.

A plural world cannot operate on a moral gradient where Western self-interest is framed as stability and non-western self-interest as deviance. What Carney’s speech actually signals is not the end of hypocrisy. It is the end of oligopoly. The old order’s moral language was viable as long as institutional authority, economic leverage, and narrative power were concentrated. As those diffuse, moral vocabulary is giving way to strategic vocabulary — resilience, hedging, diversification, autonomy, national capacity.

A genuinely post-hegemonic world will not be built merely by admitting the old order was imperfect. It will require confronting where it was extractive, who it constrained, and which civilisational assumptions it universalised. It will require opening institutional design to non-western moral, metaphysical, and social frameworks — as foundational principles. That work has not begun. What we are witnessing instead is narrower: One of the mall owners discovering that he lost his lease. That may be prudent. It may even be necessary. But it is not moral courage. Moral courage would have been to say this when Canada was still writing the bylaws.

Swati Ramanathan and Ramesh Ramanathan are co-founders of Jana Group. The views expressed are personal

{ ANTÓNIO COSTA }

PRESIDENT, EUROPEAN COUNCIL

At a time when the global order is being fundamentally reshaped, the EU and India stand together as strategic and reliable partners



India-EU ties: Stagnation
to strategic realignment

Under Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, India’s foreign policy has advanced national interests through constructive engagement. The strengthening partnership with the EU stands out as a clear example. The India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA), coupled with accords on security, defence, and strategic cooperation, injects fresh momentum into India-EU ties — making the partnership not only mutually beneficial but also a pillar of global peace and stability.

India-EU relations, declared a strategic partnership in 2004, began with promise through the Joint Action Plan (2005) and BTIA talks (2007), but soon lost momentum amid Eurozone crises, stalled negotiations, and policy inertia under the UPA government. The Modi government reversed this drift, recasting Europe as a partner in India’s rise. The EU came to embody capital, innovation, markets, and technology — vital to India’s ascent in a multipolar order. With Europe’s €18 trillion GDP, renewed engagement became inevitable, driving high-level visits, revived trade talks, business summits, and deeper people-to-people ties.

India-EU trade has soared nearly 90% in a decade to \$136 billion, with 6,000+ EU firms and 16% FDI in India. Beyond commerce, security and defence cooperation have strengthened, while connectivity has become crucial. Technology cooperation is increasing with the establishment of the 2022 Trade and Technology Council. Cooperation in green hydrogen, renewables, and resilient infrastructure reflects converging sustainability agendas. The visit of the EU College of Commissioners in February 2025, with over 20 ministerial dialogues, underscored the political maturity of the partnership.

Global turbulence has reinforced the logic of India-EU cooperation. Over the past decade, multilateralism has frayed under sanctions, unilateral provocations, airspace violations, and the weaponisation of critical technologies, casting doubt on the future of global governance.

Amid global volatility, Europe has sought dependable partners. India emerges as a trusted partner, combining demographic strength with scale, stability and strategic autonomy. The 2025 New Strategic EU-India Agenda reaffirmed convergence on sovereignty, multilateralism, and a rules-based order, elevating the partnership as a strategic priority and positioning both as co-architects of a stable multipolar world.

Despite being India’s largest trading partner, the EU sees under 2.5% of its trade with New

Delhi — highlighting untapped potential and scope for deeper engagement in defence, strategy, technology, green transition, digitalisation, and people-to-people ties.

The presence of EU leaders António Costa and Ursula von der Leyen as chief guests at India’s 77th Republic Day signalled New Delhi’s deliberate political recalibration, marked by the unprecedented parading of EU flags and Missions. Soon after, the 16th India-EU Summit advanced a substantive agenda on trade, strategic cooperation, security, defence, and mobility.

The ambitious India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) marks a decisive leap in bilateral ties. It balances India’s protection of vulnerable sectors like agriculture with broad gains. In effect, the FTA is projected to unlock a \$75 billion export engine — bolstering supply chain resilience, trade and investment, job creation, diversification, competitiveness, and regional presence for both powers. PM Modi hailed the FTA as “historic,” calling it a “blueprint for shared prosperity.” For India, it opens the EU single market, abolishes tariff on 9,425 lines of Indian exports, improves accessibility for Indian farmers and small businesses, boosts trade, particularly in textiles, gems and jewellery, pharmaceuticals, electronics, machinery, processed food, manufacturing and services sector. For the EU, it consolidates a durable economic and geopolitical footprint in India, diversification away from China and the US, with vast opportunities in manufacturing, transport, climate, energy sector (including exploration and refinery), Artificial

Intelligence, critical technologies and business services. Touted by von der Leyen at Davos as the “mother of all deals,” the agreement creates a market of 2 billion people and nearly a quarter of global GDP while strengthening rules-based order and multilateralism.

New opportunities await Indian students, workers, and professionals in the EU under the mobility framework, while the landmark Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) is set to expand cooperation in maritime security, counterterrorism, cyber-defence and strengthening Indo-Pacific ties. Further, the adoption of the joint comprehensive EU-India strategic agenda for next 5 years charts a bold course.

In an uncertain and volatile world, this recalibration marks India’s strategic repositioning and affirms that the India-EU partnership is indispensable.

Shehzad Poonawalla is national spokesperson, BJP, and Vijeta Rattani writes on international development. The views expressed are personal

A big deal

The India-EU partnership will open up opportunities

India and the European Union (EU) on Tuesday concluded the much-awaited free-trade agreement (FTA), one of the largest of its kind globally in recent times. The deal will create a market of two billion people. Nevertheless, the 16th India-EU summit and the engagement of leaders from both sides were not limited to trade. Several other agreements were signed to increase cooperation and strengthen relations. Both sides, for instance, have prepared an overarching document covering all aspects of the India-EU strategic partnership. India and the EU will improve cooperation on defence and security. A comprehensive framework for cooperation on mobility has also been agreed upon. Both India and the EU will open up several sub-sectors in the services space to accommodate each other's priorities. The EU has also committed itself to post-study work visas for Indian students.

In the context of the trade deal, though it will get operationalised after the legal requirements are completed, what has been achieved is remarkable. In 2024-25, India-EU bilateral trade was worth \$136.54 billion. India exported goods worth \$75.85 billion during the year while imports were at \$60.68 billion. Trade can increase rapidly, given the scale. India and the EU account for 25 per cent of global gross domestic product and about a third of global trade. Both sides also have large trading relations in services. It has been agreed that the EU will liberalise tariffs on 99.5 per cent of goods imported in terms of value from India, while India will liberalise duties on over 92 per cent of tariff lines. India will bring down tariffs to zero on 30 per cent of trade by value as soon as the agreement comes into force, and the scope will be gradually increased. Notably, the EU has not given an exemption on the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). However, it has agreed that the flexibility given to any other country will be extended to India.

Although the finalisation of the FTA is an achievement and a reaffirmation of commitment from both sides to a rules-based global order, India should not lose sight of at least three important issues. First, this is not a substitute for a trade agreement with the United States (US). The US administration is still sending mixed signals, but India must continue its efforts to arrive at a mutually beneficial agreement. The possibility of losing access to the US market for an extended period must be avoided. Second, India needs to review its trade policy in general, and tariffs need to be brought down significantly. Since India has shown significant openness to Europe, dropping tariffs in general should be relatively easy now. The upcoming Union Budget will be an excellent opportunity to start the process in a meaningful way. It also needs to reassess quality-control orders, which are essentially trade barriers.

These are important if India is to become part of global value chains in a meaningful manner. It should also now actively consider the possibility of joining mega-regional trade arrangements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Third, India must now push internal reforms more aggressively. It will be able to take advantage of trade deals only if Indian businesses become more competitive. One common criticism of FTAs is that they don't benefit Indian businesses. This happens because of competitiveness. Internal reforms can help avoid such outcomes in the future.

Rewiring power reforms

Discom profitability is an encouraging start

State power distribution companies' (discoms') return to profitability after a decade of being in the red offers hope that reform, which has eluded this sector, is finally paying off. In 2024-25, discoms collectively recorded profits of ₹2,701 crore, a major turnaround from the losses of ₹25,553 crore in 2023-24. Chronic loss-making discoms in states such as Punjab, Bihar, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh all turned in profits for FY25. Behind this encouraging performance are a host of little-noticed but significant decisions that forced a degree of much-needed financial discipline among discoms.

Chief among them was the implementation in 2022 of the automatic pass-through of fuel costs for distribution companies, with 30 of the 36 state and Union Territories adopting the rule. Given that fuel accounts for 70-80 per cent of the discoms' average cost of supply (ACS), the ability to recover this major expense has had a salutary impact on discom profitability. A simultaneous surge in smart metering — from 4,000 per day in FY23 to 115,000 per day in FY25 — has helped reduce power theft, which has long been a bane of the discoms. At the same time, a Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme — the fifth bailout plan in two decades — upped the incentive for improvement by linking access to discounted funds for infrastructure upgrades to measurable targets.

The results of these critical tweaks have been notable. The gap between the ACS and the average revenue realised (ARR) in FY25 narrowed dramatically from 65 paise per unit in FY21 to just 6 paise. With smart metering, the aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C) losses fell from 22.6 per cent in FY14 to 15.04 per cent in FY25. The Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme played its part in improving discom finances by making the payment of government dues and subsidies mandatory. The cascading benefit of these improvements with discoms paying their dues to generating companies on time is due also to an overhaul of the rule governing late payment.

Though this progress is promising, it does not yet point to the fundamental reform that can place the sector on a financially sustainable path. In fact, discoms ended FY25 with accumulated losses of ₹6.47 trillion. The basic problem is that most states continue to rely on support from their Budgets or subsidies to keep agricultural power rates low or free. The Punjab regulator, for instance, raised agricultural power tariffs in FY24 and FY25 but the higher cost was borne by the state; power for farmers remains free. To cover this rising burden, most states (including Punjab) resort to cross-subsidies, raising tariffs for industrial and commercial consumers. But high power tariffs have long impinged on India's manufacturing competitiveness. The draft Electricity Amendment Bill, 2025, yet to be presented to Parliament, states that it seeks to eliminate these legacy structural deficiencies even as it promises to fully protect tariffs of farmers and low-income households. Achieving these contradictory aims has so far eluded India's power sector. Competition in the retail business, as this Bill suggests, may just be the silver bullet the sector needs.

Towards more openness

The forthcoming Budget will achieve many firsts, but future Budgets should be cast in a different mould

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



The Union Budget for 2026-27, to be presented on February 1, is set to claim credit for achieving many firsts. The most obvious of them is the presentation of the Budget on a Sunday. No finance minister of India since Independence has presented the Union Budget on a Sunday. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will be the first. She will also be the first finance minister to present the eighth consecutive full Budget, in addition to an interim Budget, which strictly is not a Budget but a vote on account.

Another first for Ms Sitharaman would be that, for the first time in her tenure as finance minister, she will present a Budget without a formally designated finance secretary under her command. In all her previous seven full Budgets, she had a finance secretary in place to steer the Budget-making exercise. But the finance ministry has had no finance secretary since the last incumbent, Ajay Seth, superannuated and joined the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai) as its chairman at the end of June 2025. However, it must be noted that the secretaries' team — seven in all — at the head of the ministry during this period has remained stable and unchanged.

Of course, a view has gained ground of late that designating one of the secretaries in the ministry as the finance secretary does not make a major difference to the way a Budget is prepared. Economic Affairs Secretary Anuradha Thakur is also in charge of the Budget Division in her department and has been coordinating with other departments on work related to Budget-making. But in practical terms, there is a difference. A designated finance secretary at the helm can coordinate the Budget-making exercise with greater effectiveness within the ministry as also in interacting with other key central ministries and even the states on various revenue and expenditure imperatives.

Most importantly, a designated finance secretary can help prevent possible conflicts arising from different messages being conveyed to the so-called Budget Group in the finance ministry through different channels and nip any confusion in the bud. An effective finance secretary can, therefore, be an efficient conduit for vetting, screening and channelling all views and suggestions on the Budget in an orderly and pro-

ductive way, particularly between the finance ministry and other important stakeholders in the government, including the Prime Minister's Office.

Yet another first for the 2026-27 Budget, though not desirable, will perhaps be the short-lived durability or longevity of its numbers. This is not about the credibility of these numbers but a change in the yardstick by which they are evaluated. For instance, the deficit numbers or the debt anchor in the Budget are always expressed and better understood as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). For analysts, in particular, most other Budget numbers, like those for capital expenditure or tax as well as non-tax revenues, are also evaluated as a percentage of GDP. Equally critical will be the Budget's projection for the nominal size of the Indian economy for 2026-27, a critical number based on which most revenue and expenditure estimates will be made. This projection will be based on the First Advance Estimates of nominal GDP for 2025-26, which were released in the first week of January 2026.

Now, all these numbers derived as a percentage of GDP could change in just about four weeks after the presentation of the Budget on February 1. On the last Friday of February, the Ministry of Statistics will release a new set of GDP numbers with a new base year of 2022-23. In other words, it is likely that the fiscal deficit number for 2025-26, as announced

in the Revised Estimate in the Budget on February 1, could undergo a change by February 27. What that might mean for the numbers projected for deficit, debt, tax collections and expenditure is difficult to say. But a change in those estimates is very likely, unless the new series, with its new base year and after incorporating several new elements in calculating GDP, shows only marginal revisions in the 2025-26 numbers.

Could this have been avoided? The statistics ministry could have advanced the release of the new series data before the presentation of the 2026-27 Budget. Given the frequency with which the ministry has been announcing new features of the GDP series to be released on February 27, it could have compressed its deadline a bit to avoid the need for revising the revenue and expenditure numbers as a percentage of GDP so soon after the presentation of the Budget.



RAISINA HILL
A K BHATTACHARYA

Land value capture

India's cities are racing to build metros, expressways, and regional rail systems at unprecedented scale. Yet the financial foundation beneath many of these infrastructure projects often remains fragile. Building a metro costs anywhere between ₹250 and ₹550 crore per km, but fare revenues rarely cover even operating costs. The outcome is predictable — metro systems operate in chronic deficit.

Hong Kong's MTR and Tokyo's private railways achieve surpluses, primarily through real estate and commercial revenues rather than fares, underscoring that public transport systems, by design, cannot pay for themselves solely through ticket income. A new metro station can raise surrounding land prices by 15-30 per cent or more within 12-18 months. Studies from Delhi, Bengaluru and Hyderabad show that land values within 500-800 metres of stations rise sharply, even when ridership is modest.

In India, most of this publicly created wealth is captured privately. This asymmetric equation is not merely inefficient; it is unjust!

"Land value capture" (LVC) is based on a simple principle that when public investments increase — or create — land value, a portion of that "unearned increment" must revert to the public. Hong Kong's MTR recovers 20-25 per cent of capital costs through its Rail + Property model. Tokyo's Tsukuba Express financed 63 per cent of its project cost through land readjustment and resale. London's Crossrail project (now known as the Elizabeth Line) raised ₹4.1 billion via citywide development levies.

India has made attempts. The 2017 Metro Rail Policy, the Value Capture Framework, and the National Transit Oriented Development Policies prescribe LVC. Mumbai charges a 1 per cent metro cess on property transactions; Pune and Ahmedabad levy betterment charges; Hyderabad uses transferable development rights; and several states sell premium FSI/FAR (floor space index / floor area ratio).

However, these efforts can be quite constrained and ineffective. For instance, the City and Industrial Development Corporation of Maharashtra's better-

ment fee for the Navi Mumbai Airport Influence Notified Area project, slashed its charge from 50 per cent to 0.05 per cent after protests; far too low to meaningfully contribute to infrastructure. Delhi Metro's value capture potential has long been stifled by conservative FAR norms around station areas — far below Hong Kong's 8-10 FAR corridors.

India's challenges include weak implementation, poor inter-agency coordination, and political ambiguity about the nature of issues involved. Many Indian cities still impose restrictive zoning and FAR, parking minimums, and rigid use classifications, thereby choking the potential of transport-oriented development. Without density, land value uplift remains limited, constraining the revenue pool. Evidence from Hyderabad's FSI deregulation shows that high-demand areas with permissive development controls achieved FSI utilisation of 4.8-5, while outer zones stagnated at an average FSI of 1.45.

Fragmented governance, too, is a barrier to LVC application. Metro construction or bus rapid transit operations are handled by special-purpose vehicles, land-use by development authorities, and taxation by municipalities. Delhi Metro's experience illustrates the dysfunction caused by multiple agencies controlling different pieces of the puzzle. Weakness in government capacity is also seen in land valuation systems, which remain unresponsive to market forces. Circle rates often lag market value by 30-50 per cent. When taxes, fees, and levies are tied to artificially low valuations, public revenues decline sharply. LVC requires municipalities that are competent in land valuation, legal structuring, and negotiation.

Political or popular resistance to the idea is a formidable barrier. LVC instruments like betterment levies and premium FAR charges are abhorred by real estate players and property owners alike. Politicians hesitate to impose them because of the misguided apprehension that they are imposing new burdens; they are unable to convey to the public that such charges are transparent demonstrations of how the public can reclaim the value they themselves



INFRACTALK
VINAYAK CHATTERJEE

generated by using public transport infrastructure and services. This messaging is missing, although it is easy to understand.

India needs a clear blueprint for LVC anchored in the "3-I Strategy" that has been propounded in a study by IIM Ahmedabad for The Infravision Foundation. The "Invest-Integrate-Intensify" approach is not theoretical; it is grounded in global best practices and adaptable to Indian realities.

INVEST: Create value before capturing it. Value capture is impossible without value creation — shape high-density, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly zones around transit.

INTEGRATE: Build a strong metropolitan transport authority. A reengineered unified transport governance framework — or an equivalent institution — must evolve into a statutory, fully empowered authority, on the lines of Transport for London, with clear control over integrated mobility planning, land use, zoning approvals, and development rights.

INTENSIFY: Accelerate station-area redevelopment and PPP models. Scale up joint development around transit systems by promoting commercial complexes above and around stations; leveraging air-rights concessions; expanding retail leasing, advertising, and station-naming rights; and pursuing PPP-based station redevelopment with clear revenue-sharing arrangements.

Similar principles could be applied to other classes of infrastructure projects. For example, in the case of highways, a betterment cess could be levied on every land-sale transaction within a 750-metre parallel ribbon along both sides of a new road. The additional revenue could be shared equally between the concerned state government and a central agency.

LVC is not a fancy frill on urban transportation. It is an imperative for Indian cities that they must address with urgency. Traditional funding sources cannot finance the infrastructure needed for India's demographic shift and economic ambition. Public investments continue to produce private windfalls. Allowing this imbalance to persist is economically irrational and ethically indefensible. LVC corrects the imbalance.

The author is an infrastructure expert. He is also the co-founder & managing trustee of The Infravision Foundation (TIF). Research support by Jagan Shah, CEO, TIF

Why Left can be right



ADITI PHADNIS

If you're looking for a sophisticated treatise on Marxism and the nature of the state for example, or Eurocommunism, or Marxism and phenomenology, you won't find it here. This is a book by an activist, one who moved from holding a corporate job to realpolitik. Saira Shah Halim made her political debut in March 2022, contesting on a Communist Party of India (Marxist) ticket in the Ballygunge Assembly by-poll in West Bengal.

Though she lost the election, she managed to increase the Communist Party of India (Marxist)'s vote share from five per cent to 30 per cent — an unexpected outcome. In this book, she offers a potted history of the Left in India, its high and low points, and suggests to all readers but especially those from GenZ, that Communism is cool, Kerala rocks, and revolution, like good biryani, can't be rushed.

Writing as a member of the CPI (M), she analyses events and history from a certain vantage point. The United States is bad, exploitative, and the fount of all evil in the world. Lenin was good, Stalin was bad (there is no real exposition of Mikhail Gorbachev's role in trying to modernise Soviet socialism). The most important Marxist idea is self-governance by the working class, a "govern-

ment truly for and by the people". Except that neither Marx nor Engels nor Lenin or Stalin said that. It was actually the central idea on which the US was envisaged by Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address. She goes on to add: "It [self-governance] is not about torching all hierarchies but making sure operational hierarchies don't morph into oppressive ideologies". Right.

The book's strongest point is the honest recounting of the Indian Left movement, its divisions and schisms, the rift between the CPI, the CPI (M) and the various groups in the radical Left. We know that till between 1939 and 1941, for the undivided CPI, World War II was an imperialist war. When Germany attacked the USSR in 1941, it suddenly became a people's war. This led to great confusion among the cadres. Were they fighting imperialism? Or fascism? Were the otherwise imperialist Allied powers the primary enemy? Or was it Hitler who had led an attack on The People? This confusion remained even after the split

in the CPI and the formation of the CPI (M), when E M S Namboodiripad enunciated the line that "if Congress is cholera, BJP is plague, you end up dead with both". The CPI had already compromised itself beyond redemption by supporting the Emergency while CPI (M) colleagues were arrested and many tortured. EMS's line led to the "historic blunder" when West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu was not permitted by his party to make a claim to prime ministership. But later, the Left Front did support a Congress-led government to keep the BJP out. So did contradictions turn into compromises? And was this the reason for the gradual marginalisation of the Left in Indian power politics? The book seeks to explain this in context. It also describes in detail what Kerala did right in creat-

ing a strong foundation for Left thinking and praxis. The section of the Left government in Tripura is masterful and shines a light on the politics of a state the rest of India knows little about.

There is hardly any doubt that India needs Left ideas of equality and humanism now more than ever. It has to be a New Left. This book is also about a sort of manifesto for the New Left, detailing the ideas and people you should follow. Oppression, Ms Halim says, is like a web. Race, gender, class, sexuality and disability all intersect. Climate justice is non-negotiable. And global solidarity is the future. Ms Halim's heroes are Mayor of New York Zohran Mamdani, Arundhati Roy and Angela Davis, among others. But she adds: "The Left hasn't just been outplayed electorally; it's also

been outmanoeuvred on the narrative front". If Mamata Banerjee could position herself as 'more Left than the Left' it's a wake-up call," she says. Her solution to the crisis? "If the Left can embrace introspection and innovation, it can inspire a new generation to fight for equity, justice and democracy," she says, adding, "but sticking to outdated ideas could weaken it". Unexceptionable. But in India, she suggests the Left parties should "fully engage in national politics and be ready to form coalitions with other political parties which are ideologically close". Been there. Done that.

This book is a strong testament of faith in Left ideas and reminds us that many of the ideas and heroes that the current dispensation has appropriated actually belonged to the broader Left movement. It asks everyone, especially young people to stand up and be counted. Written in an easy, storytelling style, this book could be read by all those who are interested in India's future as a democracy.

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SECURITY AND DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP, MOBILITY FRAMEWORK AMONG 13 PACTS

India and EU seal the deal

FTA: 'Not just a trade agreement, a new blueprint for shared prosperity... sending a clear message to the world'

Shubhajit Roy
& Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, January 27

SEALING WHAT they called “a new blueprint” and the “mother of all deals”, India and the European Union announced Tuesday that they had reached a free trade agreement, “a milestone” in their strategic partnership to deepen economic ties and “drive shared prosperity”.

The FTA, clinched after nearly two decades of negotiations between the two sides representing 2 billion people, comes at a time when both India and the EU have been hit by the Trump administration's steep tariffs, adding urgency to their search for markets elsewhere.

The pact, once it is vetted and ratified, will eliminate duties on 99.5% of Indian exports, including textiles and

gems, while reducing tariffs on 97% of EU goods, such as cars and wine, to 0% in many cases.

Firming up 13 outcomes at their summit meeting in New Delhi, India and the EU signed the conclusion of the FTA negotiations, a security and defence partnership, a mobility framework and a joint India-European Union Comprehensive Strategic Agenda 2026-2030.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speaking alongside European Council President Antonio Luis Santos da Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, said, “Today is another historic occasion, when the world's two largest democratic powers are adding a decisive chapter to their relations. Today, India has concluded the largest Free Trade Agreement in its history so far.”

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with European Council President Antonio Costa (left) and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during their meeting at Hyderabad House, in New Delhi, on Tuesday. PTI

After two decades of negotiations, how the deal was clinched

Anil Sasi
New Delhi, January 27

THE INDIA-EUROPEAN Union Free Trade Agreement (FTA), nearly two decades in the making, has finally gone through. But there was another point when a trade deal appeared tantalisingly close to fruition — only to be jettisoned.

This was 2013, when the 27-nation bloc's chief negotiator, Ignacio Garcia Bercero, was abruptly moved out, effectively shutting the window of opportunity.

The lessons appear to have been learnt this time.

Officials on the Indian side testified to a palpable need for urgency, fearing that the impetus could be lost and the window could close again.

The deal attempts to be far

more pragmatic. It takes a graded approach to contentious issues such as automobiles, spirits, and has left out agriculture products altogether.

And, the key difference from the last time is evolving geopolitics. America's shadow on global trade and politics has created a broader strategic objective beyond trade gains.

How the deal fell last time

The first round of India-EU trade talks was initiated in 2007. By October 2013, New Delhi and Brussels had exchanged offers on tariffs and services, and were focusing on identifying the outlines of a possible agreement for the tricky market-access component of the FTA.

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• WHO GAINS WHAT, WHAT NEXT

FOR INDIA

	Before FTA	After FTA
Marine sector	up to 26%	0%
Chemical	up to 12.8%	0%
Leather & footwear	up to 17%	0%
Plastic & rubber	up to 6.5%	0%
Textile & apparel	up to 12%	0%
Base metal	up to 10%	0%
Gems & jewellery	up to 4%	0%
Railway, aircraft, ships	up to 7.7%	0%
Furniture & light consumer goods	up to 10.5%	0%
Toys	up to 4.7%	0%
Sports goods	up to 4.7%	0%

- India's labour-intensive annual exports worth \$35 billion benefit immediately
- Signing of the deal expected later this year
- Legal scrubbing to take 4-5 months



SOURCE: COMMERCE & INDUSTRY MINISTRY, EUROPEAN UNION

FOREU

	Before FTA	After FTA
Motor vehicles	110%	10% (quota of 250k/yr)
Wine	150%	20% (premium); 30% (medium)
Spirits	up to 150%	40%
Beer	110%	50%
Olive Oil	up to 45%	0%
Kiwis & pears	33%	10% (in-quota)
Machinery & electrical equipment	up to 44%	0% for most products
Aircraft & spacecraft	up to 11%	0% for most items
Iron and steel	up to 22%	0% for most items
Pharma	11%	0% for most items
Processed food (bread, biscuit, pasta, chocolate, pet-food)	up to 50%	0%

- Deal expected to come into effect by early next year
- India will receive same flexibility as US on EU's carbon tax

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A SIGNAL OF FREER TRADE, A GOOD AUGURY

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INDIA'S BIGGEST CHALLENGE: EU'S REGULATORY REGIME

AUTO STOCKS SLUMP, BUT TEXTILE COMPANIES CLIMB

EXPLAINED

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HOW SHIFTING TRADE WINDS NUDGED INDIA-EU TALKS ACROSS FINISH LINE

'EQUITY REGULATIONS'

No discrimination against anybody: Govt after protests on new UGC norms

Abhinaya Hargovind,
Vikas Pathak
& Vidheesha Kuntamalla
New Delhi, January 27

AMID PROTESTS over the recently notified “equity regulations” for higher education institutes by the University Grants Commission (UGC), Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said Tuesday that no one would be allowed to misuse the provisions and that “discrimination will not be allowed against anybody”.

“... Oppression will not be allowed against anybody... there won't be discrimination... Nobody will have the right to misuse (the regulations)... The UGC, Union government or state governments... there will be responsibility,” Pradhan told mediapersons.

The regulations, which were notified on January 13, were “within the ambit of the Constitution” and “done under the supervision of the Supreme Court”, he added.

The UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, which replace the 2012 equity regulations of the commission, have

EXPLAINED

HOW NEW UGC NORMS SHARPEN PROVISIONS ON CASTE BIAS PAGE 10

seen protests by groups, mostly on social media, claiming that these could be used to “harass” general category students and create “caste divisions”. On Tuesday, some students protested outside the UGC office in Delhi seeking the withdrawal of the regulations.

On Monday, Bareilly City Magistrate Alankar Agnihotri announced his resignation citing the regulations, among other reasons, while there were reports of 11 BJP office-bearers in Uttar Pradesh stepping down in protest.

The main objection that has been raised is that there is no provision for penalties in the regulations against “false complaints of discrimination”, and that institutions can be subjected to action for not complying with the regulations.

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Business as Usual
By EP UNNY



THE BIG PICTURE



A carrot story
Sikandrabad is now a carrot hub. Meet the former Army man behind this PAGE 13

Shift on Ukraine in joint statement

IN A significant departure on Ukraine, India signed off on a joint statement with the EU which said they would support efforts based on the principles of “independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity”. This is an important framing since this goes against what Russia has been asking for. India and the EU have so far differed on Russia's actions on Ukraine, and these divergences have dominated the Delhi-Brussels discourse over the last four years.

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Big swap: Automobiles, wine for labour-intensive goods

Ravi Dutta Mishra
New Delhi, January 27

REFLECTING INDIA'S priority to shore up trade-linked jobs in textiles, footwear and the marine sector amid the US tariff hit, and Europe's bid to revive its industrial base through automobile exports in the face of Chinese competition in global markets, New Delhi and Brussels closed negotiations on a high-stakes trade-off: EU access for automobiles and wine in return for concessions on In-

dia's labour-intensive sectors.

The market access trade-off assumes significance as India-EU trade talks had collapsed in 2013 over market access negotiations for automobiles. For India, zero duty on labour-intensive goods brings it at par with competing countries, particularly with Vietnam, which signed a trade agreement with the EU in 2019, which helped it assume a key role in the global supply chain.

Commerce Ministry officials

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Mobility pact eases options for Indian students, workers

Divya A & Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, January 27

IN A new framework to facilitate movement of people, India and the European Union have signed a mobility pact aimed at easing the movement of Indian students, workers and professionals across 27 EU member countries.

This comes at a time when the US is making H1-B and other visa routes for Indian citizens more expensive, stricter.

Under the new framework for mobility, the EU has committed to “an uncapped mobility for Indian students”, according to officials, allowing Indians greater ease to travel, study and work across EU states. There are already around 1.20 lakh Indian students across the EU, with Germany clocking in around 50,000, making Indian students the largest group of international students in the country.

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

• 38-YEAR-OLD LIKELY TO TURN HIS FOCUS TO INDEPENDENT MUSIC AND COMPOSITION

Arijit Singh, Bollywood's voice of love, says no to playback singing: 'Wonderful journey'

Suanshu Khurana
New Delhi, January 27

FOR MORE than a decade in contemporary Bollywood, love, and very often its loss, learned to sing through Arijit Singh.

In an industry where a song can often communicate what even the most intense dialogue cannot, Singh's grainy, bruised baritone came to signal the heart's triumphs and tribulations. On Tuesday, in a striking announcement on social media, the 38-year-old said he was

stepping away from playback singing — a significant turn for a voice that has become inseparable from today's Hindi film industry.

“Hello, Happy new year to all. I want to thank you all for giving me so much love all these years as listeners. I am happy to announce that I am not going to be taking any new assignments as a playback vocalist from now on. I am calling it off. It was a wonderful journey,” he posted.

Singh is now likely to turn his focus to independent music



'Not taking new assignments as a playback vocalist'

and composition, which, he has long maintained, was his original calling.

In a conversation with this

reporter in 2013, Singh had recalled telling the legendary lyricist Javed Akhtar that he wanted to be a composer. “But Javed saab told me, *pehle singer ban jao, phir composer bhi ban jaana* (First become a singer, then become a composer as well). I am following his advice... Composers like my voice and I enjoy singing but what I really love is producing and programming music. One needs to have fun with what is being done,” he had said.

Singh first came into the spotlight during the reality

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

WINGS INDIA 2026

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Happening today

• THE BUDGET SESSION begins with President Droupadi Murmu's address to the joint sitting. The Union Budget will be presented on February 1.

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Made in India & Made in Europe

AFTER SEVERAL rounds of talks, India and the EU have finally concluded negotiations on an enormously consequential free trade agreement — a deal that creates a trade zone of regions that are home to around 2 billion people and account for 25 per cent of global GDP. The “mother of all deals” underlines Delhi’s desire to seek deeper global integration within a predictable rules-based framework at a time when US President Donald Trump has taken a wrecking ball to the trading system. Though the formal signing will take place only after the legal scrubbing is finished, this pact will help facilitate the diversification of India’s export markets — critical when the country faces a 50 per cent tariff levy on exports to the US. The relationship with the EU is deepening beyond trade as well, with the signing of a Security and Defence Partnership that will facilitate greater collaboration in areas of maritime security, counter-terrorism and cybersecurity.

Under the agreement, India has received preferential access to the European markets across 97 per cent of tariff lines, while for the EU, India has offered tariff liberalisation on 92.1 per cent of tariff lines. Some tariff lines will see immediate reductions, while in certain cases the duty reductions will be implemented in a phased manner. Others are subject to tariff-rate quotas. For India, labour-intensive sectors are likely to get a boost. For instance, the FTA creates a more even playing field in accessing the EU’s ready-made garment market, which is pegged to reach \$105 billion as per CareEdge Ratings. This will create tremendous opportunities for exporters. And while India has stuck to its red lines — such as dairy — it has also secured commitments across 144 services subsectors, including IT/ITes, education and professional services. At a time when there are issues regarding H-1B visas in the US, the EU FTA puts in place a mobility framework that “eases the movement of employees of Indian corporations”.

The political will in pushing through this long drawn out agreement — talks for the deal had begun in 2007 — along with the spate of recent trade agreements, signals a desire to embrace freer trade, and points to protectionist impulses in retreat. While the deal with the US hangs in limbo, the government should look to sustain the movement and push to join other larger trade groupings.

In China, a purge and a dramatic power reset

AS VICE-CHAIR of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Zhang Youxia is not just China’s second-most powerful figure in its military (after President Xi Jinping). By all accounts, the country’s highest-ranking general is among the few commanders with extensive combat experience (Vietnam, 1978), and his personal ties with Xi run deep. Recent revelations that Zhang, along with fellow CMC member General Liu Zhenli, is under investigation for “suspected serious violations of discipline and law” cap Xi’s three-year purge of the entire top tier of China’s military leadership, ostensibly on corruption charges. Should Zhang and Liu be officially dismissed, the seven-member CMC, which holds supreme authority over the 2-million-strong People’s Liberation Army (PLA), will be left with only two members: Xi and the anti-corruption officer, Zhang Shengmin. Not since the era of Mao Zedong has Communist China witnessed a purge of this magnitude.

When Xi assumed power in 2012, he vowed to eradicate corruption in the PLA by cracking down on both “tigers and flies”. Another round of purges began in 2023 in the PLA Rocket Force, which oversees China’s missile arsenal, with reports emerging that water had been used instead of fuel in some of its missiles. This wave has culminated in the removal of Zhang, who, until now, was one of Xi’s most trusted aides. While corruption has been given as the formal justification, China watchers point to another possible factor: Zhang’s assessment of the PLA’s operational readiness for a Taiwan invasion may not have aligned with Xi’s deadline, which, according to US intelligence, is 2027. On January 1, Xi had doubled down on his Taiwan pledge, reiterating that China’s “reunification” is “unstoppable”. Differences between Zhang and Xi over how to achieve this objective may have sealed the former’s fate.

China is a black box. Yet one thing is clear: The Chinese military stands weakened. The question, now, is where the PLA goes from here. Will the supposed anti-corruption drive strengthen the force, or will continued disruptions erode cohesion and degrade capability? Beyond operational considerations, what is also evident is that any decision regarding escalation across the Taiwan Strait will rely exclusively on Xi and his personal preferences.

Monkey intelligence runs a tight ship

THE COMEDIAN George Carlin used to characterise “military intelligence” as an oxymoron. One wonders what he would have made of monkey intelligence. A study published in the journal *npj Complexity* has found that spider monkeys in Mexico’s Yucatán peninsula run an elaborate intelligence-gathering operation. Agents are dispersed in cells, scout different areas, split and recombine seamlessly into different cells and brief each other, pooling and synthesising their knowledge to build up an increasingly granular intelligence picture. It’s a continuous process, and the same group of agents may never come together a second time. No silos, no bureaucracy, just quiet competence and good operational security — monkey intelligence (MI) runs a tight ship.

The objective of MI’s reconnaissance is to secure food supplies for their banana republic. The spider monkeys, who split up into groups of three or more collect and disseminate information that includes both location and timing — “an example would be if one subset of individuals would contribute the location of a food source and another subset the timing of the fruiting of that source”, the study says. When this knowledge is brought together, all can benefit from that food source.

The study calls this a “compelling example of collective intelligence in natural conditions”. And in nature, all this happens spontaneously and voluntarily. It’s simply a matter of individuals sharing tips — with no centralised command and control; MI doesn’t have an “M” at its head. Would humans be able to do the same in the absence of authority and hierarchy? Hobbesian wisdom would point to a “war of every man against every man” but other thinkers have imagined, and presented evidence for, alternative ways of living together, some of which may have been practised by prehistoric societies. The idea, a spider monkey might argue, isn’t necessarily bananas.

FTA not an endpoint, marks reform push for the next strategic move

ON A crisp January day in 2026, India and the European Union announced what has been described as “the mother of all trade deals”: A comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that took 19 years to materialise. When negotiations first began in 2007, the world was a very different place. The iPhone had just been launched, India was adding 18 million subscribers a month to its telecom subscriber base, Lehman Brothers was still solvent, and the global order seemed settled. Few would have predicted that nearly two decades later, after a pandemic and amid an increasingly unpredictable global power acting as though the world owes it respect, recognition, and money, both sides would be compelled to conclude what had long seemed impossible.

The “mother of all deals” metaphor can be interpreted in several ways, but it is best read as a signal of something deeper. Two democratic partners, one that privileges standards as protection (the EU) and the other tariffs (India), have managed to set aside long-standing differences to forge an alliance. What has emerged is not merely a trade agreement, but a broader strategic partnership encompassing trade, investment, defence cooperation, and supply-chain resilience. This reflects not only how much India and the EU have changed, but more importantly, how profoundly the world itself has transformed. The relevant question, then, is simple: Would this deal have been signed had the world remained as it was in 2007? The answer, almost unambiguously, is no. The India–EU FTA is less a triumph of patient diplomacy than a rational response to a world that has become markedly more dangerous, unpredictable, and multipolar.

But it has happened — and that is what matters. Tariff reductions for India, whether achieved through international agreements

or by unilateral inspiration à la 1991, are good for the economy. They foster competition, improve efficiency, and expand markets. Thirty-five years after a round of inspired economic thinking by the then finance minister, Manmohan Singh, one might reasonably expect Indian industry to be ready to move beyond a protectionist mindset. Perhaps this agreement will provide precisely the push that was needed. India has, for instance, agreed to reduce tariffs on cars imported from the EU to 40 per cent from peaks as high as 110 per cent, with a path toward eventual reduction to 10 per cent. These changes are likely to generate significant pro-competitive spillovers. The same applies to wines and spirits, which have been granted treatment similar to that under the Australia and New Zealand FTAs. Crucially, Indian spirits will also gain access to the EU market, as will services. As with any bilateral trade agreement, gains accrue to both sides. European buyers benefit from reliable supplies from a cost-competitive source, while India gains an incentive to upgrade quality standards, not only for exports, but for domestic consumers as well.

Sensitive areas in the farm sector have been excluded from the FTA. In 2024, India exported \$4.2 billion worth of food and beverages to the EU, ranking a distant 30th among EU suppliers, behind countries such as Vietnam and Thailand. The binding constraint here is not tariffs but standards. The EU market is governed by stringent sanitary and phytosanitary measures, traceability requirements, and sustainability norms that Indian exporters often struggle to meet consistently. Here, too, the agreement should be viewed less as a concession than as an opportunity to build capacity and upgrade compliance regimes.



RAJAT KATHURIA

By signing the EU deal, India signals the constraints it is willing to live with, and to what extent. US tariffs have forced a choice; the EU FTA, in turn, provides India with time to gradually wean itself away from Russian dependence

Meghalaya’s AI story is a template for inclusive tech



CONRAD K SANGMA

Leveraging data-driven governance systems, Meghalaya has reduced its maternal mortality rate by nearly 50 per cent, a metric that showcases AI’s capacity to save lives when deployed thoughtfully in public health systems

MEGHALAYA’S EMERGENCE as one of the hubs of AI development represents a significant milestone in India’s technological transformation. By leveraging abundant clean energy, dedicated data centres and proactive state policies, Meghalaya is fast attracting AI research, start-ups and digital skilling initiatives. This not only diversifies India’s tech map beyond traditional metros but also showcases how smaller states can drive inclusive, innovation-led growth.

The Regional AI Impact Conference, held in December 2025, brought together over a thousand participants in Shillong. It signalled how state-level innovation, when aligned with central government support, can create a replicable model for inclusive AI development across the nation.

Leveraging data-driven governance systems, Meghalaya has reduced its maternal mortality rate by nearly 50 per cent, a metric that showcases AI’s capacity to save lives when deployed thoughtfully in public health systems. The state is implementing an Internet of Things sensor network across 70,000 water springs to gather real-time data for improved water resource management and conservation planning.

The state government has articulated a bold vision to position Meghalaya as the IT skill capital of eastern India through initiatives including the expansion of the Shillong Tech Park, upcoming data and AI labs, and an AI centre of excellence. The state is also exploring robotics and AI applications in agriculture, drawing on cutting-edge farming models observed in Japan, while simultaneously integrating local languages into AI-powered applications.

Meghalaya’s commitment attracted immediate central government support, reflecting how regional excellence can shape national resource allocation. During the December conference, Union Minister for Electronics and Information Technology Ashwini Vaishnaw announced that Meghalaya would receive three additional data and AI labs. This expansion is part of a much larger national initiative. The goal is to train approximately 1 million people in AI skills. At

its core, the IndiaAI Mission provides the strategic foundation for India’s AI ecosystem, structured around seven integrated pillars that democratise access and foster technological sovereignty: IndiaAI Compute, which offers subsidised access to 38,000 GPUs; the IndiaAI Datasets Platform, hosting over 3,800 datasets for developers; IndiaAI FutureSkills, powering large-scale AI education programmes; the IndiaAI Innovation Centre, building indigenous foundational models; IndiaAI Startup Financing, supporting deep-tech ventures; and IndiaAI Applications Development, funding about 30 AI solutions in healthcare and agriculture.

The central government is implementing AI-focused initiatives across the Northeast. The Union Minister for Skill Development emphasised that embedded apprenticeship programmes are being rolled out through universities. The National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme has been reformed to double stipend support for apprentices from the Northeast, addressing a critical issue: Historically, talented youth from the region had to migrate to major urban centres for quality employment.

Modules for AI readiness have been developed for students in classes VI through XII, with rollout expected soon. Additionally, the government is preparing online assessments, courses, and certification programmes to make AI education accessible to young people throughout the Northeast.

The conference in Meghalaya served as a key preparatory platform for the India AI Impact Summit scheduled between February 16 and 20 in New Delhi. The summit aims to establish India as a global leader in responsible, people-centric AI, with a strong focus on applications across healthcare, agriculture, education, and climate sectors.

As India prepares for the AI Impact Summit and the larger vision of democratising AI across the nation, the Meghalaya model offers a template: Ground-up innovation, supported by national-level resources and vision, can transform technology development from a centralised privilege into a decentralised opportunity.

The writer is Chief Minister, Meghalaya

What does merit mean in an unequal classroom?



ADITI NARAYANI PASWAN

Equity is not merely about securing admission. It is about surviving the academic journey with dignity

WHEN I teach, I often begin by asking my students a simple question: What do you think of Ambedkar? It is painful how frequently students describe him as the man who “took away” their “merit” through reservation. The merit-versus-quota debate continues to divide the nation because we refuse to interrogate what merit means in an unequal society.

I often wonder how unequal social conditions can produce equal competition. I’m appalled by the level of discourse surrounding the UGC’s Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026, which superseded the 2012 guidelines by the same name. The hue and cry over what might have been a run-of-the-mill revision is disheartening, if not surprising. What’s more heart-breaking is that these sentiments are being echoed by so-called beacons of academia, who lament that these regulations will lead to discrimination against them.

It is preposterous to think that any regulation safeguarding the rights of the marginalised will in any way hamper the interests of the dominant castes. The criticism is premised on the assumption of the regulations’ misuse by the 85 per cent — SC/ST/OBC — against the dominant caste groups. What this view fails to acknowledge is that the same 85 per cent are grossly underrepresented in education, whether as faculty or students. As per data presented in Parliament, of the 423 posts sanctioned for professors in central universities under the OBC category, only 84 have been filled. For the ST category, 83 per cent of posts are vacant as only 24 of 144 have been filled. In the SC category, 64 per cent of posts sanctioned are vacant, with only 111 of 308 being filled.

Data tabled in the Lok Sabha in December 2023 showed that more than 13,500 students from SC, ST and OBC categories had dropped out of central universities, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) in the previous five years. When humiliation, excessive scrutiny, isolation and exclusion become routine, discrimination stops appearing extraordinary — it just becomes invisible. Dropouts, then, are not individual failures but a collective failure.

The tag of “not found suitable”, rising cases of suicides in IITs and persistent criticism of reservation in employment and education has led to an environment in which efforts to bring parity and equity keep getting derailed. This begs also the question: Why have decades of reservation failed to bear any results in bringing parity in representations? How, despite quotas and allegedly watered-down merit lists, do we continue to be underrepresented in the media, judiciary and other corridors of power?

Equity is not merely about securing admission. It is about surviving the academic journey with dignity. Perhaps it cannot be enforced by UGC guidelines alone, but in seeking institutional accountability, these guidelines become moral signals that we cannot ignore.

The writer is assistant professor of Sociology, Lakshmibai College, Delhi University

40 YEARS AGO

January 28, 1986



Akali Dal cries conspiracy

A STORMY joint meeting of the ruling Akali Dal (L) legislature party, MPs and district party presidents described Damdami Tak-sal’s “Sarbat Khalsa” and connected happenings in the Golden Temple complex as “part of a big conspiracy to destroy the Sikh panth.” The meeting called upon every Sikh to fight such “anti-panthic forces”. It was suggested at the meeting that a campaign should be launched to collect about 2 lakh Sikhs from all over the world for an SPGC-sponsored “Sarbat Khalsa”.

UP ‘rasta roko’ stir

THE LOK DAL has given a call for “rasta

roko” in Uttar Pradesh to demand remunerative sugarcane prices for farmers. Announcing this to newsmen in New Delhi, the Lok Dal MP, Virendra Verma, said rail movement would, however, not be disrupted. The Lok Dal had organised a week-long agitation beginning on January 1 on the same issue, but it was confined to western Uttar Pradesh.

Thatcher in survival mode

THE BRITISH Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, fighting for her political survival over the Westland crisis, admitted to Parliament that her government had mishandled aspects of the affairs but she denied any wrongdoing. She said she deeply regretted

the manner in which a government document central to the crisis surrounding Britain’s ailing Westland helicopter firm had been leaked. The questions facing her were: Was she involved in authorising Mayhew’s letter to Heseltine? When did she first learn of her officials’ involvement in the leak? Why did she institute an inquiry if she had prior knowledge of the facts?

Australia crashes out

AUSTRALIA CRASHED to their worst defeat yet in one-day cricket in Adelaide when they were bowled out by New Zealand for only 70 runs. New Zealand earlier had scored 276 for seven off their 50 overs, giving them victory by a massive 206 runs.



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For Delhi and Brussels, challenge is to move from breakthroughs to delivery



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

THE ARRIVAL of the European Union's top leadership in Delhi over the Republic Day weekend brought not just brilliant winter sunshine to the capital but a burst of strategic clarity. Ursula von der Leyen and António Costa, presidents of the European Commission and the European Council respectively, also unveiled the long-overdue consolidation of the bilateral strategic partnership and vindicated Delhi's newfound zeal for trade liberalisation.

The translation of prolonged rhetoric into concrete outcomes marks a genuine transformation in the geopolitics of India and Europe. Binding India to Europe — whose economy is now on par with China's and second only to the US — represents the most consequential trade arrangement Delhi has yet negotiated. It reinforces India's growing recognition that trade is a crucial element of its national strategy for becoming a developed nation by 2047.

These developments, however, are not accidental byproducts of the current turbulence in Indian and European ties with Donald Trump's America. Both India and Europe remain deeply invested in their massive economic partnerships with the US and have no intention of weakening their respective security bonds with Washington. What we are witnessing, rather, is a deliberate diversification by both sides — a conscious effort to de-risk their ties with an assertive China and a mercurial America.

The agreements on trade, defence co-operation, and mobility unveiled this week were not conceived overnight. They reflect a sustained diplomatic effort that stretches back to the early years of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first term — an effort that is too often overlooked in the broader narrative of Indian foreign policy.

For much of the post-Independence era, Europe scarcely figured in India's geopoliti-



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

cal imagination. Delhi habitually viewed the continent through the prism of Russia's rivalry with the West. Europe, for its part, interpreted Asia through a narrow frame: An India encumbered by protectionism and a China open for business. By the time Modi took office in 2014, ties with Europe had sunk to a low. The strategic partnership announced in 2004 had stalled. Free trade negotiations were suspended in 2013. Annual summits were put on hold. Bilateral relations with key European states, including Italy, were deeply strained.

The first task was repair. The Modi government moved early to resolve difficult bilateral issues, reopen political channels, and rebuild trust. The revival of the annual India-EU summits in 2016 became a turning point. Simultaneously, Delhi began to shed its habit of treating Europe as a "fly-over continent" en route to the US. Europe, too, initiated a fresh strategic review of India in 2018, setting the stage for the resumption of trade talks in 2022 — a full decade after they were suspended.

This diplomatic reboot extended beyond Brussels. Delhi revitalised ties with major European capitals — Paris, Berlin, London, Rome, Madrid, Warsaw — and reached out to Europe's sub-regions: The Nordics, the Baltics, Central Europe, and the Mediterranean. New connectivity initiatives like the India-Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor

With Europe, India must generate both the ideas and momentum. Delhi also needs creative institutional engagement and an expanded presence across Europe's multilingual and multinational geography

(IMEC) widened the horizon. Security co-operation expanded in the western Indian Ocean. Defence industrial collaboration picked up pace. Advanced technologies — from green hydrogen to semiconductors — moved to the centre of the agenda. Even on contentious issues such as climate change, human rights, and Russia's war in Ukraine, Delhi and Europe found pragmatic common ground to advance bilateral ties.

This week's breakthroughs are the cumulative results from that diplomatic investment and political will to overcome entrenched scepticism in both Brussels and Delhi. But India has little time to linger in celebration. Trade liberalisation, once agreed upon in principle, requires enormous bureaucratic mobilisation to move from negotiation to signature to implementation. Defence cooperation, by nature, is slow, and calls for sustained high-level engagement if it is to yield tangible results.

In many ways, India's moment with Europe today resembles the summer of 2005, when Delhi and Washington crafted a new framework for bilateral cooperation. What followed in the US case was an unprecedented mobilisation across governments, businesses, think tanks, and civil societies. Two decades later, one can debate whether India fully capitalised on the strategic possibilities the US opened up. That debate must not be replicated with Europe in future.

With Europe, India must generate both the ideas and momentum. Delhi also needs creative institutional engagement and an expanded presence across Europe's multilingual and multinational geography. Yet, the moment could not be more auspicious. India and Europe share similar priorities: Internal economic and institutional reform, strengthening defence capabilities, narrowing the technology gap with the US and China, and diversification of strategic ties.

On trade, the journey has been especially striking. The BJP government began as a sceptic of free trade and dramatically walked out of the RCEP in 2019, reinforcing India's image as a reluctant liberaliser. What followed was a significant strategic reorientation: The recognition that India gains more by negotiating with complementary economies in the West rather than competing with manufacturing hubs in East Asia.

Since exiting RCEP, India has stitched together a chain of free trade agreements — with Australia, the UAE, the European Free Trade Association, the United Kingdom, Oman, and New Zealand. The FTA with Europe will be the capstone of this new strategy.

Success with Europe must now spur Delhi to accelerate the upgradation of the Australia agreement, revive prospects with Canada, and nudge Washington toward a more stable trade compact. India should also begin exploratory discussions with members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Unlike the RCEP, dominated by China, the CPTPP excludes both Beijing, the manufacturing hegemon, and Washington, now an increasingly capricious trade partner.

India's partnership with Europe stands at a turning point. The challenge now is to move from breakthroughs to delivery and from frameworks to outcomes. For India and Europe alike, this is a moment not just to diversify partnerships but to expand their agency in shaping the emerging international order.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express. He is a distinguished professor with the Motwani-Jadeja Institute of American Studies, Jindal Global University, and holds the Korea Foundation Chair at the Council for Strategic and Defence Studies, Delhi

In healthcare, it's time to shift focus from numbers to quality

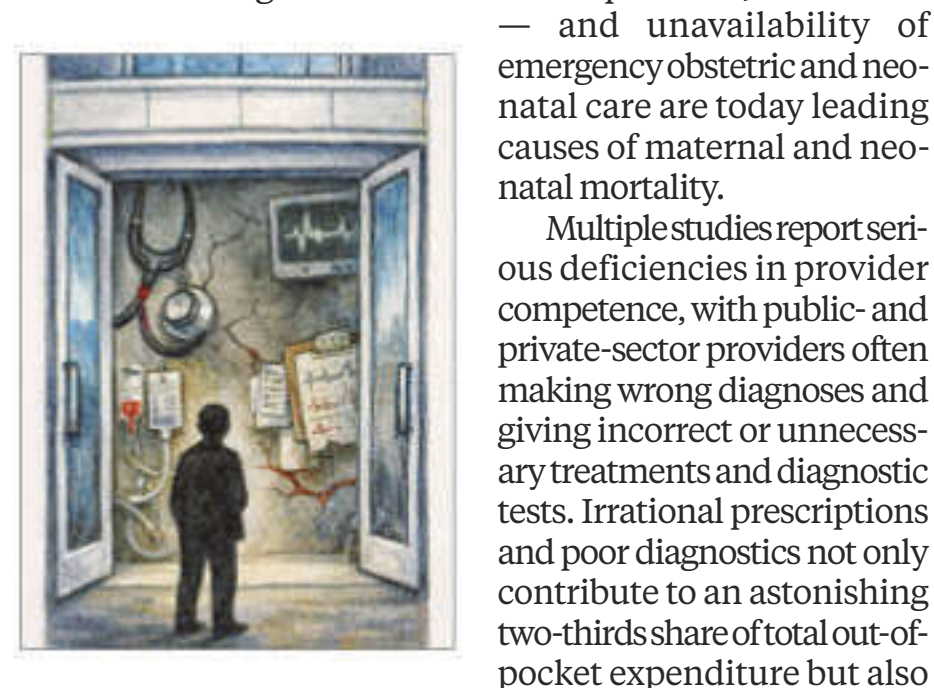


VIKRAM PATEL

THE LANCET, the storied medical journal whose pages have been home to publications that have transformed health policy and practice for 200 years, published its first commission devoted to India on January 21. The commission was launched in December 2020, a year into the Covid pandemic and just months before the devastating Delta wave ripped through communities, reminding us of the fragility of our health system. As one of the co-chairs of the commission, I have worked closely with a diverse group of scholars from across the country and the diaspora for over five years.

What did our research tell us? In a nutshell, India has made remarkable progress over the past two decades in its mission to realise universal health coverage. There is cross-party consensus on the crucial role of the government, as a financier, provider and steward of the health system. The health sector stretches from over a million community-based health workers to sophisticated tertiary hospitals. The country is the nursery for human resources for the world's healthcare, churning out thousands of doctors and nurses each year. The pharmaceutical industry produces medicines and vaccines not only for most of the country's needs, but also for other countries. People seem to have no difficulty accessing healthcare from both the public and private sectors. Out-of-pocket expenditure as a share of total health expenditure remains among the highest in the world. However, there appears to be a decline in recent years.

The greatest challenge, then, is not the availability of doctors, drugs or facilities. It is the poor quality of various components of the health system. Estimates in the Economic Survey of 2021 suggested that, in 2018, about 1.6 million deaths in India were attributable to poor quality of care. More people died because of poor-quality healthcare than because they were unable to access healthcare. While there has been impressive improvement in healthcare utilisation for antenatal care, low adherence to evidence-based guidelines — childbirth protocols, for instance — and unavailability of emergency obstetric and neonatal care are today leading causes of maternal and neonatal mortality.



Multiple studies report serious deficiencies in provider competence, with public- and private-sector providers often making wrong diagnoses and giving incorrect or unnecessary treatments and diagnostic tests. Irrational prescriptions and poor diagnostics not only contribute to an astonishing two-thirds share of total out-of-pocket expenditure but also lead to worse health outcomes. Irrational use of drugs is also fueling resistance to antibiotics. The uneven quality of primary care is a major reason most patients skip this level of care for even the mildest health problems, crowding the corridors of higher-level hospitals or simply opting out of the public system. The quality of care is worse for persons from disadvantaged social groups and people living in rural areas.

The commission, therefore, suggests that the focus must now shift to the quality of healthcare. At the heart of this change is a commitment to accountability and integrity by all actors in the health system.

Such a culture change would need to permeate to every corner of the health system, beginning with the training of healthcare providers and ensuring high-quality primary care for every citizen. We also recommend implementing major reforms in the financing of healthcare and the governance of the health system. State, district, and local government institutions must be empowered to design and implement responsive reforms and to be accountable to the communities they serve. Informing citizens of their entitlements and on the performance of their healthcare providers is the practical realisation of citizen-centred healthcare. The commission recognises the role of technologies, such as data-driven monitoring of the use of antibiotics or providing digital information to communities about the services in their primary care facility, in catalysing governance. It calls for a health system that continuously learns from and shares health system data, collaborates in learning networks with other health systems in the country, and strives to improve its performance.

The English surgeon Thomas Wakley, *The Lancet's* founding publisher, was motivated to use the journal to address "the corruption, nepotism, and incompetence in London's medical establishment". The commission reminds us that some of these issues are just as relevant today in modern India.

The writer is founder and managing partner of Kedaara Capital

The writer, Paul Farmer Professor at Harvard Medical School, is a co-chair of Lancet Commission on India

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Cricket politics

AN IDEAL proposition is not to mix politics with sports. If the divide over cricket is bridged, it will be a win-win situation for cricket and relations between India and Bangladesh ('Dial down, Pakistan should play in India', *IE*, January 27). The truth is that Dhaka needs Delhi even more today. Xi Jinping may cut a cheque for Tarique Rahman, as he did with Sheikh Hasina in 2016, and Pakistan may begin to fish in the Bay. That's why cricket can become an icebreaker and take the sting out of tensions.

SS Paul, Nadia

Domestic reforms

INDIA CAN no longer depend on external stability for long-term prosperity due to growing protectionism, supply-chain disruptions, and geopolitical unpredictability ('As rules-based order crumbles, only reforms can shield the economy', *IE*, January 27). Bold domestic reforms that revitalise manufacturing, empower MSMEs, invest in skilling, and guarantee policy stability are the true safeguards. These actions can create a competitive, resilient economy that can endure shocks from around the world. India's strength must come from within.

Sakshi Jha, Jammu

Bhajan clubbing

THE EMERGENCE of 'bhajan clubbing', described as being "engineered for maximum crowd participation", reflects a unique cultural interpretation by the current generation ('When spirituality goes clubbing', *IE*, January 27). However, in an era defined by the superficial gloss of social media, significant doubts arise regarding its lasting impact beyond the immediate entertainment value. The critical test for this phenomenon is whether it can motivate a profound "re-engagement with traditions" that extends substantially beyond the current spectacle.

Jai Prakash Acharya, New Delhi



MANISH KEJRIWAL

DAVOS HAS a talent for lending grandeur to what some mistakenly claim is glorified networking or a "glitzy schmooze-fest". The 2026 edition brought together a record 400 political leaders, including 65 heads of state, alongside 830 CEOs. For frequent attendees, it is hugely efficient to complete a year's meetings in a week, with access to partners and competitors who may normally not be on the same continent, forget about being forced together in a small village with a total population of not much more than 11,000. Moreover, it can occasionally do something much rarer: Create an alignment among people who otherwise communicate only by megaphones. Let's deep-dive into what was achieved on Greenland as an example.

On Greenland, Davos 2026 did just enough to matter. It did not "solve" anything — there was no treaty, no joint communiqué, no new institutional machinery. But it helped steer a fast-moving transatlantic quarrel away from its combustible edges: A threatened US tariff strike against European countries, and the prospect of force being used against a NATO ally.

The week's drama revolved around an old Donald Trump instinct — treat geopolitics as a property negotiation. Greenland is strategically placed in the high north and already hosts important US military infrastructure. That has

On Greenland, Davos 2026 did just enough to matter. It did not 'solve' anything. But it helped steer a fast-moving transatlantic quarrel away from its combustible edges

not stopped Trump from portraying the island as a core US security requirement, nor Europeans from treating acquisition talk as a direct test of sovereignty among allies.

Canadian PM Mark Carney's speech read like a manual for middle powers living next to giants: Be frank about the world's "rupture", don't confuse ritual with protection, and build strength at home while diversifying abroad. But he also addressed Greenland directly. Canada, he said, "stand[s] firmly with Greenland and Denmark" and "fully support[s] their unique right to determine Greenland's future". He went further: "Canada strongly opposes tariffs over Greenland" and called for "focused talks" on Arctic security and prosperity. That mattered because it denied Washington the comforting fiction that the dispute was bilateral — America versus Denmark — rather than a stress test for allied norms. It also offered Europe a vocabulary that is neither sanctimony nor panic: Oppose coercion, insist on self-determination, and redirect the quarrel into practical security.

European leaders, for once, acted like a bloc confronted by a negotiating tactic designed to split it. Davos captured a broad shift: Less hedging, more boundary-setting, and a willingness to tell Trump that sovereignty is not a bargaining chip. The Europeans' tactic was to make clear that coercive tools, especially tariffs, would not be treated

as a clever negotiating flourish, but as an attack on the alliance's political foundations.

The operational turning point came when Trump announced, after meeting NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, that a "framework of a future deal" on Greenland and the broader Arctic had been formed — and that tariffs due to begin on February 1 would not be imposed. The "framework" remains vague in public, which is why it worked as a pressure-release valve. It allowed Trump to claim progress without forcing Denmark to concede sovereignty, and allowed NATO to reframe the episode as an Arctic security coordination problem rather than an intra-alliance territorial shakedown.

On Greenland, Davos 2026 was hugely "successful". It reduced the immediate risk of escalation with talks, channels and an elastic phrase ("framework") that each side can interpret without immediate humiliation. It did not resolve the contest between transactional coercion and allied restraint; it simply postponed the reckoning.

Still, that is often how diplomacy works when it is functioning: Not by delivering harmony, but by preventing panic. Davos, in other words, did what it often does at its best: It provided a stage on which leaders could "climb down" without calling it a "climb-down" — and where allies could demonstrate unity at the moment it was needed.

The writer is founder and managing partner of Kedaara Capital

The writer, Paul Farmer Professor at Harvard Medical School, is a co-chair of Lancet Commission on India

A tamping down of risk, quiet diplomacy at Davos

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Let's do away with Governor's special address

tion of reading the exact text. The governors worked more like "political agents" of the Centre and less like constitutional functionaries.

Article 176(1) of the Constitution provides for a "special address" by the Governor, and it mandates him, by the use of the word "shall", to read the policy speech handed to him by the government. The constitutional convention of the President or the Governor delivering addresses at the commencement of the first session of each year and the first session after each general election is a colonial hangover.

It is analogous to the speech from the throne in Great Britain, where, since 1841, the King's speech is taken as the ministerial statement for which the sovereign accepts no personal responsibility.

It is a settled question in England that the King cannot alter the speech prepared by the government.

We do not find anywhere in the Indian Constitution or in any interpretation that the Governor has the right to withdraw or express his mind on the opening day. On behalf of the people of the state, the state government speaks through the Governor, who needs to act as the mouth-

We do not find anywhere in the Indian Constitution or in any interpretation that the governor has the right to withdraw or express his mind on the opening day

piece of the programmes, policies, and prevailing conditions of governance. In a parliamentary democracy, the Council of Ministers headed by the Chief Minister holds power and is collectively accountable to the people. The Governor tinkering with the speech is akin to misuse of his discretionary powers and erosion of the principles of cabinet government. If the Governor is unable to work with the ministry, he must at best resign gracefully for the smooth functioning of the real executive.

Kerala has repeatedly objected to the pressure tactics employed by the Centre in the areas of tax devolution and Finance Commission grants. The people of Kerala have the right to know about the gridlocks of federal processes, particularly of fiscal federalism, and any deliberate attempt,

as manifested in the Governor's efforts, to conceal such information is a breach of constitutional morality.

On the other hand, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin has often demanded steps for securing greater autonomy for the states in order to achieve true federalism. For him, Ravi behaves more like a political gatekeeper than a constitutional facilitator.

By digressing from the speech or walking out of the Assembly during the special address protocols, both governors have shown disregard for the constitutional provisions. It is high time we did away with this colonial act of a special address by the nominal head, called the Governor.

The writer teaches at Ramjas College, University of Delhi

Trade without walls

The much-awaited FTA will synergise the fastest-growing economy and largest trading bloc

INDIA AND THE European Union (EU) have concluded negotiations for a mutually beneficial free trade agreement (FTA) that would leverage a combined market of 2 billion people, accounting for a quarter of global GDP. It is termed the mother of all deals as it represents the partnership of the world's fastest-growing economy and largest trading bloc. As India is not part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership or the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, this is the biggest of the eight deals it has negotiated since the ruling dispensation assumed office in 2014. Although negotiations began nearly two decades ago, there was a sense of urgency to cross the finishing line as the rules-based trading order is being undermined by the tariff disruption of US President Donald Trump and the need for India and the EU to reduce reliance on the US and China. India's exports to the EU are \$76 billion—accounting for 17% of its total exports—which can further rise by \$50 billion by 2031 as the FTA sends a strong message to a rapidly fracturing trading world that another way is possible.

The formal signing of the FTA, however, will take place only after the legal scrubbing of the text is completed within the next five to six months. Indications are that it will come into force in early 2027, subject to its ratification. Indications are that the agreement is mutually beneficial as it will lower costs and expand trade as India and the EU operate on different rungs of the value chain, according to the Global Trade Research Initiative. India is focused on labour-intensive and downstream production, while the EU supplies capital goods and industrial inputs. Thanks to this structural complementarity, India will benefit from zero-duty access for its labour-intensive exports of textiles and apparel, leather, footwear, and gems and jewellery when this agreement kicks in. The EU gains from lower tariffs on its cars and alcoholic beverages. In autos, for instance, tariffs will gradually go down from 110% to 10% with a quota of 250,000 vehicles a year. High tariffs on machinery, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals will also be mostly eliminated. However, there will be concerns regarding issues like the EU's carbon tax.

Beyond the mutually beneficial gains in goods trade, this agreement also has major implications for services through a landmark MoU on cooperation in mobility. While India has secured greater access through a more liberal regime for short-term and business travel to the EU, the FTA also grants EU companies privileged access to the Indian market in financial and maritime services. The EU, in fact, considers this deal as having the most ambitious commitments in financial services by India than in any of its trade agreements. The 9th high-level dialogue on migration and mobility last November proposed a pilot European legal gateway office in India for information and communication technology (ICT) professionals and explored comprehensive mobility frameworks for young professionals. Both the EU and India will provide mobility commitments to each other for intra-corporate transferees and business visitors along with entry and working rights for dependents and family members of ICT professionals. For such reasons, the mother of all deals presages an uptick in bilateral goods and services trade, which will be catalysed if an investment protection agreement is also concluded at the earliest to facilitate two-way flows of investments.

Musk is wrong about AI and retirement

PUT ME DOWN as an AI optimist. Artificial intelligence has the potential to transform the economy and make Americans richer, healthier, and more productive. I'd bet money on it—in fact I have, through the shares I own in an index fund, which means I am long the US economy.

That said, there are certain things not even AI can do, and one of them is suspending the basic laws of economics. Elon Musk recently predicted that AI will create such abundance that in a decade or two, people won't need to bother saving for retirement. Feel free to check my answer with your favourite AI, but: Don't count on it.

There are two optimistic and probable scenarios for the future of the AI-powered economy. One is that AI behaves like other innovations—that is, it makes people more productive in the same way as other major innovations of the past, such as railroads, the telegraph, or electricity. These innovations powered the economy and transformed work and life, yet they did not result in an abrupt increase in growth, which averaged just under 2% between 1850 and 1929. The effects of these innovations were diffuse, and as they spread through the economy, they made other innovations possible.

Under this scenario, markets will continue to go up—but probably not enough to compensate for Americans' lack of saving. So they will still need to pay for their retirement, especially health and home care, which will still involve people whose labour will cost money.

The second optimistic and likely scenario is that AI is not like past innovations—that it will transform people's lives like nothing that has come before it. AI could be different because it has the potential to improve the speed of innovation; it can even do the innovation itself. If so, there could be productivity improvements in all sectors of the economy, as machines do tasks that used to be time-consuming and expensive.

Even in this case, however, people still need to save for retirement. Take a best-case scenario: AI finds a cure for cancer. That means people will live longer—and will need money for more years in retirement. Perhaps they will employ robots to care for them, but growing old with robot companions sounds pretty grim. Socialisation is critical to living well and maintaining cognitive abilities. I for one am sceptical that even the best AI-powered robot nurse will overcome the need for human connection. In this AI-is-exceptional scenario, the wages of people who can do non-AI tasks, such as caretakers, will probably increase.

The good news is that, in this scenario as in the previous one, the market would also perform well. That's why this scenario also offers the government the best chance for paying off its debt without cutting entitlements: As the economy grows faster, so do tax revenues.

There are less optimistic scenarios, too. It's possible that AI will not change the economy that much—that it will be a useful tool, but (like the internet) will not improve productivity very much right away. In this case, all the data centres don't pay off, growth expectations are not realised, and the market falls and doesn't recover for years. The government will collect less tax revenue and have to reckon with its debt and entitlement obligations. Under this scenario, the need for saving is obvious.

There are far less likely, far more apocalyptic scenarios. What if AI kills us all? In that case Musk would be right: no need to save for retirement. But I don't think this is what he had in mind. And it's certainly not a possibility that should dictate anyone's retirement strategy.

As an optimist, I am expecting something between the first and second scenarios. AI may well cause financial bubbles and disruptions, but it will leave humanity and the economy better off. No one knows for sure, of course, not even Elon Musk, and that's exactly the point: The purpose of saving and investing is to hedge against an uncertain future. And even if the best possible future materialises, people still need to save for retirement.



ALLISON SCHRAGER

Bloomberg

INDIA-EU FTA

WHILE NEITHER COMPROMISED ON ECONOMIC SECURITIES BOTH SIDES WERE DETERMINED TO REACH AGREEMENT

The 'mother' of all deals

WHAT IS UNIQUE about the India-European Union (EU) free trade agreement (FTA), ostensibly the "mother of all deals"?

It is not just the scale of the deal, which brings around a quarter of the world economy, and the global population respectively, within the bounds of its framework. It is also not the fact that India is offering generous market access in sectors it zealously has protected, such as automobiles, alcoholic beverages, and government procurement. Nor is it the fact that the EU will offer deep market access to several labour-intensive exports from India such as textiles and garments, handicrafts, gems and jewellery, and leather products.

None of the above are good enough to make the FTA the "mother" deal. These concessions have been offered by India and the EU in other FTAs. India has committed to these in its latest FTAs like those with the UK and New Zealand. The EU, on the other hand, as it is, has globally low tariffs on most labour-intensive manufacturing exports. Its other FTAs cover almost all issues that would feature in the India FTA.

The true worth of the FTA is in enabling both India and the EU to enhance their economic securities; individually and collectively. This is clear from the concessions offered and the red lines drawn.

As mentioned, labour-intensive exports from India will receive a big boost from the preferential access they will obtain in the EU market. These exports—textiles, garments, handicrafts, jewellery, and leather—have been hard hit by the 50% US tariffs. Some of these industries, such as textiles, garments, and handicrafts, comprise low-skills wage workers



AMITENDU PALIT

Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (trade and economics), Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

including a substantial number of women. Less exports to the US—the largest market for these exports—mean job and income losses for several workers. Garment and leather exporters include many small and medium enterprises, including household businesses. It is important for India to safeguard the economic securities of these workers and enterprises following the hit from US tariffs. On the other hand, while not being entirely equivalent in its depth as a pressing security imperative, lower Indian import tariffs on vehicles made in the EU mean much for European carmakers and their future economic prospects at a time when the latter are heavily threatened by Chinese electric vehicles.

If greater market access for labour-intensive exports is a fillip for making them more economically secure, similar objectives are served by retaining agriculture and dairy on India's protected list. At a time when many small enterprises and their workers are hurt by high tariffs, more such injuries are necessary to be avoided. It is not surprising that sensitive agricultural sectors have been excluded from the FTA. Along with India's concerns, the EU's sensitivities on domestic rice and beef have also been preserved. By ring-fencing vul-

nerable sectors with red lines both the EU and India have emphasised economic security in their deal and respected each other's domestic concerns.

While details will be known once the legal text becomes available, the EU's uncompromising stance on the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is not surprising. Minimising carbon emissions is fundamental to the EU's vision of economic security. It is unfair to expect that it will necessarily accept India's domestic price of carbon, as levied through fossil fuel taxes, as a nullifier for exempting CBAM-sensitive Indian exports—steel, aluminium, fertilisers, cement—from being taxed at the border. High carbon prices are the EU's way of disincentivising emissions. Even if this is not agreed with, the economic security concern driving the idea must be respected.

The fine print will also have to be awaited for digital trade rules, especially on whether cross-border free flows of data from India are allowed by the EU. Like the CBAM, this is also an area where the EU red line is noteworthy. As of now, India is yet to be included among data locations considered secure under the EU's General Data Protection Regulation,

By diversifying with a purpose, both India and the EU can ignore "red eyes" threatening them with random tariffs and export restrictions

Redefining India's global economic position



ANANT GOENKA

President, FICCI

The India-EU FTA is outcome-oriented. Once implemented, it will deliver gains across industry, services, MSMEs, investors, consumers, and professionals alike

THE INDIA-EUROPEAN UNION (EU) free trade agreement (FTA) marks a defining moment in India's economic diplomacy. Coming on the back of a series of new-generation trade agreements with key partners, this deal effectively completes India's contemporary trade architecture by anchoring the country firmly within the world's largest and most sophisticated markets. With the EU on board, India is well-positioned to accelerate exports, move decisively towards its USD 2-trillion export ambition, and integrate more deeply into global value chains.

More importantly, the agreement strengthens India's role as a global manufacturing and export hub, aligning trade policy with the broader Viksit Bharat vision of becoming an upper-middle-income economy.

Few trade agreements carry the scale, ambition, and strategic weight of the India-EU FTA. Often described as the "mother of all deals", it goes far beyond conventional tariff liberalisation. It represents a landmark achievement of India's trade diplomacy and establishes a deeper economic partnership with a trusted, like-minded region at a time of profound global uncertainty.

What makes this agreement truly consequential is the convergence of timing, scale, and strategic depth.

The timing could not be more appropriate. At a moment when global trade is marked by fragmentation, protectionist pressures, and supply-chain disruptions, India's trade strategy—

anchored in high-quality FTAs—provides businesses with predictability, diversification, and resilience. The India-EU FTA offers precisely these attributes, helping Indian exporters de-risk markets and sustain export growth in a challenging global environment.

Equally significant is the scale the agreement unlocks. Together, India and the EU represent a market of nearly two billion consumers, accounting for roughly a quarter of the world's population. While India offers an expanding consumer market for European firms, Indian exporters gain preferential access to one of the world's largest import markets. Extra-EU imports alone amount to around USD 2.6 trillion in goods and USD 1.5 trillion in services annually—yet India's share remains below 3%. The opportunity to scale exports through this agreement is therefore immense.

Labour-intensive sectors stand to be among the biggest beneficiaries. Garments, textiles, leather, and footwear—currently facing EU tariffs of 9-12%—will gain significantly from duty-free access. Improved competitiveness vis-à-vis peer economies can translate into meaningful export growth and employment generation.

Manufacturing sectors such as electronics, engineering goods, auto

components, and chemicals also have an opportunity to integrate more deeply into European value chains. For pharmaceuticals, where tariffs are already low, the real gains will come from regulatory cooperation and addressing non-tariff barriers—areas where the FTA can substantially reduce transaction costs and improve market access.

The agreement's impact on services exports is equally important. Information technology and digital services, already a major strength for India, could see a significant boost through the FTA's commitments in services as well as the comprehensive mobility framework, enabling seamless movement of skilled Indian professionals. India's strong performance in engineering and technical services, which already account for close to 10% of EU imports in this segment, will also get a further boost. Scale, however, will also come through diversification. Today, nearly 80% of India's exports to the EU are concentrated in just six member states—namely the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, and Belgium.

Improved market access and regulatory cooperation under the FTA will enable Indian exporters to expand into smaller but fast-growing EU markets.

Improved market access and regulatory cooperation under the FTA will enable Indian exporters to expand into smaller but fast-growing EU markets

notwithstanding its implementation of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act.

As these examples indicate, economic security has not been compromised by either India or the EU in reaching the deal. But what is striking is that while not compromising on individual economic securities, both sides were determined to reach a deal. Such determination stems from the exceptional political will on both sides. The mutual political will, no doubt, has been motivated by the common urge to enhance collective economic security by working with each other.

European Council President Antonio Costa's description of the FTA as an important geopolitical stabiliser underlines the collective economic security it is to provide to both sides. Globally, both the EU and India are trying hard to turn back from the trade dependencies that make them vulnerable to economic coercion by the US and China. The role of a rules-based framework that has the kind of scale that the India-EU FTA has is critical in this strategy. By diversifying with a purpose, both India and the EU can ignore "red eyes" threatening them with random tariffs and export restrictions. And that is a strong guarantee for collective economic security.

Political leaderships in both sides have understood the criticality of enhancing economic securities through the FTA at one of the most geopolitically turbulent junctures in the modern era. Without such understanding, the FTA might still have been left unfinished, fetching it the dubious distinction of being the world's longest negotiated and unfinished trade deal. The infamy has been avoided by political will and foresight, setting an example for the rest of the world. Don't "mothers" set the best examples?

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Focus on outcomes

"Jobs as growth push" (*FE*, January 27) rightly underlines the gap between headline employment numbers and the quality of jobs being created. While formalisation and gig work have expanded, too many workers remain stuck in low-pay, insecure roles with limited mobility. The Budget must therefore move beyond schemes and focus on outcomes. Greater investment in skill-linked training, especially

for manufacturing, care services, and green technologies, is essential. Small and medium enterprises need easier credit, simpler compliance, and predictable policies so they can hire with confidence. At the same time, labour data should be more transparent and timely to guide policy choices. Employment growth that is steady, productive, and regionally balanced will strengthen demand and social stability. M Barathi, Bengaluru

Prioritise employment generation

Apropos of "Jobs as growth push" (*FE*, January 27), there can be no two ways about it—employment generation has to be given priority. Indian Inc has been complaining about the lack of employability of our graduates for many years now. So we need to address this concern in two ways. First and foremost is imparting requisite skills to our youth according

to the market demands so that they can get sustainable employment. Secondly, enough jobs should be created in manufacturing and services and in both the public as well as private sectors to absorb the youth. India's demographic dividend can only be leveraged if we create sustainable jobs and skills to meet the requirements. —Bal Govind, Noida

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Ode to Joy! World’s Got Just a Bit Bigger

Prototype for a rules-based trading system

There are good reasons to have the band bajao Beethoven’s 9th Symphony. Not just because it’s Europe’s official anthem, but also because the India-EU FTA is, indeed, an ‘ode to joy’. India enjoys a surplus in both goods and services trade, and there is no strong-arm tactics — like those used by you-know-who — being used to balance them. The EU is India’s largest trading partner, while India sits low among the bloc’s list of import destinations. The latter should be able to hold on to its advantage while it penetrates more of the EU market. Machinery finds itself among the top trade category in both directions. This can be leveraged for bigger Indian play in global manufacturing. Aerospace, specifically, holds out immense potential to develop indigenous capacity for both commercial and strategic use, and re-export.

But the true significance of the deal lies in papering over differences articulated by both sides in multilateral negotiations over how the ‘global north’ and ‘south’ should conduct business with each other. India has often led the resistance by developing economies to perceived trade-distorting conditions the EU has championed. These cover a wide array of issues, from protecting agriculture to sharing costs of climate mitigation and IPR. The FTA provides a prototype for a rules-based trading system when the current era of bilateralism yields to a multilateral order again. It opens up pathways for trade diversification for countries at the receiving end of Trump’s protectionist fatwas.

India now has a mechanism to engage with Europe — including the previous deal with Britain — on terms of its choosing. This is an opportunity to correct the historical perversion in its trade with the continent. Urgency lent by Trump tariffs can be put to good use in establishing a new trade order not held hostage by US overconsumption and Chinese overproduction. Getting the EU to break ranks with the US, and with no prospect of a free trade deal with China, India has improved its negotiating capability with its other leading trade partners.

Make Safety Add to Airline’s Brand Value

New Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) rules announced on November 1, 2025, are facing a tough test, as four of India’s five national airlines — which carry 95% of passengers — have reportedly urged the aviation ministry to relax crew-rest requirements. They reportedly have argued that the regulations are unsustainable and would require hiring additional pilots and managing more complex schedules. Well, yes. From a safety perspective, these criteria are non-negotiable. Given that ‘budget’ airlines charge extra for every service, from legroom to snacks to seat selection, it would be reasonable — and responsible — for them to reinvest some of that revenue into ensuring both passenger and crew safety.

New FDTL rules mandate tighter limits on pilot working hours and rest periods. Weekly rest has increased from 36 to 48 continuous hours, including two full nights at the crew member’s home base, among other changes. Pilots are largely supportive of the rules. Associations like Federation of Indian Pilots argue that compliance simply needs better planning, smarter scheduling and increased hiring.

The rules also align India’s aviation industry with standards set by International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO). DGCA should resist calls for dilution. Pilot fatigue is a genuine risk, and just because it was overlooked before doesn’t mean it’s kosher. A 2022 ‘Safety Matters Foundation’ survey of 542 Indian pilots found that 31% admitted to falling asleep mid-flight without alerting the crew. Another 31% reported fatigue-related close calls. Enlightened self-interest, if nothing else, should guide airlines toward adopting FDTL norms. In fact, strict compliance with global safety rules can actually be marketed as an airline’s brand appeal.



JUST IN JEST

MAGAbaby’s bawling is the father of all bawls – so what if it’s fake?

Who’s Your DADDY? SO CUTE! 🍼👶 Don!

In a sideshow that could have been produced by a toddler hopped up on Red Bull, Don ‘the Chump’ Trump reportedly launched what experts are calling the ‘Big Daddy of All Sults’ after India and the EU signed an FTA without inviting him to even oversee the deal — or rewrite the agreement in crayon. ‘SO CUTE!’ 🍼👶 he squealed on social media, mocking the deal like a jealous prom king watching an ex slow-dance with Brussels. The post, it turns out, is made-up. But we love it. Dripping with baby emojis and all MAGA caps, it accused Ursula von der Leyen — whom he calls ‘Lying’ Ursula’ for some reason — and India (without naming his ‘good friend’) of ‘playing house’ while he, self-declared ‘DADDY’, was busy ‘making America Rich again!’ by levying tariffs like they were Pokémon cards.

The fake kindergarten bawling stems from the fact that India and the EU are playing ball, while Trump insists on rules where America wins regardless of where the goalposts are. The chap in the post demanded a ‘50% Daddy Tax’ before any deal could be signed, presumably payable in MAGA caps and Mar-a-Lago coupons. But India, quite the polite guest, has sashayed past the real Donald Tantrum and into Brussels, leaving Bubba to sulk in the Oval Office tweeting into the baby monitor. As the world moves forward, Don Don keeps squalling from his playpen. Someone, give the real boy-man a pacifier?

EU-India FTA sends out a message to the world: globalisation isn’t disappearing, it’s diversifying

Re-Globalisation 2026 Mix



Shishir Priyadarshi

Tuesday’s conclusion of negotiations of the India-EU FTA, which started in 2007 under the framework of a broad-based trade and investment agreement, isn’t merely a significant commercial event, but also a timely strategic intervention in a fractured global economy. But after observing trade negotiations stall, fragment or collapse under the weight of domestic politics and geopolitical rivalry, one learns to treat such grand announcements with caution.

However, the fact that India and the EU have concluded FTA negotiations — the actual signing always takes a few months to allow ‘legal scrubbing’ of the agreed text — is striking. Two large, complex, pluralistic political economies, neither short of sensitivities, constituencies or regulatory ambition, have chosen agreement over drift, and rules over discretionary power.

The FTA is big deal. Trade between India and the bloc of 27 European countries stands at around \$135 bn. Even though significant, this trade must be viewed against the backdrop of a global economy that is under pressure because of geopolitics, top of which has to be Trump tariffs, along with climate transition, technological rivalry and supply-chain shocks. Agreements that remove or minimise both tariff and non-tariff barriers, like the India-EU FTA does, will go a long way in strengthening trade flows between the two entities.

For Europe, among others, over-concentration in production networks has beco-



Jugalbandi in tune

me a strategic vulnerability. Moreover, it needs a long-term economic partner in the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, India needs preferential access to a high-income market whose firms anchor some of the most sophisticated manufacturing ecosystems in the world. This mutual calculus — not sentimentality — explains why the negotiations ultimately crossed the ‘finish line’.

From a WTO perspective, the symbolism runs deeper. The multilateral system has been struggling to generate new liberalisation for years. Dispute settlement is impaired and consensus among 160-plus members has become elusive. An India-EU FTA between two regulatory heavyweights therefore matters. Its disciplines on sustainability, digital trade and industrial goods will shape expectations for future agreements elsewhere. It quietly reasserts that trade governance is still being written through negotiation, rather than unilateral measures (read: blackmail).

For Indian business, access to the EU market has always been attractive but demanding. European standards are among the world’s most exacting, whether on product safety, chemicals, labour processes or environmental compliance. The FTA reduces cost of entry into that market, financially through tariffs, institutionally

through regulatory cooperation, and commercially through predictability.

Pharmaceuticals, specialty chemicals, engineering goods, automotive components, processed foods and digital services are not fringe players in India’s export basket. They are core engines of industrial growth. Strengthening their European footprint expands revenue, diversifies risk and embeds Indian companies in higher-value segments of global supply chains.

Textile products deserve a special mention. For years, India’s exporters have been competing against exporters from countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam, which have enjoyed duty-free access into the EU because of their least-developed-countries (LDC) status. With the coming into force of the FTA, this playing field would be levelled.

Obviously, the EU has not accepted this deal as an act of generosity. It did so because India represents scale, growth, geopolitical predictability and regulatory transparency. European firms — from auto manufacturers, wine and whisky producers, and RE developers to luxury brands and infrastructure operators — will get a foothold in what is likely to be the world’s third-largest economy within the decade.

One of the ironies of today’s discourse is that ‘strategic autonomy’, a po-

licy that India strongly follows, is not looked at favourably by everyone. This FTA will show that in practice, large economies can achieve autonomy not by shrinking their commercial ties but by expanding and diversifying them.

This agreement does precisely that for both sides. India reduces over-reliance on a narrow set of export markets and technology sources. Europe broadens its industrial partnerships beyond established hubs. Interdependence, carefully structured, becomes a stabiliser, rather than a vulnerability.

Conclusion of the India-EU pact should, therefore, be read as part of a broader, if understated, trend — of re-globalisation. Despite geopolitical fragilities, countries are still knitting together webs of preferential trade. A bilateral deal that brings over 2 bn people and 25% of

Mutual calculus, not sentimentality, explains why the negotiations ultimately crossed the ‘finish line’

global GDP under one canvas needs to be applauded, including for the signal it gives to the doomsdayers of globalisation.

After years listening to declarations about the virtues of open trade that we rarely follow up with political risk-taking, one can say this much: concluding this deal would have required governments on both sides to expend real capital. In today’s trading system, that counts as leadership. That deserves kudos.

Ultimately, that’s why the FTA matters. Not because every tariff line will get reduced to zero, or every annex will seem perfectly drafted. But because India and Europe chose to lock themselves into a long-term economic partnership at a moment when doing so was neither fashionable nor easy.

The writer is former director, WTO

It’s Really About Dignity, Not Doles



Upasak Das

Manchester: Earlier this week, Abhijit V Banerjee expressed concern over Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill stating that a declining share of central funding could disproportionately harm poorer states. He is not alone in his concerns. At the heart of MGNREGA lies a simple principle: wages must come with dignity. Unlike cash transfers, this is money earned, not granted, and workers have repeatedly emphasised that distinction. The Act also deliberately recognises those normally excluded from the labour market. Elderly workers and persons with disabilities are assigned lighter but meaningful roles such as record maintenance, water provision and childcare support. This inclusion is not symbolic: it shifts individuals from dependence to participation and respect.

Overall, studies indicate income earned through the programme has improved education, healthcare, nutrition and household health. It has sustained local markets and prevented families from slipping into distress. During droughts and periods of agricultural

uncertainty or even Covid, MGNREGA has functioned as a buffer against economic collapse.

Contrary to dismissive narratives, MGNREGA has never been a programme of meaningless labour. Across the country, it has built durable public assets like flood-protection structures, soil bunds, irrigation wells, plantations, ponds and rural roads. In West Bengal’s Torsa river basin, embankments and flood-control structures allowed farmers to farm on their land even during the monsoons. Water conservation and plantation works have also supported greener landscapes and more stable agriculture.

Crucially, these assets emerged from discussion in the panchayat where villagers identify assets that matter most. This bottom-up process ensures relevance, strengthens community ownership and improves long-term maintenance. Governance improves not through grand announcements, but by enabling communities to choose their development priorities.

MGNREGA has also been one of the most significant platforms for women’s economic participation in India. Women constitute a large share of the workforce, often exceeding the statutory minimum of 33%. Equal wages for men and women directly challenge gender-based wage discrimination and enhance dignity. The provision of crèches at worksites reduces barriers for mothers with young children. For many women, this was their first experien-



Hands get dirty, but they stay clean

ce of independent paid work, strengthening their ability to demand accountability. In Telangana, women workers collectively approached local officials to protest delayed wage payments.

MGNREGA’s value extends beyond earnings. It strengthens labour bargaining power. Before its introduction, agricultural wages had stagnated for years. A guaranteed fallback option enabled labourers to negotiate fairer compensation during inflationary periods. Women benefited disproportionately from wage parity provisions, as non-MGNREGA work often pays substantially less.

MGNREGA worksites also create rare spaces of cooperation. People from different castes and religions work side by side, earn equal wages and contribute to shared assets. In societies fractured by social divisions, this everyday interaction carries powerful significance. Being demand-driven, the programme provides support even during peak agricultural seasons to those excluded from regular employment. It has redu-

ced distress migration, stabilised families and eased pressure on urban centres.

It is precisely these strengths that VB-G RAM G Bill risks diluting. While framed as reform, the Bill undermines MGNREGA’s legal core: demand-driven right to work. Replacing guaranteed employment with a fund-capped, centrally controlled allocation model fundamentally alters the meaning of a guarantee.

The Bill also shifts fiscal responsibility to states already constrained by limited revenues, risking reduced work availability and delayed payments, with the burden falling once again on the poorest. Provisions allowing suspension of public works during peak agricultural seasons assume uniform rural labour markets.

In reality, marginalised groups often continue to need work during these periods. A blanket pause risks denying employment precisely when vulnerabilities persist. Equally concerning is dilution of decentralised planning, which would weaken community voice, erode local autonomy and undermine the democratic ethic that MGNREGA embodies.

MGNREGA is not flawless. It needs better funding, predictable payments and stronger implementation safeguards. But weakening its legal backbone or decentralised design will not resolve these challenges.

The writer is senior lecturer, Global Development Institute, University of Manchester

Being Unelected Isn’t Unimportant



Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

The quality of Indian democracy has always been spotty. Most Indians view politicians as crooks and rascals, out to get rich and build vote banks to help their re-election. James Buchanan won the Economics Nobel Prize in 1986 for showing why politicians cannot be trusted to work for the public interest: they are too busy working for their private interests. Indian politicians spend crores on fighting elections and, if successful, try to get a good ROI through perversions of power.

Even as elected politicians are widely looked down on, the institutions commanding the most public respect are two unelected ones: armed forces and Supreme Court. They are respected precisely because they are seen as untouched by politics. That was also true of those who created the Constitution in 1950. They showed how and why unelected people in positions of power can be as important as elected ones.

Many think of Republic Day as one of military parades and patriotic song-singing. But at its heart is the celebration of India’s constitution declaring it to be a democratic republic. The Constitution said India would have no discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, gender or place of birth, and many

other human rights. It ensured not just rule by elected majorities, but checks and balances to ensure that democracy could not slide into majoritarianism, a form of autocracy in disguise.

Democracy requires much more than holding elections. Dictators across the world hold elections and make quite sure they win. PM of communist Albania Enver Hoxha was outraged when he got only 99.9% of the vote, and not 99.99% he expected.

Democracy stands on two pillars. One is constitutional democracy which lays down the rules of political engagement. The second is popular democracy, which elects governments. The latter, with constant elections and changes of power, dominates our attention. Yet, constitutional democracy is more important. Popular democracy empowers majority groups. But constitutional democracy protects minorities, crucial to ensure rights for all.

Democracy is critically about the right to dissent and criticise the ruling majority. Historically, dissent was

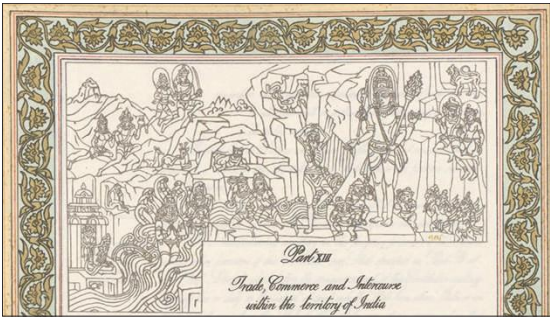
equated with treason — you could be beheaded for opposing the ruler. But democracy not only permitted dissent but also raised it to a place of honour. The leader of the opposition is not merely a dissenter but is recognised as a potential future PM. That is why he gets Cabinet rank.

Constitutional democracy nurtures dissent, which elected politicians would dearly love to squash if they could.

Left to themselves, politicians would place no voluntary limits on their powers. To win elections, they would ensure by fair means or foul that they could hobble or criminalise dissenters, thus perpetuating their rule through what Fareed Zakaria has called ‘illiberal democracy’. This, alas, has been a growing trend in countries across the world.

Popular democracy is short-termist. Politicians are elected for only a few years, and seek policies and actions that yield immediate, visible results. They are not very interested in long-term reforms that might help the country immensely, but will only benefit

some future government. Creating job and educational quotas for backward castes and Muslims is simpler than to invest in basic education that empowers them to compete without props. Indian politics is overwhelmingly about freebies



Framers keepers



THE SPEAKING TREE

Meditate on Meaning

SWAMI SUKHABODHANANDA

Ram destroyed Ravan, who was intoxicated with knowledge, wealth and power. Krishn brought about the fall of Kans, who was drunk on wealth and illusion of authority. You must be vigilant against the enemy within. There is a real possibility that you may succumb to the temptation of exploiting your subordinates, misappropriate money for your organisation, and evade taxes and duties payable to govt.

The desire to gratify these tendencies is a monster that grows within. You need to overcome it before it takes control of your life. Be constantly aware of the need for transcendence. Transcend boundaries of the physical, financial and intellectual and enter the arena of the soul. Even as you participate in rituals, get into their deeper significance. Even as you acquire knowledge and wealth, think of its value to yourself and others. Close your eyes. Shut out all intrusions.

Concentrate on the essential, not the peripheral. Meditate on meaning. Imagine yourself under a gentle waterfall with divine blessings showering on you. Every sat-sang has a central principle of transformation: company of the wise leads us to disassociation from internal negative states such as delusion, anger and frustration.

Along the way, we shed all those negative passions that keep us down, like moh, greed, mada, pride, and matsarya, jealousy, Vairagya, detachment, is a healthy attitude towards vagaries of life. It enables us to stay unruffled in times of stress and sorrow, and not to be carried away by excitement in times of joy and happiness. Bhakti is what enables us to define ourselves in relation to God.



B-Day 1.0

With the budget around the nukkad, ConstitutionOfIndia.net podcast’s **Independent India’s First Budget** may sound like a yawn, but it’s actually a fascinating throwback at how India’s fiscal journey began. The episode revisits November 26, 1947, when the country’s first FM, R K Shanmukham Chetty (pic), delivered his budget in the midst of the turbulent Partition, economic uncertainty and the enormous task of nation-building. What makes this episode particularly compelling is its narrative approach. Rather than focusing solely on ho-hum numbers and dry ‘sepia’ history, it situates the inaugural budget within the lived reali-



ties of the time — refugee rehabilitation, defence expenditure and urgency of administrative stability. Discussion of the interim nature of the budget, covering August 1947 to March 1948, helps listeners understand the constraints under which India’s early policymakers operated.

The episode also examines public and political responses, shedding light on how fiscal decisions were communicated and received in a newly democratic setup. If you thought things are tricky on B-Day in today’s turbulent world, here’s a check that we’ve been through scrappy waters before.

Chat Room

Right is Might

Apropos the Edit, ‘Your Honour, Dissent Is Constitutional’ (Jan 26), is a valid exception to Mumbai sessions judge anticipatory bail case that censured 9 Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) students on attending death anniversary of a teacher, Prof G N Saibaba, who had already been acquitted of all the draconian charges by the Bombay High Court. Judiciary is supposed to be a beacon of light to society — but judgments shouldn’t instil fear among citizens. Our youth’s trust in the judicial system will be better strengthened if we uphold their constitutional rights. This shows how missing is dialogue with our students.

Brij B Goyal
Ludhiana



CONTRAPUNTO

I had to abandon free market principles in order to save the free market system

- GEORGE W BUSH

For A Continental Shift

India must address concerns over pesticide use and industrial emissions, for smooth rollout of FTA with EU

India's free trade agreement with EU is great news. Once the pact is implemented – hopefully, early next year – both sides will benefit from lower prices, higher demand, and more jobs. Together with another major trade deal that India signed with UK last year, this FTA lays the ground for not only sustained export growth but also the employment of our highly skilled workers abroad.

EU is India's biggest trade partner, with total bilateral trade of over \$200bn. In both goods and services, the balance of trade favours India. So, the elimination of tariffs on 98% of Indian products will only make them more competitive. The deal is good for Indian consumers also, as gradual reduction or elimination of tariffs on European goods, ranging from chocolates to cars, will make them more affordable. The import duty on fully built cars will be slashed to 10% eventually. But all of this is subject to the FTA's ratification by EU's 27 member countries. That's the big 'if' of the deal.

India signed the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with UK last July, but its rollout is still pending. So, dealing with 27 govts will be trickier, and require a sustained diplomatic push. Issues like India's continued purchase of Russian oil, for example, could pose a hurdle. And time is of the essence in trade deals, as the experience with Trump has shown. Last Feb, India and US were discussing 'Mission 500', a plan to grow bilateral trade past \$500bn by 2030. Instead, India got saddled with penal sanctions. Another Trump tantrum against EU could make some member countries go slow on the India deal. But it's also possible that the FTA speeds up America's own deal with India.

Meanwhile, EU's hyper-regulatory policies are an obstacle for the FTA. For example, EU has refused to dilute its sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) rules on plant and animal health for India. It has also stood firm on Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, or CBAM, that taxes goods like steel, cement and aluminium based on their carbon emissions. These are non-tariff barriers that can be overcome only with significant investments, driving up costs for Indian producers. But all of these are in the future. For now, a deal is on the table, and getting it going should be the goal.



XIOPOLITICS

Purge of top Chinese generals could reflect the leader's paranoia or prep for going aggro. India, be on guard

In a big shakeup, China's top general and vice-chairman of its Central Military Commission (CMC) Zhang Youxia was purged over the weekend along with the head of PLA's joint operations, Liu Zhenli. True, Xi Jinping's 14-year tenure at the helm of the Chinese party-state has seen wide-ranging purges, netting an estimated 200,000 officials. But Zhang's ouster still raises eyebrows. First, Zhang's removal means that CMC is effectively down to two members – Xi himself who is chairman, and Zhang Shengmin, PLA's anti-corruption tsar.

Second, the extensive purges in PLA have created a dearth of top-ranked battle-experienced officers. Note that Zhang was a veteran of China's 1979 border conflict with Vietnam. Third, Zhang was also seen as one of Xi's closest allies. His purge means no one is safe within the Chinese system. Fourth, Xi now has total control over CMC and can mould PLA without opposition.


However, the relationship between the party and PLA has often been complicated due to internal power struggles. Case in point, just before the conclusion of the China-Japan Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978, rebel factions linked to PLA Navy sent dozens of armed boats to Japan's Senkaku islands to put pressure on then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping. Xi, since 2012, has been obsessed with stamping out internal dissent. That's why he has practically rewritten the party constitution and given himself a convention-breaking third term at the helm.

But the more Xi tries to control the cloistered system, the more cracks appear. The purges could be a sign of paranoia. Or they could be a sign of a system ready to blow – Zhang is rumoured to have leaked Chinese nuclear secrets to the Americans. But Xi surrounding himself with 'yes men' is also problematic – Putin found that out the hard way with his Ukraine invasion. Is Xi planning to use PLA to secure another term at the party congress next year? Is a Taiwan invasion or another border skirmish with India on the cards to unify domestic support? This could be Xi's Birnam Wood moment, leading to unpredictable consequences for the world.



North vs South

The two disagree on how to say 'Yes' when they mean 'No', and vice versa



Back in Goa once again for a visit, I'm struck as I've often been, by the several differences of topography and temperament that make peninsular India distinct from north India.

Compared with the rugged and broad-chested landscape of the North, the South seems softer, more lush in its rain-drenched greenery.

The larger, and often louder-than-life persona of the North, can sometimes feel to be both in your face and in your space. The South seems less assertive in proclaiming its presence to all and sundry, and projects a more restrained and composed demeanour.

But perhaps the most revealing point of divergence between North and South is their respective way of expressing 'Yes' and 'No'.

This has nothing to do with any perceived attempt to impose Hindi on the South, but is based on the non-vocal mode of body language, and involves the head rather than the heart of linguistic pride and prejudice.

When the North says 'Yes' without using words, it nods its collective head up and down. When it wants to express 'No' without actually saying so, it shakes its head from side to side.


In the South, this process is stood on its head, literally, when a shake of the head means 'Yes', and a nod means 'No'.

Sociologists have added the extrovert vim and vigour of the north vis-à-vis the cerebral inwardness of the south to the Deccan being relatively sheltered from the frequent foreign incursions to which the North has historically been subjected, prompting a response mechanism of macho muscularity.

Moving one's head up and down to signify assent provides an opportunity to size up the other party's physical dimensions and combat capabilities, should need arise. Shaking one's head from side to side allows one to ascertain if the other party has reinforcements waiting in the wings, in which case flight is preferable to fight.

Unencumbered by such tactical considerations, the South saves energy in saying 'No' by letting gravity do the nodding and says 'Yes', by the less labour-intensive headshake.

North-South divide? It's all in the head.



secondopinion

What Do We Get From EU?

India & the bloc operate at different stages of value chain, so their FTA can help both without hurting domestic industries. But EU's carbon tax, excess regulation & lengthy ratification are potential glitches



Ajay Srivastava

After nearly two decades of stop-start talks, India and European Union yesterday announced the conclusion of negotiations on a free trade agreement. This is India's ninth trade agreement in four years and its 19th overall, alongside six narrower preferential trade agreements.

This deal is being concluded now, not because differences between the two sides have vanished, but because geopolitics has forced pragmatism. Recent tariff shocks under Trump, combined with rising dependence on China, have pushed both sides to narrower ambitions, and an executable deal.

India and EU together account for 23% of global GDP and 25% of global population (nearly \$25tn and 2bn people), making this one of the world's largest trade deals, serving around 1bn middle- and high-income consumers. Plus, with bilateral goods and services trade already close to \$220bn, it starts from a strong base for expansion.

This FTA helps both sides. Because India and Europe sell different kinds of products, they do not compete directly with each other. India mainly exports labour-intensive goods such as garments, footwear and auto parts, along with downstream products like smartphones, generic pharmaceuticals and cut and polished diamonds, and processed fuels including diesel and aviation turbine fuel.

EU, by contrast, supplies capital- and tech-intensive products (machinery and aircraft), advanced goods such as electronic components and medical devices, and essential industrial inputs like rough diamonds and metal scrap. Because both operate at different stages of the value chain, tariff cuts will reduce costs and expand trade without hurting domestic industries.

SECTORAL OUTCOMES | This FTA spans 24 chapters covering goods, services, intellectual property, digital trade, govt procurement, environment, labour and data protection. Here's how both sides stand to gain in the key areas.

Tariff cuts | EU will cut or eliminate tariffs on 98% of Indian goods, though many duties are already low. Real gains lie in garments (around 12%) and footwear (8-15%), where tariff cuts would boost India's competitiveness against Vietnam and Bangladesh. Tariff cuts will also benefit marine products, gems and jewellery, handicrafts, chemicals and machinery.

India will reduce or remove tariffs on about 97% of EU exports. Wine duties will fall from 150% to 20-30%, spirits to 40%, beer to 50%, and car tariffs from 100-125% to 10% for up to 250,000 vehicles. India will also move to zero tariffs on many agri-food products and most processed foods, chemicals, machinery, electronics and aircraft.

Services push | India has secured EU commitments in IT and IT-enabled services, professional services, education, finance, tourism, construction and other business sectors. This FTA also creates a framework

to ease short-term and temporary business travel for professionals. However, the final outcome will be clear only once the text is released.

Despite EU being India's second-largest IT market, exports remain below potential. EU rules often require Indian firms to set up local offices even for remote work and impose high minimum salary thresholds for Indian professionals. India is seeking EU recognition as a "data-secure" country to cut compliance costs and compete on equal terms with Japan and South Korea. Overall, India's gains in services will depend on outcome of data security status, adequate number of short-term visas, social-security totalisation, and mutual recognition of qualifications. Both sides have agreed on facilitative frameworks on above themes, but we have to wait for the legal text for details.



How A Humane Law On Dogs Went To Dogs In Telangana

Sarpanches who gave contracts for poisoning strays and some poisoners have been identified by cops. But there's little political will in Congress-led govt to pursue these cases, even though the accused have violated Supreme Court-mandated rules & are booked under two laws

Sudipta.Sengupta@timesofindia.com

Just to put the Supreme Court case on stray dogs in context, as hearings went on, news has been filtering out from Telangana that more than 1,000 strays were killed across the state. The mass killing was not the act of madmen unable to tell right from wrong. This was the outcome of politics at its worst, and perpetrators getting away because laws meant to deter and punish such cruelty are ineffective.

Armed with newfound political power following their victory in the gram panchayat elections held in Dec 2025, a group of sarpanches in the state started a covert campaign of mass killings. 'Specialists', as locals in Telangana villages dub them, were brought in from neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. These 'specialists' injected stray dogs with a small dose of *gaddi mandu* – a lethal agricultural chemical that helps destroy wild overgrowth (its primary chemical is paraquat dichloride).

Sarpanches had promised to reduce numbers of stray dogs (also of monkeys) if voted to power. Monkeys are difficult to tackle, but dogs are easy to trap and terminate.

So the netas thought it best to take this instant, cheaper route to voter appeasement – locals say it costs not more than ₹500 to kill a stray dog – rather than go through the ethical and law-mandated process of taking up animal birth control (ABC) programmes.

Although it is difficult to tell sarpanches of which party did most of the killing, it is quite clear there is no political will to prosecute them. This makes the culling of free-roaming dogs effectively a state-enabled campaign, spearheaded by elected representatives who are clear they will not take any notice of a national law, one which SC only recently reiterated as the guiding principle to



all approaches to controlling stray population.

That a large section of their electorate was ill-informed about the goings-on in SC, became a convenient weapon for the sarpanches. Locals allege that many deliberately misinterpreted the top court's observations on removing strays from public institutions – there's no ruling on this as yet, the final case is being heard – to justify their actions.

Although the local police across five districts have registered cases against close to a dozen sarpanches, along with other individuals, the chances of any of

them doing jail time are very slim. Also, the last thing Congress-led Telangana govt wants to do now is to arrest newly elected representatives.

All of the accused are booked under BNS Section 325 that deals with killing, poisoning, maiming, or rendering any animal useless, crimes that attract up to five years in prison, and also under Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. But they were all handed station bail, as is the



A protest in Lucknow against mass killings of stray dogs in Telangana

practice with punishment under seven years of jail. Their files are stuck at the forensics stage. To hazard a guess as to just when these reports will be released, and when a chargesheet will be filed – if at all – pinning them to the crime, is tougher than predicting the weather.

Then there's bad data being tomtommed as evidence. Per a recent RTI response, Telangana recorded over 14.9L dog-bite cases over the last five years. But, as has been widely reported, what is recorded as "dog bites", for one, includes bites by monkeys, rats and other animals. Moreover, it isn't "bites" that are recorded, but rabies shots dispensed, which also include preventive shots taken by those who handle animals. Experts have repeatedly pointed out that all dog bite statistics are inflated.

Experts have also emphasised that ABC remains the only scientific – and humane – approach to stabilising stray dog population. Mass killings can't be a solution. The state must take responsibility. What needs acceleration is the pace of sterilisation and vaccination of stray dogs under ABC programmes and better budgets for municipalities and gram panchayats to execute it.

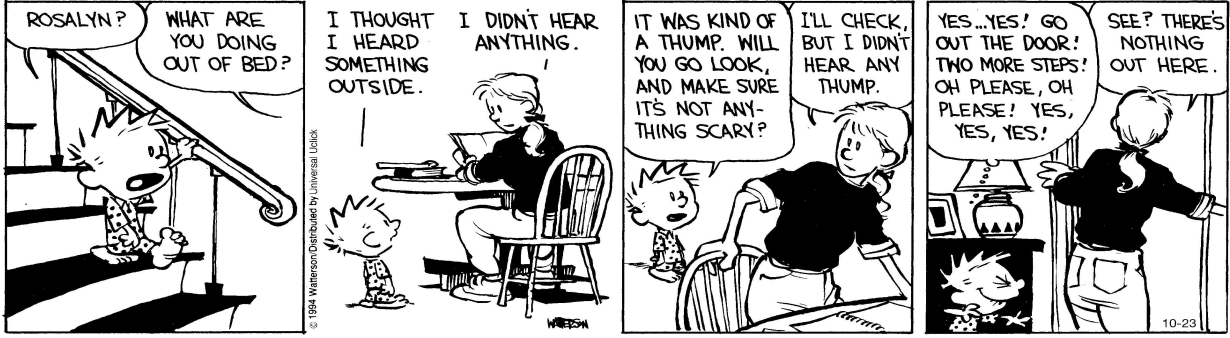
Currently, Telangana conducts roughly 10,000 sterilisation surgeries annually – a grossly inadequate figure, given the state's stray dog population of roughly 15L, per estimates by animal rights groups.

Take the case of Hyderabad, where a substantial number of stray dogs remain unsterilised and unvaccinated, per recent reports. But neither state govt nor municipalities have stepped up ABC efforts.

What is needed is clear, as it is in every Indian state – recruitment of more trained personnel, sustained, institutionalised partnerships with animal welfare organisations, and more animal shelters, particularly in rural areas.

Activists fear, minus state action, the mass killing may continue in Telangana's villages.

Calvin & Hobbes



Five Values Krishn Enunciated For World Leaders

Hasmukh Adhia

In the backdrop of current world leadership behaviour, we are witnessing a vitiated geopolitical climate. There is a need to remind everyone of the five spiritual values outlined by Krishn in Gita's thirteenth chapter. These five values are: *amanitvam*, absence of expectation of respect; *adambhitvam*, absence of pretentiousness; *ahimsa*, non-harm; *kshanti*, forgiveness; *arjavam*, straightforwardness.

Amanitvam is the absence of manitvam, insatiable desire to be praised always. Such a person expects and demands praise constantly. The more you praise him, the more he expects. Krishn says one should be the opposite of this. The extraordinary expectation of respect indicates a deep-rooted inferiority in a person, even though, outwardly, he has a sense of self-importance or a feeling of superiority over others.

A person with real self-esteem does not have to crave external recognition. Such a person knows that respect cannot be demanded; it must be earned.

Adambhitvam is the absence of dambh, pretensions. Dambhitvam means trying to flaunt something which is not true. Showing off to catch people's attention, to expect some respect or gain. While manitvam means expecting respect, dambhitvam is manipulating respect. The latter is even worse. It is like cheating someone in a sophisticated way. Dambhitvam also arises out of a lack of self-esteem. A person who is hollow inside tries to make a bigger show of his strengths. There is pressure inside to speak or do something which makes one look important. Empty vessels make more sound. Absence of dambhitvam is expected from leaders.

Ahimsa is refraining from causing physical, mental, or verbal harm to anyone. It is listed as a core value by most religions. One can control physical hurt or injury to others, but controlling violence caused by words is difficult because people often speak without being aware. A person who talks too much is more likely to cause mental hurt to others. Himsa can be done in three ways: *krit*, done by self, *karita*, instigating others, and *anumodita*, approving it. One may not directly inflict himsa, but one can cause it through others. Supporting those engaged in violence is himsa. Not speaking out at the right time can also be himsa. Approving injustice, kneeling before perpetrators of violence are all examples of anumodit himsa.

Kshanti, forgiveness, implies consideration and tolerance. There are umpteen reasons for forgiving. Not forgiving means 'i retaliate'. The other

person also retaliates. And the fight goes on and on. Is it not better to forgive once and close the account? Forgiveness is a quality of a generous person, not a weak individual.

Arjavam means straightforwardness. 'Speaking what you really think, and practising what you speak' is arjavam. It is the alignment of your thoughts, speech, and action. Such a person can only be called an integrated personality. The opposite of this is a split personality. Arjavam is the bare minimum practical value required for success in any field. It is a quality of being trustworthy. If this value is not followed, a leader can lose his allies. An individual who talks nicely to the face of a person but behaves otherwise is never liked by anyone. A person's ever-changing mind makes him vulnerable to flip-flop decisions. People stop trusting statements of such a person. Once trust is lost, everything is lost.

The writer is a former finance secretary of India



THE SPEAKING TREE



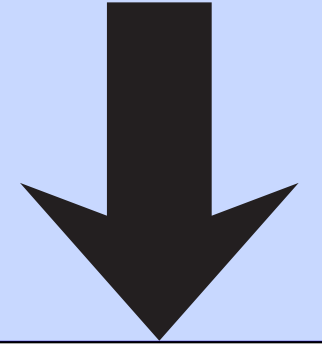
Sacredspace

A leader's trustworthiness is measured by the degree to which they think of others.

Consideration for others is an essential quality for leaders, together with courage and the ability to make objective judgments.

Daisaku Ikeda

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comment

THOUGHT
FOR THE DAY

Anger doesn't demand action. When you act in anger, you lose self-control — Joe Hyams, American writer

Railway rage cannot be ignored any longer

CTV surveillance and facial recognition software, besides other aspects like eyewitness details, helped police arrest the man who fatally stabbed a college professor at the Malad railway station in Mumbai on Saturday.

The shocking incident happened over a relatively "minor" dispute while alighting from a moving local train.

What is chilling is that this seems almost an everyday happening,

where train arguments erupt over boarding, alighting, and seating as trains and stations, with their crowds often become a simmering cauldron of short fuses and survival of the fittest or fastest.

Yet, to think that an argument could trigger a murder is terrifying, in a city unfortunately inured to train incidents. This proves there is a significant facet to commuter safety in the megalopolis. This is rage. One has heard about road rage;

railway rage cannot be overlooked. We need to teach and learn calm, composure, patience and a sense of cooperation to dial back train tiffs that can escalate massively.

We may have witnessed or just learnt about squabbles, train fury, train gangs, bullies, etc. This is an absolute inferno in this environment. Desist from aligning with these; step back from arguments or fisticuffs and report behaviour like this to the police. This may sound

naive and almost utopian for those who are caught up in the quotidian challenge of rail travel. Yet, it is beneficial if individuals take upon themselves the onus of following every rule and control when accessing these trains.

We need to work on our anger response, regard for human life and self-control, applying it to every area of life. Railway rage may be a uniquely Mumbai phenomenon. It is real and can be deadly, as this has shown.

Some musings on music, as it were...

MS
WORD



Mayank Shekhar

This one time Donald Trump unwittingly left an impression on me (circa 2003), is when the prank-artist Sacha Baron Cohen as Ali G mock-interviewed the real-estate baron then, to ask what he thought was the most popular thing in the world.

Never mind the context of that joke; without a pause, Trump said, "Music." And isn't that frickin' true? I thought.

Everybody in the world indulges in music, while they don't need it for essential survival (unlike cooking, cleaning, etc). You could hate some sorta music, surely. But you enjoy music; period. As against, how fewer people engage with all other arts.

But do we experience music the same way, too?

The great VS Naipaul was once asked in a BBC radio interview about his personal relationship with music. He said he grew up with music being "external" to his home. Which is an interesting split to define it as, I felt.

Isn't music quite internal to the brain, still? Can speak for myself. Tap on my shoulder (anytime), I'd tell you the exact song playing in my head, right now (and all through the bloody day)!

It's not necessarily a favourite song — quite often the last tune I heard, getting off a cab, perhaps. Or simply something that someone said, or I read/saw.

Which the subconscious mind, drawing some connection or the other, segued into pulling out a random track from an infinite playlist.

The composition is usually an invading ear-worm. I don't know/care for the lyric so much. The notes refuse to let go. Until another set similarly replaces it, sometimes within a minute. And yes, I softly hum, throughout the waking hours.

Which makes me wonder, if this might be a desi thing — to whistle, hum, rattle or drum, in the car, in the shower, up the lift, down the street...

An ode to the indefatigable bathroom singer; wrote this, as usual, while crappily humming an ear-worm in my head, under my breath!



Everybody in the world indulges in music, while they don't need it for essential survival. You could hate some sorta music, surely. But you enjoy music; period.

REPRESENTATION PIC/ISTOCK; (below) professional singer Shilpa Rao. PIC/NIMESH DAVE



It's how music possibly transmits through generations. Melody is chocolatey. Words are simple.

And perhaps why we still love popular Hindi music from the 1950s, down to the nasal '90s? Or, maybe, in the popular imagination, Beethoven/Beatles bigger than, say, Megadeth; or SD/RD Burman > AR Rahman?

Obviously, no knock on the talents. They're all as timeless as it gets. But you inevitably bend on your knees and move to Rahman's GOAT number, 'Chhaiya Chhaiya' on the dance floor. You hardly sing it to yourself.

That said, for the most part, none of us, really, are singers, worth listening to, anyway!

Professional singer Shilpa Rao believes being born with a voice is a myth. In the sense that, "you sing in

several capacities. The lohari/lullaby may not be technically sound. But it's correct with the love. That's what the music holds for you."

Before Rao became one of Bollywood's top playback singers, she read statistics in college. "In one line," she tells me, "Statistics is the study of human nature, put in numbers; it captures anomalies."

And in that anomaly resides art. It'd be AI, otherwise. For instance, she argues, when she performs her popular track, 'Bulleya' (from *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil*) onstage, it's usually the super-loud audience, around 10,000 people, who sing along.

Each is not a perfect singer. But the collective sound averages out the margins of error, and it becomes harmonious: "There's still no AI, or auto-tune, with human-feel button to it."

What about those who sing so perfectly that your jaws drop, that regularly, when you tune in to reality TV shows like Indian Idol, Sa Re Ga Ma Pa, even YouTube/Instagram Reels?

If that's the level of talent that's

always existed — why's it that when you look back at the popular Indian greats, such few come to mind? From 1950s/60s onwards, for decades, in Hindi playback singing: Kishore/Rafi, Lata/Asha, give/take a couple more!

"Persistence," Rao reasons. It's one thing to sing a song already sung. Quite another to repeatedly produce from within, in two hours flat, when no reference point exists.

The first time Rao attempted an original composition ('*Kaisi paheli zindagani*' from *Parineeta*), she knew she wasn't there, yet. Composer-singer Shankar Mahadevan guided her to sharpen wares with ad-jingles first.

She's been a singer since a baby. Her father S Venkat Rao, a high-end engineer with an MA in music, ensured music wasn't just "internal" to her home.

It was their home itself. He told her, there are always two lives — one with art; the other, without. Pick the former. It's inherently a more enriching life.

He drove her to practice/riyaaz. "He's Aamir Khan from *Dangal*," she laughs. I suppose, persistence makes perfect. Sometimes, the penny drops.



Scan the QR to enjoy full chat with Shilpa Rao

The first time I watched Rao perform live (2024) was in her 30-second Insta Reel, singing the title track of *Kalank*! It felt so viscerally pristine/pure, I must've replayed it a thousand times myself. It's gone viral since.

She remembers, it was from singer Hariharan's birthday. "They call it aamad," Rao says — the arrival of the muse. "You've to catch it. Sur lag rahe the." The notes were flowing.

I find that with writing, on rare occasion. Surely, same with you, regardless of what you do. Plus, whether or not you believe in God — how can you not believe in music? Turns out, all of us do. Amen to aamad!

Mayank Shekhar attempts to make sense of mass culture. He tweets @mayankw14 Send your feedback to mailbag@mid-day.com

LETTERS

Murderer must pay for his actions with his life

Apropos of 'A murder in 90 seconds', petty quarrels in crowded trains are common but physical violence is unacceptable and shocking, to say the least. A family has lost a loved one due to an act of utter madness. The accused needs to be given capital punishment as a deterrent to would-be offenders.

SN KABRA

Deliver justice to kin of deceased's the earliest

Omkar Shinde should be given life imprisonment after being tried on a fast-track basis. An innocent life was snuffed out for a petty reason. May Alok Kumar Singh rest in peace. Justice must be delivered to his family at the earliest.

RAVI D BALIGA

Society needs to ponder over its impatience levels

It refers to 'Mumbai locals: From lifeline to danger line, a year of violence'. While the accused in the Malad case must receive stringent punishment, we, as a society, also need to ponder over our impatience level, which seems to have increased a lot.

BAL GOVIND

Honnold's exploits are a display of human courage

This refers to 'Rock climber scales Taipei skyscraper'. The sheer audacity of Alex Honnold's exploits sends shivers down the spine. The climb is an unparalleled display of human courage and endurance.

PV PRAKASH

have your say!



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UGC guidelines must have proper safeguards

The latest guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) have triggered a storm in the field of education, which has the potential to spill over to the political arena. The UGC's newly notified Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026, has provisions for stronger mechanisms to address caste-based discrimination in universities. On the face of it, they are seemingly innocuous regulations that could not become controversial. History of such government steps, however, has made some sections of society fearful and angry. There have been a lot of cases of misuse of the Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities)

Act, 1989. This piece of legislation too had lofty objectives: to check atrocities against SC and ST people. The law has become an instrument to "blackmail" innocent citizens and public servants, the Supreme Court observed in a judgment in 2018. It issued a raft of guidelines to protect public servants and private employees from arbitrary arrests under the Act. It also held that public servants could only be arrested with the written permission of their appointing authority. In the case of private employees, permission of the concerned senior Superintendent of Police is made mandatory. Soon, there was uproar by politicians and activists, claiming to be the champions of SCs and STs, forcing

the Narendra Modi government to bring in amendments to nullify the apex court's judgment. The government argued that SCs and STs still face social stigma, poverty, and humiliation to which they have been subjected for centuries. There was a grain of truth in the arguments proffered by the government and activists, but the problems of SCs and STs could not be solved by a law that is widely abused. Now, non-SC-ST people fear that the UGC regulation could become another instrument of bullying and coercion for them. They find the safeguards inadequate. Resistance has come from various walks of life. A district magistrate reportedly resigned, alleging the new rules were unfair to upper-caste stu-

dents. Many Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders are angry. Shyam Sundar Tripathi, the district president of the BJP's Kisan Morcha in Salon (Rae Bareilly), wrote a letter to the Prime Minister and resigned from his party post in protest. An unnamed senior BJP leader was quoted by a media platform, saying, "The party's tally got reduced to 240, and the conclusion that was drawn was that it was because the SC and ST communities did not support them. They have been coming up with one scheme after another for their welfare, and we have kept quiet. But now, it is about the future of our children, and the move is completely discriminatory. If this is not withdrawn, the party will have to

face consequences." The government is cagey, with Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai avoiding a direct answer to the query about whether the regulations would be reviewed or paused. Parrying questions, however, will help neither the government nor the saffron party. If the objective of the UGC regulations is genuine about equity, then the answer lies not in blunt instruments but in carefully calibrated policy and effective implementation. Robust safeguards against misuse, clear definitions of discrimination, and transparent procedures are essential. Without them, the regulations may end up replicating the very injustices they seek to eliminate—this time under the banner of social justice.

LETTERS

Address chronic sleep loss on priority

This refers to the editorial "Brain drain of a different kind is happening globally" (THI Jan 27). It rightly flags how chronic sleep loss drains cognitive sharpness, much like talent exodus hurts nations. In India, long work hours and screen time make it worse for many professionals. Workplaces can help by enforcing a 'no meeting' after 8pm rule and flexible hours. Schools should teach sleep basics early. K Sakunthala, Coimbatore-641016

Solution is to have realistic work hours

A propos your editorial "Brain drain of a different kind is happening globally". It justifiably draws attention to a quiet but serious issue affecting our young workforce—chronic sleep deprivation among corporate employees. Reduced sleep impairs memory consolidation, decision-making and overall brain health, as the piece notes. This "brain drain" through exhaustion is especially worrying when over 65 per cent of our youth face such pressures, leading to stress, burnout, and diminished productivity. Companies should enforce realistic work hours, discourage late-night emails, and promote flexible schedules. Public campaigns and workplace wellness programmes can normalise adequate (7 to 9 hours) rest as essential for performance. Schools and colleges could also educate students early on sleep hygiene. This way, we can protect our human capital. M Barathi, Bengaluru-560076

Curb sleep deprivation

A propos "Brain drain of a different kind is happening globally". The editorial highlights a growing but often ignored problem: normalisation of poor sleep and mental overload. The concern is not about hard work or ambition, but about a system that quietly rewards constant fatigue. When young professionals function on minimal rest, clarity of thought, learning ability, and emotional balance steadily decline. Over time, this weakens productivity and burdens public health. This is not an individual lapse but a collective issue. Employers can set firm boundaries on work hours and schools can include lessons on sleep and mental fitness. Valuing rest today will help build healthier minds and a more resilient society tomorrow. S M Jeeva, Chennai-600032

Educate students about value of sleep and brain health

This refers to the editorial "Brain drain of a different kind is happening globally". The concern over sleep deprivation among young professionals is timely and serious. While awareness is growing, we need more workplace-level changes. Companies should actively promote healthy sleep habits—simple steps like discouraging late-night emails, offering flexible hours, and integrating mental wellness into HR policies can help. Schools and colleges too must educate students on the value of sleep and brain health. We must treat sleep not as a luxury but as a civic priority. The time to act is now. Abbharna Barathi, Chennai-600023

Sleep disorder is a major risk factor

The editorial "Brain drain of a different kind is happening globally" rightly highlights how chronic sleep deprivation is quietly eroding cognitive capacity and overall health. Recent evidence reinforces the urgency of this concern. Reports from 2025 indicate that nearly 22.5 per cent of Indian adolescents are clinically sleep-deprived, with a majority showing symptoms of anxiety and depression. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has also warned that lifestyle disorders linked to inadequate sleep—such as diabetes, hypertension, and mental illness—are rising sharply among urban youth and working professionals. The World Health Organization now recognises sleep disorders as a major risk factor for non-communicable diseases, alongside poor diet and physical inactivity. As the editorial aptly notes, glorifying sleep deprivation as a "badge of honour" must give way to respecting the brain's non-negotiable need for rest. Beyond individual lifestyle changes, policy-level interventions are required—awareness campaigns on sleep hygiene, regulation of excessive work hours, and inclusion of sleep health in school and workplace wellness programmes. Treating sleep as essential infrastructure for human capital is vital if India is to safeguard its public health and productivity. Vidyasagar Reddy Kethiri, Hanumakonda-506009

Give importance to adequate sleep

A different kind of brain drain is unfolding globally as modern lifestyles and work schedules steadily erode the most basic human necessity—sleep. As your editorial points out, a University of Pittsburgh neurologist has highlighted how reduced sleep, prolonged wakefulness, and night shifts contribute to neurological disorders and long-term health complications. Chronic sleep deprivation disrupts appetite, digestion, and body metabolism, affecting nearly 65 per cent of India's population today. If left unaddressed, the much-celebrated demographic dividend may transform into a burden of psychosomatic illness. For a developing nation, protecting healthy sleep patterns is not a luxury but a prerequisite for sustained productivity, social harmony, and overall personal well-being and healthy long term national productivity. K V Raghuram, Wayanad

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

War veteran harassed at Toll Plaza, sparks national outrage

KUNDAPUR: A wheelchair-bound Army veteran injured during Operation Parakram was allegedly harassed at Sasthana toll plaza despite holding a valid exemption pass, triggering widespread outrage after his video went viral on social media. A retired Army commando who lost both his legs while serving the nation was allegedly humiliated by staff at the Sasthana toll plaza near Kundapur in Udupi district after being asked to pay toll despite being exempt under government rules. The soldier, Shyamraj, hails from Edaneeru in Kasaragod district of Kerala and served with the elite 21 Para Military unit. He was grievously injured during Operation Parakram and has since been confined to a wheelchair.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Here is what the 2026-27 Union Budget might look like



RAVULAPATI SEETARAMARAO

Presenting the budget" used to be a big attraction until a few years ago. Even if children did not understand the word or its meaning, they knew adults were glued to it — so they too would gather around the radio and listen to the Finance Minister's budget speech. Subsequently, when the elders spoke, the kids would hear that car prices might be rising this year, or that taxes paid by employees might go up or down, and they'd join in: if the elders complained, they would complain; if the elders sighed with relief, they would sigh too, just to pass the time. Listening to the budget speech was fun in those days. Those pleasures are gone now. Those complaints and celebratory sighs have evaporated into thin air. The budget has become synonymous with indifference and apathy. The reason is that governments haven't consistently followed the budgets they presented. Today, educators, economists, and those who used to praise budget figures either don't care anymore or openly dismiss them. All the TV channels —



hosts, presenters, everyone — started treating the finance minister, who was about to present the budget, as if he was a celebrity an hour before the presentation. Some acted as admirers, others as fierce critics, and instead of weapons of war the channels wielded verbal weapons, turning the whole scene into a kind of comedy. Because the briefcase in the finance minister's hand before the presentation resembled another "Akshaya Patra" (inexhaustible vessel), all the TV channels repeatedly portrayed the upcoming budget as a cure-all — a solution to every economic problem — even suggesting the minister would personally hand out sweets. They kept broadcasting this image over, and over, amping up the drama like filmmakers

readying a climax, offering viewers their own mix of help and entertainment. Amid all these, the budget to be presented in 2026 seems like a beacon of hope. The budget makes a point of crediting the government's economic experts with the achievement of preventing US President Donald Trump's previously proposed 50 per cent tariff from doing major damage in 2025. That's true — it helped dispel fears that India's economy might collapse and that the country could become desperately poor. By calming those worries at the end of last year, our financial experts' competence is reflected in this year's budget. Let's look forward to this year's budget for that reason. It would be good if the ensuing budget prioritises strengthening of financial

resources. Even if this government does not claim credit for economic reforms — the P V and Manmohan Singh era — everyone knows that today's economic progress depends on openness and facilitation, and that our economic condition advances along that path. If 2025 is remembered as the year when reforms consistently supported the economy, that momentum could help 2026 move forward smoothly. We must expand and strengthen the country's financial resources and systems. Budget proposals should channel investments and expenditures to build financial strength. Strengthening systems is a continuous process, but there are some areas where we must strengthen without skimping on spending — defence is one of them. We

should not dilute the focus on defence. We must not be tempted by small signs of improving conditions to divert funds away from defence investments. The 2025 budget estimates need to increase from 26.4 per cent to about 30 per cent. Given the current situation, it is imperative that there is an enhanced allocation to Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) by at least Rs. 10,000 crore. Defence indigenisation happening in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu should be further encouraged, while the production must be expanded. We should focus on a plan to establish another defense industrial corridor in eastern India. There's nothing wrong with asking that this budget include proposals that give the highest priority to environmental protection — it's only right to seek a future that is secure in every way. These are times when oil and mineral resources must be given utmost priority. Our country should be able to develop oil fields and produce petroleum, so that we are not dependent on others. We need to see whether any budget proposals address oil and mineral production, imports, and exports. When it comes to managing production, exports, imports, and investment in other goods, the Finance Minister and experts in that ministry must, based on India's experience, give priority in budget design to measures that carefully and strongly bolster the fiscal position. Tax matters are not easy for ordinary people to un-

derstand — even financial experts and the officials in the ministry only come to terms with what they announce through experience; there is no fixed rule about when things will be settled. Only financial specialists can really shed light on these issues. Employees and others pay the taxes they are required to — but powerful businesspeople, industrialists and politicians can, by some trick or sleight of hand, find a hundred ways to escape the "tax-net" and sometimes they do. Collecting taxes and bringing exporters into the tax net is very difficult. Taxes are just one part of raising revenue. For the central government, GST has become a new source of income. On a broad level, an individual household's budget, how much is spent and how much revenue is generated, whether through income or borrowing — is something every household prepares each year. And that small personal budget is linked to the national budget. That connection has a broad impact on the country's economic progress and on the welfare of its citizens. The national budget has its effect on global systems and on other countries; it must withstand those impacts. Only if our Prime Minister and Finance Minister design an economic system each year that can compete on equal footing with other nations will the world take notice of our development. (The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

Medaram: The roar of Adivasi self-respect

By modifying the natural setting of the Gaddelu, we risk drifting away from our roots

MADAKAM LAKSHMAN KOYA

Deep in the forests of Mulugu, a powerful phenomenon is unfolding that challenges the rigid rules of institutionalised religion. The Sammakka-Sarakka Jatra is not merely a festival; it is a roaring assertion of native culture. As millions congregate to bow before the Gaddelu (the two wooden poles representing the warrior goddesses), they send a powerful message to the world. However, this massive reverence has often unsettled the guardians of Vedic orthodoxy. In the recent past, controversial remarks by prominent spiritual figures—questioning the divinity of these deities for "not descending from Brahma Loka" and dismissing them as mere "village spirits"—exposed a deep-seated cultural arrogance. These comments were not just theological critiques; they were attempts to delegitimise a power that unites millions. Critics often try to label Sammakka and Sarakka as

just "tribal deities" to compartmentalise them. However, the reality at Medaram shatters this narrow definition. While the custodians are Koya Adivasis, the devotees are universal. It is a spiritual union that defies state borders. Today, these deities are not owned by one community; they are mothers to the multitudes. People from all castes—BCs, SCs, OCs, and others—flock to Medaram with unwavering faith. At the Gaddelu, the distinction of caste dissolves. A Brahmin stands shoulder-to-shoulder with a Dalit and an Adivasi, all offering 'bangaram' (jaggery) with equal devotion. This proves that these mothers have transcended the forest to become the supreme power for the common man. For most Adivasis, the criticism from the elite arises from a "Manuvadi" lens that validates divinity only through Puranic lineage and stone temples. But the Medaram worldview is different. Sammakka and Sarakka are not mythical avatars descending from the heavens; they are historical



Recognising the greatness of these deities, the State Government has moved beyond tokenism to active prioritisation. In a historic move, the government sanctioned a massive Rs 251 crore for the jataru, with Rs 150 crore dedicated to infrastructure and Rs 101 crore specifically for renovation of Gaddelu. Furthermore, the decision to hold a state Cabinet meeting directly at Medaram signals that the administration is bowing to the sanctity of the soil

martyrs who rose from this soil to fight tyranny. To the devotee, divinity is found in 'sacrifice', not in rituals. As an insider of the community, one sees the profound difference in spiritual stewardship. Unlike Vedic priests who rely on written scriptures and rigid timings, our Koya Vaddes (priests) rely on instinct and the signals of nature. When

they bring the deity from Chilakala Gutta, it is not a ritual of chanting mantras; it is a ritual of raw spiritual energy. Similarly, the holy dip in Jampanna Vagu is not merely to wash away sins, but to honour the legend of Jampanna, whose blood turned the stream red while fighting for his people. The ultimate vindication of this indigenous power is

now visible in the highest corridors of power. Recognizing the greatness of these deities, the State Government has moved beyond tokenism to active prioritisation. In a historic move, the government sanctioned a massive Rs 251 crore for the jataru, with Rs 150 crore dedicated to infrastructure and Rs 101 crore specifically for renovation of Gaddelu. Furthermore, the decision to hold a state Cabinet meeting directly at Medaram signals that the administration is bowing to the sanctity of the soil. However, amidst this celebration, the completion of the Gaddelu renovation has sparked a deep cultural concern among Adivasis. While the government's intent was development, we must ask: at what cost to our tradition? For countless generations, the Sammakka-Sarakka deities have stood under the open sky. This was not due to poverty; it was the very soul of Adivasi tradition. Our gods are not confined by walls, domes, or Gopurams; they are one with the wind and the forest. With the renovation now

complete, there is a genuine fear that we are losing the originality of the Adivasi way of worship. By modifying the natural setting of the Gaddelu with modern structures, we risk drifting away from our roots. If this trend continues, future generations may never know the raw, nature-bound spirituality of their ancestors. We must ensure that in the race for 'development', the unique identity of Medaram is not erased. The future of our faith depends on respecting the open-air sanctity that has defined us for centuries. The silence of the critics is loud compared to the beating drums of Medaram. The attempt to belittle this culture has only galvanized the faithful. The huge crowd and the state's reverence are the final answer to those doubts. The Sammakka-Sarakka Jatra proves that the indigenous "Mulavasi" culture does not need validation from anyone else. The geography of faith has changed, and the gods of the glade have claimed their rightful place in the hearts of all people.

Opinion

Mark Carney and Vaclav Havel saw the same lie

Canada's prime minister knows Trump all too well. He invoked a dissident's words to make a point.



Ezra Klein

"Dear Prime Minister Carney," President Trump wrote on Truth Social on Thursday. "Please let this Letter serve to represent that the Board of Peace is withdrawing its invitation to you regarding Canada's joining, what will be, the most prestigious Board of Leaders ever assembled, at any time. Thank you for your attention to this matter!"

Everything Trump has done over the last week has made him look tawdry, addled and small. He began his latest play for Greenland by complaining about being passed over for the Nobel Peace Prize and ended it by disinviting Mark Carney from his "Board of Peace." For Trump, nothing — not even peace — transcends his brutish transactionalism.

Coolly assessing that transactionalism is what landed Carney in Trump's sights. Two things stood out to me about the speech that Carney gave at Davos last week. First, Carney's speech used the word "hegemon" four times. He said the word "America" only once, and then only to specify "American hegemony." This is who we are now to our northern neighbors: Not the America they once knew, or thought they knew, but "the hegemon."

Second, Carney invoked Vaclav Havel's story of how communism perpetuated itself. In his essay "The Power of the Powerless," Havel imagined a grocer who hangs a "Workers of the World, Unite!" sign in his window. Why does he do this, Havel asked? He does it because to do otherwise would invite ruin.

"Havel called this 'living within a lie,'" said Carney. "The system's power comes not from its truth but from everyone's willingness to perform as if it were true. And its fragility comes from the same source: When even one person stops performing — when the greengrocer removes his sign — the illusion begins to crack."

Carney sought, at Davos, to be that greengrocer; he sought, before the eyes of the world, to remove the sign. Carney spoke as Trump was threatening tariffs against Europe if Greenland was not delivered into American hands. That threat is now forestalled, but for how long?

Great powers, Carney said, are "using economic integration as weapons. Tariffs as leverage. Financial infrastructure as coercion. Supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited. You cannot 'live within the lie' of mutual benefit through integration when integration becomes the source of your subordination."

As if to prove Carney's point, Trump responded, during his own speech, with a Mafioso-style warning: "I watched your prime minister yesterday. He wasn't so grateful. They should be grateful to us, Canada. Canada lives because of the United States. Remember that, Mark, the next time you make your statements."

Sometimes, world leaders fall into conflict because they misunderstand each other. But Carney and Trump understand each other all too well.

It is hard to dispute Carney's rendering of America under Trump. Early in



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Trump's second term, I asked a number of his advisers to explain Trump's theory of international relations to me. Every one said some version of the same thing: America has leverage it does not use. Under Trump, it is going to start using it.

This is perhaps Trump's most fundamental belief about how the world works. "The best thing you can do is deal from strength, and leverage is the biggest strength you can have," Trump wrote in "The Art of the Deal." "Leverage is having something the other guy wants. Or better yet, needs. Or best of all, simply can't do without."

What is striking about Trumpism is how devoid it is of idealism of any kind. In this way, it betrays Havel's framework. What Carney left out of his rendering of Havel's argument is that, to Havel, some lies are stronger than others. Here is Havel, writing about what the imagined grocer is really saying when he hangs his "Workers of the World, Unite!" sign:

Verbally, it might be expressed this way: "I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond

reproach. I am obedient and therefore I have the right to be left in peace."

This message, of course, has an addressee: It is directed above, to the greengrocer's superior, and at the same time it is a shield that protects the greengrocer from potential informers. The slogan's real meaning, therefore, is rooted firmly in the greengrocer's existence. It reflects his vital interests. But what are those vital interests? Let us take note: If the greengrocer had been instructed to display the slogan "I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient," he would not be nearly as indifferent to its

semantics, even though the statement would reflect the truth. The greengrocer would be embarrassed and ashamed to put such an unequivocal statement of his own degradation in the shop window, and quite naturally so, for he is a human being and thus has a sense of his own dignity. To overcome this complication, his expression of loyalty must take the form of a sign which, at least on its textual surface, indicates a level of disinterested conviction. It must allow the greengrocer to say, "What's wrong with the workers of the world uniting?"

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State terror has arrived in the United States

A regime based on fear deploys violence precisely to reinforce the message that anyone can be subjected to it.



M. Gessen

After the past three weeks of brutality in Minneapolis, it should no longer be possible to say that the Trump administration seeks merely to govern the nation. It seeks to reduce everyone to a state of constant fear — a fear of violence from which some people may at a given moment be spared, but from which no one will ever be truly safe. That is the new national reality. State terror has arrived.

Please look at this list with me. Since early January, when Immigration and Customs Enforcement expanded its operation in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., federal officers have: killed Renee Good, a white middle-class mother; menaced a pregnant immigration lawyer in her firm's parking lot; detained numerous U.S. citizens, including one who was dragged out of his house in his underwear; smashed in the windows of cars and detained their occupants, including a U.S. citizen who was on her way

to a medical appointment at a traumatic brain injury center; set off crowd-control grenades and a tear gas container next to a car that contained six children, including a 6-month-old; swept an airport, demanding to see people's papers and arresting more than a dozen people who were working there; detained a 5-year-old. And now they have killed another U.S. citizen, Alex Jeffrey Pretti, an I.C.U. nurse with no criminal record. It seems he was white. The agents had him down on the ground, subdued, before they apparently fired at least 10 shots at point-blank range.

Confronted with a list like this — a deluge like this — we look for details that might explain why these people were subjected to this treatment, details that might reassure us that we, by contrast, are not in danger. Good was in a relationship with a woman, and her partner, who is butch, spoke impertinently to an ICE officer, so there, Good wasn't your average white mother after all. Chongly Thao, the man who was dragged out of his house in his underwear, is an immigrant from Laos; he is not white, and presumably he speaks with an accent. The woman on her way to the medical appointment and the family with six kids drove through areas where anti-ICE protests were taking place. The 5-year-old child's family doesn't have permanent

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ANGELINA KATSANIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

OPINION

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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Learn Mandarin in a word: He, she, they, them and us

John McWhorter

The rapid growth (and partial retreat) of “they” and “them” has gotten a lot of attention in recent years, but English is hardly the only language that has been experimenting with a gender-neutral singular pronoun. The French have tried fusing “il” (he) and “elle” (she) into “iel,” while the prettiest example to me is Portuguese’s “elu,” where “ele” is “he” and “ela” is “she.”

It’s happening in Mandarin Chinese as well, with the new character X也, which combines the Roman letter X with an element that’s present in the word for both “he” and “she.” It emerged in 2015, but until recently there was no graceful way to type it, a fact that slowed its adoption. That changed last September when the character was added to Unicode, the international standard of digital characters and symbols.

Many English speakers have trouble with “they” and “them” because using them as singular rather than plural challenges deeply entrenched speech habits. X也 may prove to be easier to adopt, since it’s pronounced “ta” — which is how the words for both “he” and “she” are pronounced. So in one sense the new word just

This one novel word speaks volumes about how an entire language works.

formalizes something that was already familiar to every toddler. That versatility of “ta” is an example of something intriguing about Mandarin:

It leaves a lot to context. The language has no definite article, no “the.” Marking things as plural is often optional, as is indicating whether something happened in the past or the present. To say “The relationships among the Seven Warring States were constantly changing,” in Mandarin, you can put it as “Relationship between Warring States is constant change.”

Most languages nail things down with much greater specificity. One way they do so is by dividing nouns into genders. In Spanish, for example, “sombbrero,” or hat, is masculine but “luna,” or moon, is feminine. Many languages also have complex rules about how to conjugate verbs, and some go even further, with declensions and the like, all to ensure that every word of a sentence functions in a specific and unmistakable way.

English is a different story. Like Mandarin, it leaves much up to context. Most of our words keep the same form regardless of how they function in a given sentence: A hat is a hat is a hat whether it’s the subject or the object or anything else. We barely even conjugate verbs, in most cases just adding an “s” for the third person singular. (I love; he loves.)

For Anglophones who are used to that model, in which meaning is deduced from context, languages in which meaning is derived more precisely, through detailed grammatical

rules, can be challenging. That’s especially relevant at this time of year, when so many people make New Year’s resolutions to learn a new language. At a minimum a lot of them download language-learning apps, far more in January than in any other month.

If you’re one of the many people who contribute to the annual statistic, keep all this in mind as you begin your study. Learning a new language will require more than memorizing new words and expressions. Mastery comes when you wrap your head around patterns.

English has only three suffixes that indicate where in time something happens: “-s” for the present, “-ing” for the ongoing and “-ed” for the past. The language you are learning will probably not be that relaxed. It’s also likely to be more persnickety than English about marking whether something is a subject instead of an object. And in your new language, pronouns probably change shape depending on whether they’re being used to describe doing something, like kicking a ball, or feeling something, like being cold. There’s lots of that in Russian, for example.

My New Year’s resolution is to work harder at learning Chinese. I’m not looking to become fluent — my goal is just to read the language at the level of an 8-year-old. That’s as good as I will ever need, or likely be able, to get.

To do so, I’ve been using Chinese-Pod, which I heartily recommend for learning to speak and, especially, understand the language, and the amazing Du Chinese for learning to read it. But whatever language you’re learning, sometimes you need to get beyond apps. In that vein, I have an unusual suggestion: Once you’ve achieved a modest level of comprehension, spend some time watching “Peppa Pig.”

Yes, I mean the children’s cartoon. It’s been dubbed into over 40 languages, and the translations are all over YouTube. Because the animation is so simple, the show is more about talking than action, and because it’s for children, the language is elementary and tidy. It’s a great way to get a sense of how to put everyday sentences together. In a one-minute scene, I counted six things about Mandarin that are key to basic communication, such as that question words like “how” go at the end of the sentence instead of the beginning; that prepositions can go after, rather than before, nouns; and that Mandarin uses little words like “ma,” “ba” and “a” to convey nuances that English communicates with expressions like “Go ahead and . . .” and “Ohhhh . . . !”

The convergence of “he,” “she” and “it” is another example of what makes Chinese distinct. I always encourage my linguistics students to see how many different ways languages can work. Look to Russian to see how extravagant a language can be in the ways it conveys meaning, and then Chinese to see how economical. Exhibit A? X也!

JOHN MCWHORTER is an associate professor of linguistics at Columbia University.



PABLO DELCAN

State terror has arrived in the United States

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status. Little is known about Pretti at this writing, but his father said he did participate in protests and he might have been carrying a gun (legally).

We don’t focus on these details in order to justify the federal agents’ actions, which are plainly brutal and unjustifiable; we do it to force the world to make sense, and to calm our nerves. If we don’t talk back, if we alter our routes to avoid protests, if we are lucky enough to be white, straight, natural-born Americans — or, if we are not, but we lie low, stay quiet — we will be safe. Conversely, we can choose to speak up, to go to protests, to take a risk. Either way, we tell ourselves, if we can predict the consequences, we have agency.

But that’s not how state terror works.

In the 1990s, when I talked to people in the former Soviet Union about their families’ experiences of Stalinist terror, I was repeatedly struck by how much

Even in brutally repressive regimes, including those of the Soviet colonies in Eastern Europe, one knew where the boundaries of acceptable behavior lay.

people seemed to know about their circumstances. Time and time again, people would tell me exactly what had led to their family members’ arrests or executions. Jealous neighbors had reported them to the authorities, or colleagues who had been arrested named them under duress. These stories had been passed on from

generation to generation. How could they come to know so much, I wondered. They couldn’t. People crafted narratives out of suspicions, rumors and hints, to fill a desperate need for an explanation.

My favorite book about state terror is Lydia Chukovskaya’s “Sofia Petrovna,” a short Russian novel that has been translated into English. The protagonist, a middle-aged woman loyal to Stalin’s Communist Party, loses her mind trying to make sense of her son’s arrest. My own family history contains a corollary. After the secret police arrested most of the senior staff at the newspaper where my grandfather was a deputy editor, he waited for the knock on his door. When the secret police failed to show up night after night,



DAVID GUTTENFELDER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

week after week, he became so distressed that he checked himself into a mental institution. It could be that was how he avoided arrest. Or it could be that the secret police had filled their quota of arrests for that month.

For this was the secret about the secret police that became clear when the K.G.B. archives were opened (briefly) in the 1990s: They were ruled by quotas. Local squadrons had to arrest a certain number of citizens so they could be designated enemies of the people. That the officers often swept up groups of colleagues, friends and family members was probably a matter of convenience more than anything else. Fundamentally, the terror was random. That is, in fact, how state terror works.

The randomness is the difference between a regime based on terror and a regime that is plainly repressive. Even in brutally repressive regimes, including those of the Soviet colonies in Eastern Europe, one knew where

the boundaries of acceptable behavior lay. Open protest would get one arrested; kitchen conversation would not. Writing subversive essays or novels or editing underground journals would get one arrested; reading these banned works and quietly passing them on to friends probably would not. A regime based on terror, on the other hand, deploys violence precisely to reinforce the message that anyone can be subjected to it.

When we think of the terror regimes of the past, it is tempting to superimpose a logical narrative on them, as though totalitarian leaders had an extermination to-do list and worked their way through it methodically. This, I think, is how most people understand Martin Niemöller’s classic poem “First They Came.” In reality, though, the people living under those regimes never knew which group of people would be designated an enemy of the state next.

In Niemöller’s day, terror was carried out by the secret police and the paramilitary forces — especially the SA, more commonly known as the Brownshirts — whose job it was to instill fear in the population. In 1934, Adolf Hitler had an estimated 150 to 200 members of the SA’s own leadership arrested and its top generals executed in the ultimate demonstration that no one was immune from the state’s deadly violence. Stalin regularly carried out similar purges. Terror itself was not the end goal of those regimes, but nothing that followed would have been possible without it.

The toolbox isn’t particularly varied. President Trump is using all the instruments: the reported quotas for ICE arrests; the paramilitary force made up of thugs drunk on their own brutality; the spectacle of random violence, particularly in city streets; the post-mortem vilification of the victims. It’s only natural that our brains struggle to find logic in what we are seeing. There is a logic, and this logic has a name. It’s called state terror.

Greenland and the scars that linger

KERRY, FROM PAGE 1

sulted Canada and announced that he would bury the country in tariffs, our neighbor to the north has inked a deal to open its market to China’s electric vehicles, an agreement likely worth billions of dollars to Beijing, not Detroit.

Even if the economic case for preserving our trans-Atlantic relationships were less compelling, history shows why it is dangerous to return to a 19th-century-style system of spheres of influence. Territorial disputes among major powers grasping for empire led to some 20 million people being killed in World War I. Another 60 to 70 million lives were lost — 3 percent of the world’s population — in World War II.

Nothing remotely similar has happened since. Hatred, rivalries, greed and extremism didn’t disappear. But postwar institutions and alliances, led by a United States committed to a cooperative international order, restrained those malign instincts. America built the greatest national security insurance in the history of humanity.

A world in which major powers revise maps without cause and subjugate local peoples is more perilous. Every time an American president implies borders and sovereignty are outmoded conventions to be erased at will, President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Xi Jinping of China gain moral latitude. We can easily imagine them invoking the language of President Trump to justify the pursuit of their long-sought trophies in Kyiv and Taipei.

America needs relationships to tackle a wide range of big global issues, too. Artificial intelligence has enormous potential but needs international guardrails so madmen do not use it for malign purposes. Individual



ILLUSTRATION BY SAM WHITNEY/THE NEW YORK TIMES; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY IGOR KUTYAEV/GETTY IMAGES

nations going it alone cannot address challenges such as disease, climate change, energy security, critical mineral supply, migration flows or Russian and Chinese expansionism.

Republican and Democratic presidents have worked hard over the post-World War II decades to shed the image of an imperialist power. Now America is sending messages about seeking a 21st-century empire that stretches from Greenland to South America.

Previous presidents were right, and

Mr. Trump is wrong. Members of the House and Senate — indeed, all leaders who value alliances and peace — should not let the lessons of the Greenland fracas pass unheeded. We must stand up for a world that needs a renewed multilateral moment. Otherwise we will by default accept a world in which our friends move on as best they can without us. America alone is not America first.

JOHN F. KERRY was the U.S. secretary of state from 2013 to 2017.

FROM READERS

Our phone choices: Color or not, smart or dumb

Re “I killed color on my phone. The result surprised me,” by Julia Angwin (Opinion, Dec. 27):

Ms. Angwin’s relief at switching her phone to black and white is real — but as a 19-year-old with a grayscale phone for six years, I know it doesn’t last. I see black-and-white filters as a placebo, offering only temporary relief.

I made the change for the same reasons Ms. Angwin cites: awareness of my phone’s dangers. I’ve lost thousands of hours of learning and experience to digital use, and I worry that 10-person friend groups glued to their phones have

become a defining image of my generation.

Even with filters, some days I still spend four hours on my phone. While I agree that people should escape the digital world, more effective approaches exist. Cutting down on social media is a good start. It’s one way I use my phone as a resource rather than letting it use me. The most meaningful choice isn’t the color of my phone — it’s deciding to focus on the people and moments around me. JACOB GOROFF, CHICAGO

More stories about the life changes caused by smartphones:

Neighbors used to exchange a few pleasantries riding down the elevator. Now each has his nose in his phone,

giving barely a nod to the next fellow.

Before a concert or a lecture, old folks in the audience used to chat. Now, they are poking at their phones.

People used to criticize old married couples as having nothing to say to each other in restaurants. Now they are the only ones talking to each other! On and on . . . SHIRLEY SMITHBERG, NEW YORK

There is a reason I have a dumb flip phone. It makes telephone calls and nothing else. I don’t want a telephone that is smarter than I am.

While I have had a computer available to me since the mid-1970s, I know that real life is a lot more fun. BILL RUCK, SAN FRANCISCO

Calling out the same lie

KLEIN, FROM PAGE 9

Thus the sign helps the greengrocer to conceal from himself the low foundations of his obedience, at the same time concealing the low foundations of power. It hides them behind the facade of something high.

Trumpism does not hide behind the facade of something high. Part of Trump’s appeal is that he offers his venality as a thuggish honesty: This is what everyone is doing. I’m the only guy willing to admit it. Voters believe that politicians are corrupt. Trump proves them right by flaunting his own corruption; his success confirms their disgust with the system and the need for a champion who has mastered its rules.

This is both a lie and a weakness. It is a lie because Trump’s worldview is not universally shared. Relatively few people are as nakedly transactional or thoroughly corrupt as Trump. And it is a weakness because it creates a hunger for its opposite.

There is a reason Carney’s speech lit such a fire: Carney was, himself, taking a risk. He was, himself, acting against self-interest. He was, himself, showing that he intended to do something more with his power than profit off it. It was a bracing speech, but more than that, it was a brave act. It was the kind of act that Trumpism suggests does not exist, the kind of act that rebuts Trumpism by simply existing.

I am not saying this will go well or easily for Carney — or for other world leaders who choose to take down their signs. Trump is vengeful, and he is right that America can inflict terrible harm on any country it chooses.

But Carney is right that America’s power is, in part, dependent on the willingness of other countries to be entwined with our might. “Hegemons cannot continually monetize their relationships,” Carney warned, “Allies will diversify to hedge against uncertainty. They’ll buy insurance, increase options in order to rebuild sovereignty — sovereignty that was once grounded in rules, but will be increasingly anchored in the ability to withstand pressure.” This is the path Canada is already following, in part through seeking closer ties with China and Qatar.

The world is built on relationships, not leverage, and relationships are built on reciprocity and respect. It is not Trump’s genius to recognize America’s unused strength; it is his blindness to see that our strength was a function of our restraint.

COMMENT

Editorials

World will pay higher volatility bill for cost-benefit calibration of US defense

The United States Department of War released its 2026 National Defense Strategy on Friday, marking a departure from the 2022 version issued under the Joe Biden administration. A comparison of the two documents reveals not a retreat of US power as some suggest — the US leader has vowed to raise the country's military budget from \$1 trillion to \$1.5 trillion by the fiscal year 2027 — but rather a deliberate recalibration of how the US seeks to extract maximum strategic and economic returns from its global military posture under the banner of “America First”.

The earlier strategy framed the US defense policy as a values-driven enterprise. It emphasized upholding a “rules-based international order” and underscored alliance solidarity. The US leadership was portrayed as being indispensable to global stability, providing the “rationale” for extensive overseas commitments and sustained military investment across multiple theaters.

The 2026 strategy replaces the moralistic narrative with a distinctly utilitarian logic. The document redefines the US defense strategy through the prism of calculated costs, benefits and returns. Homeland security and US interests in the Western Hemisphere are elevated to top priority, while regions deemed to offer diminishing strategic dividends are subject to burden-shifting and conditional engagement.

This shift is evident in the report's first pillar: “ensuring control over key areas of the Western Hemisphere”. The document states that the US will guarantee military and commercial access to “critical areas from the Arctic to South America”, explicitly naming Greenland, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Panama Canal. This focus aligns with the US administration's revived interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine and has already been reflected its military and coercive actions against Venezuela and heightened pressure on other Latin American countries.

Compared with the previous administration's defense strategy, which stressed so-called “cooperation” and “multilateral engagement” in the Americas, the 2026 strategy prioritizes unilateral control. Latin America is no longer treated primarily as a partnership zone, but as a strategic “neighborhood” where compliance is demanded. The document warns that if neighbors fail to defend what Washington defines as “shared interests”, the US is prepared to take “targeted, decisive action”.

Manila should see potential behind goodwill

The recent maritime rescue operation near China's Huangyan Island, in which the China Coast Guard saved 17 Filipino sailors from a shipwreck, is a reminder that humanity should still shine even when there is a shadow over some areas of bilateral ties.

Notwithstanding the underlying tensions in the waters, this humanitarian act by the CCG, alongside the People's Liberation Army Southern Theater Command, exemplified China's commitment to international maritime laws and the moral obligation to assist those in distress.

This was not an isolated incident. Just a month ago, on Dec 25, a PLA Navy destroyer provided “swift humanitarian assistance” to a Filipino fisherman who had been stranded at sea for three days. The challenge now is to turn these moments of assistance into a consensus that bilateral differences should be resolved through consultation.

China and the Philippines have already reached a preliminary consensus on creating a road map to manage tensions in the South China Sea. This framework could serve as a foundation for addressing disputes through dialogue, focusing on areas of mutual interest such as trade, environmental protection and maritime safety. The ongoing negotiations for a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea further highlight the potential for a cooperative approach to regional security.

China's ambassador to the Philippines, Jing Quan, emphasized the importance of dialogue over discord at a recent embassy reception in Manila when he called for resolving differences through diplomatic means. The message resonates with the broader goal of regional stability and offers the necessary space for advancing relations.

As this year's chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Philippines is well-positioned to play its due role in facilitating multilateral discussions. By maintaining a balanced foreign policy, Manila can help foster an environment conducive to peaceful dialogue. A balanced approach is crucial for creating a stable and prosperous Southeast Asia.

It is essential for Manila to recognize that the

Another difference is the way that alliances are viewed. The previous administration viewed allies as force multipliers bound together by “shared values”. The current administration, however, openly criticizes allies for long-term dependence on the US security umbrella, demanding that they “assume more responsibility”. Europe, in particular, is viewed as a region whose share of global economic power is “shrinking”, signaling a decline in its strategic importance in US calculations.

The recalibration of the US defense strategy has already shaped the US policy toward NATO and the Ukraine crisis as the US administration is pressing allies to pay for the US' protection. This will no doubt reinforce European anxieties about US disengagement.

Nowhere is the US administration's transactional mindset clearer than in the complete absence of any mention of China's Taiwan region in the new document. By avoiding explicit commitments, the administration preserves strategic ambiguity while it continues to leverage arms sales and economic “arrangements” for tangible returns. Taiwan island, in this framework, is “valued” for its economic resources and high-tech industries rather than for strategic benefits. The same cost-benefit logic applies to other regions.

At the same time, the strategy places strong emphasis on strengthening the US defense industrial base, highlighting investment in advanced capabilities such as hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence and unmanned systems. This focus reflects both the changing character of modern warfare and an economic-centric approach aimed at revitalizing US manufacturing while “decoupling” critical supply chains from China.

The strategic attention given to Greenland's rare earth resources further illustrates the US' effort to reduce dependence on Chinese supply chains in areas it considers vital, while showing less urgency in noncritical sectors.

Taken together, the 2026 NDS underscores an obvious transformation. What appears to be a “contraction” of the US defense perimeter is in fact a reorientation toward absolute dominance in certain selected regions, particularly the Western Hemisphere. This is not a weakening of US ambition, but a sharpening of its edge. The US administration seeks to maintain the US hegemony at a lower cost. It is an approach that is likely to inject greater uncertainty into an already volatile international landscape.

South China Sea issue is but one aspect of the Sino-Philippine relationship. Economic ties, infrastructure development and cultural exchanges continue to bond the two nations. China's role as the Philippines' largest trading partner and its involvement in infrastructure projects demonstrate the tangible benefits of practical cooperation.

However, moving forward, it is imperative that the Ferdinand Marcos Jr government exercise restraint and refrain from escalating tensions. A recent statement by the Philippine Coast Guard, which falsely claimed that the area where the vessel capsized is “within the Philippine exclusive economic zone”, does not help build mutual trust.

Both nations should keep communication channels open and build trust through consistent and transparent dialogue. This approach aligns with both countries' long-term interests and contributes to the broader goal of regional peace and stability.

China and other regional countries have maintained their joint efforts to resolve their maritime disputes through dialogue and negotiation. The Philippines should heed their experience, stop trying to drive a wedge between China and other countries, and join the regional endeavors to responsibly handle the disputes in the South China Sea.

The relationship between China and the Philippines should be characterized by mutual respect, cooperation and a joint commitment to peaceful coexistence. This is not merely a vision but a pragmatic pathway to a more stable and prosperous future for both nations and the broader region.

The recent maritime rescues are more than just isolated acts of goodwill. They remind us that in spite of complex geopolitical challenges stoked by external forces in the region, there exists a shared humanity. It is up to the Marcos Jr government to seize this moment and work with China and other regional countries toward a future where dialogue and collaboration prevail over discord and confrontation.

Jin Ding



Opinion Line

U23 team rekindles hopes that Chinese soccer can revitalize

A 0-4 defeat is rarely a cause for celebration. But although China's U23 soccer team lost to defending champion Japan 0-4 in the final of the 2026 AFC U23 Asian Cup in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Saturday, its performance in the competition has lifted the spirits of Chinese soccer fans.

Thanks to its solid defense and the heroics of goalkeeper Li Hao, the Chinese team overcame formidable opponents in the knockout rounds. In the penalty shoot-out against Uzbekistan in the quarterfinals, 21-year-old Li maintained his composure and confidence, unfazed by the missed penalties by his teammates. Such poise and self-assurance have been rare for Chinese national soccer teams in recent years. As noted in a congratulatory message from the General Administration of Sport of China, the team has borne the mission on its shoulders — rejuvenating the hopes for Chinese soccer.

At the same time, the 0-4 scoreline in the final laid bare the gap between Chinese soccer and the top level in Asia. It was a sobering reminder that reviving Chinese soccer cannot be done overnight. Yet recognizing that should not diminish what this team has achieved.

Japan's soccer success is deeply rooted in its comprehensive and well-structured youth training programs, which emphasize technical skills, tactical understanding and mental fortitude from a young age. These programs are supported by a robust league system.

In contrast, China's youth training system has historically faced challenges such as inconsistent coaching quality, insufficient competitive platforms and a lack of long-term developmental strategies. Addressing these issues is crucial for China to narrow the gap with Japan and other soccer giants.

In 2015, the State Council issued a plan for the reform and development of Chinese soccer, which explicitly proposed building a dual-track system of “popularization plus improvement” with schools as the foundation. Many of the players currently active on the field have benefited from the youth training system.

With a larger base of soccer participants and smoother selection channels, Chinese soccer is naturally poised to make progress.

In the past year, although the national soccer team's attempt to qualify for the World Cup failed, the

Chinese Super League attracted more than 6.18 million spectators, setting a new record. Soccer is playing an increasingly important role in the national economy and people's lives with popular city soccer events, such as those in Jiangsu and Hunan provinces, driving growth in culture, tourism and consumption.

The hope for Chinese soccer lies not only in the potential of young players but in the strengthening of youth training, improving the competition system and providing more high-quality match opportunities for young players.

The U23 team's runner-up finish is not an end point but a starting point. These players have been tested in the cauldron of international competition and tasted the bitterness of defeat, but they have also gained invaluable experience. Chinese soccer may still face ups and downs, but this young team gives us reason to believe that as long as we stay on the right path, acknowledge our gaps and work diligently, Chinese soccer can eventually emerge from the shadows and, in time, compete with the best on the global stage.

— LEI LEI, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Clean energy transition challenge and opportunity

Editor's note: Jan 26 is the International Day of Clean Energy and the founding day of the International Renewable Energy Agency. United Nations News spoke to Li Sheng, director-general of the China Renewable Energy Engineering Institute; Fang Li, country director of the World Resources Institute China; and Fu Yongfeng from the China Southern Power Grid on the development of clean energy in China. Below are excerpts of the interviews. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

As countries around the world accelerate their transition to green energy, research organizations such as the World Resources Institute play a vital role in building a bridge between scientific understanding and policy consensus. They also provide tools and methodologies to develop more consistent and mutually recognized standards, thereby minimizing the overall costs and supporting capacity building in different countries.

Organizations such as the China Renewable Energy Engineering Institute step in at this stage. Their task is to strengthen overall planning, prepare policy recommendations on energy development and provide credible research support. By doing so, they help Chinese energy enterprises expand overseas and support host governments in advancing the development of green and clean energy.

Enterprises can then take charge of operations, management and service delivery. Enterprises are indispensable not only as investors, but also as advocates of new development concepts and practitioners of service-oriented approaches. It is through their investment and implementation that more people can share the dividends of clean energy.

However, there are several challenges during implementation and operation. The first challenge is the structural tension within energy sys-

tems. Renewable energy sources such as wind and solar are inherently intermittent and volatile, with their output heavily influenced by weather and seasonal conditions. The existing power grids lack the flexibility and regulatory capacity required to fully accommodate large-scale and high-proportion integration of renewables.

At the same time, deep decarbonization on the consumption side remains particularly difficult. Some industries such as steel, cement and chemicals, as well as heavy transport, aviation and shipping, still rely heavily on fossil fuels. Alternative technologies are in the early stages of development and often come with high costs.

The second challenge concerns bottlenecks in key technologies and industry chains. While wind and solar technologies are relatively mature, frontier areas, including high-efficiency photovoltaic cells, long-duration energy storage, smart grid dispatch and the hydrogen industry chain, still face problems related to core materials, critical components and technological readiness.

The third challenge is financial pressure and economic viability. Clean energy projects typically require a large investment and have long payback periods. So, there is a strong demand for long-term, low-cost financing. However, against the

backdrop of slowing global economic growth and rising interest rates, financing costs have increased while some developing countries face an acute shortage of capital.

As a result, countries differ significantly in their needs and capacities for clean energy development, making it difficult to mount a unified response to climate change. This underscores the importance of enhanced international cooperation, including closer collaboration with think tanks and financial institutions, to jointly address these issues and overcome shared challenges.

The green and low-carbon transition of the energy system is an irreversible global trend. Acting sooner rather than later is essential to seize this historic opportunity. Countries that hesitate risk falling behind the early movers.

The energy transition is not an option but a mandatory task tied to sustainable development. It should not be seen as a burden, but as a major opportunity to drive economic growth, improve people's well-being and enhance national competitiveness.

Clean energy means cleaner air, healthier lives and more job opportunities. It also means greater energy security through localized supply, stronger competitiveness for low-carbon products and new opportunities for countries to innovate together through cooperation.

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Contact us at:

China Daily
15 HuiXin Dongjie Chaoyang District,
Beijing 100029
News: +86 (0)10 6491-8366
editor@chinadaily.com.cn
Advertisement: +86 (0)10 6491-8631
ads@chinadaily.com.cn
Subscription: +86-400-699-0203
subscription.chinadaily.com.cn
App: www.chinadaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

China Daily UK
90 Cannon St, London EC4N 6HA, UK
+44 (0) 207 398 8270
editor@chinadailyuk.com

China Daily Asia Pacific
China Daily Hong Kong
Unit 1818, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan
Praya Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong
+852 2518 5111
editor@chinadailyhk.com
editor@chinadailyasia.com

China Daily USA
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,
New York, NY 10036
+1 212 537 8888
editor@chinadaillyusa.com

China Daily Africa
P.O. Box 27281-00100, Nairobi, Kenya
+254(0)20 692 0900 (Nairobi)
editor@chinadailyafrica.com
enquiries@chinadailyafrica.com
subscription@chinadailyafrica.com

VIEWS

Teshome Toga Chanaka

Diplomacy tradition boosts China-Africa ties

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Ethiopia from Jan 7 to 9, undertaken as part of the long-standing tradition of Chinese foreign ministers making Africa their first destination of the New Year, is significant both in its timing and substance. For the past 36 years, China has consistently prioritized Africa in this symbolic diplomatic practice. Yet the value of this tradition extends well beyond symbolism. It provides an opportunity for an engagement between China and its African partners for bilateral cooperation and recalibration of strategic priorities in light of evolving global and regional dynamics.

Ethiopia remains one of the most frequently visited African countries in this annual diplomatic tour, a reflection of its strategic importance in China's diplomacy. The itinerary underscores China's differentiated engagement with key African partners.

Since the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation 26 years ago, relations between Ethiopia and China have evolved from basic economic and technical cooperation into a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership in 2017 and into an all-weather strategic partnership in 2023. What began as a modest engagement in aid, trade and technical assistance has expanded into a broad-based strategic partnership aligned with the development priorities of both countries.

The durability and depth of the partnership rest on several core principles: equality between partners, equity in relations, mutual respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. These values have played a pivotal role in cultivating trust and sustaining cooperation. In diplomatic practice, treating each other as equals means the absence of political conditionalities, external imposition or interference in domestic affairs. China's engagement with Ethiopia, characterized by flexibility, respect for Ethiopia's policy choices, and alignment with nationally defined priorities, has made China a development partner of choice.

China's unprecedented transformation over the past four decades is an inspiration for many countries in the Global South, including Ethiopia. Ethiopia's interest in learning from and benchmarking China's development experience has encouraged extensive interaction between the two sides. However, Ethiopia has never sought to replicate the Chinese development or governance model wholesale, given the contextual differences in history, culture and political economy.

The launch of FOCAC in 2000 coincided with Ethiopia's growing emphasis on economic diplomacy. Ethiopia's active participation in FOCAC activities and China's major global initiatives provided

strong momentum for enhancing bilateral relations. Within the context of their respective national priorities, both countries have found strategic value in each other. The Ethiopia-China partnership has thus acquired symbolic significance as a successful model of South-South cooperation.

Ethiopia's growth and transformation plans and, more recently, the homegrown economic reform agenda clearly articulate the country's priorities in engaging with China. Key focus areas include infrastructure development, industrialization, foreign direct investment, trade, technology transfer and development financing.

China's contribution to Ethiopia's infrastructure development is unparalleled.

For over a decade, China has consistently ranked first among sources of FDI in Ethiopia. According to data from the Ethiopian Investment Commission, nearly half of Ethiopia's FDI inflows originate from China. Chinese enterprises have played a critical role in the development of industrial parks and in advancing Ethiopia's industrialization drive.

Trade between Ethiopia and China has also expanded significantly, mirroring the broader growth of China-Africa trade. However, the persistent trade imbalance in China's favor reminds us the need for enhanced efforts in value addition, improvement in productivity and diversification in exports. At the same time, the expansion of China's middle income group and consumer market presents

substantial opportunities for Ethiopian exports, particularly in agro-processing and manufactured goods.

Looking ahead, cooperation in the digital economy, artificial intelligence, mining and people-to-people exchanges aligns well with Ethiopia's evolving priorities and offers significant potential for further deepening bilateral engagement.

During my tenure as Ethiopian ambassador to China from 2019 to 2022, I experienced Wang Yi's visit to Ethiopia twice. The first was in 2019, where he focused on bilateral relations as well as regional and global issues of mutual concern. His 2021 visit, however, stands out for its political significance. Conducted amid the conflict in northern Ethiopia, it demonstrated solidarity with the Ethiopian government and people at a time when many Western countries were evacuating their citizens.

That visit sent an unmistakable message: China does not abandon its partners in times of difficulty. This stance reflects China's long-standing foreign policy principles of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The timing of this year's visit was equally significant. It came at a moment of heightened regional and global uncertainty. Developments in the Horn of Africa unfolding, including tensions related to maritime access and questions of sovereignty, as well as broader global challenges to international governance, are issues of mutual concern to both Ethiopia and China. Ethiopia's support for several Chinese initiatives including the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilization Initiative and the Global Governance Initiative was reassured.

The one-China principle was reaffirmed by the Ethiopian government. Ethiopia's quest for access to the sea was addressed within the framework of maritime logistics and emphasized through diplomatic and peaceful dialogue. Respect for the United Nations Charter was referred to more than once, while the opposition to external interference subtly addressed the situation in Venezuela.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Ethiopia reinforces the depth, resilience and strategic nature of the Ethiopia-China all-weather strategic partnership. Beyond diplomatic symbolism, the visit reflects shared principles, converging interests, and a mutual commitment to navigating an increasingly complex regional and global environment. As Ethiopia advances its ambitious development agenda, and as China continues to recalibrate its engagement with Africa, the partnership remains a cornerstone of South-South cooperation and a model for equitable and mutually beneficial international relations.

The author is former ambassador of Ethiopia to China. The views don't necessarily reflect those of China Daily.



Kang Bing

The author is former deputy editor-in-chief of China Daily. kangbing@chinadaily.com.cn

Oh deer, what a comeback for wildlife

Driving to Beijing's Nanhaizi Park for a weekend outing, my family and I wanted to enjoy the beautiful scenery and visit the park's most famous resident, the milu deer. But our excursion did not go as planned. Instead of deer, we ended up seeing hundreds of wild geese and many other birds on the lake beach near the park's entrance.

The Nanhaizi Park was established to host the milu deer which once roamed in large numbers along the lower reaches of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers. However, by around 1900, the species had almost completely vanished from China, victims of better hunting weapons, shrinking habitats and the famines that plagued the region.

Fortunately, a few dozen milu deer survived, thanks to a British nobleman who had shipped a few deer to Britain where they were bred on his private estate. In the mid-1980s, as a gesture of friendship, 39 deer were sent back to China by the owner and the British government.

To give them a proper habitat as well as to promote wildlife protection, China established a special reserve in the wetlands of northern Jiangsu province. The reserve now hosts about 9,000 milu deer. A smaller group of the returned deer was settled in the southern suburbs of Beijing, in what is now Nanhaizi Park, where some 200 deer live today.

The milu's near extinction about 100 years ago and its present prosperity neatly frame China's difficult but determined journey in wildlife protection.

Smart enough to know that we are not hostile, some of them even came very close to take food from our palms.

When I was a kid 60 years ago, sparrows, magpies, crows and pigeons were the only birds I saw. All other birds had fallen victim to hunting guns, nets and people suffering from hunger. My playmates and I used to shoot down sparrows with air rifles or slingshots. The harvest was roasted and shared among the group, with each person getting about half a sparrow.

Sparrows survived because they are small and provide very little meat. Magpies lived on because Chinese people believe they bring good luck and killing them is a bad omen. Crows, on the other hand, were seen by many as evil birds and we were advised to keep a distance from them. As for pigeons, they were largely home-raised and targeting them would invite retaliation from their owners.

Things began to change for the better after the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Wildlife came into force in 1989, just a few years after the reintroduction of the milu deer. The law has been revised several times since then, each amendment increasing the protection and tightening the enforcement measures. In 2024, the National Forestry and Grassland Administration announced that China now has 789 wildlife habitats, including those for milu deer, giant pandas, crested ibis and Siberian tigers.

My wife insists she once spotted a tiger while walking alone along the Wusuli River last year. Though I think she is kidding, I will not argue. Residents along the China-Russia border do come across tigers and black bears now and then.

When I came to Beijing 43 years ago, the capital's birdlife looked much like the birds I saw in my childhood. But now, a variety of species frequent my balcony where I leave rice, corn and water for them. Watching these beautiful birds from the window has become a daily routine for my family. Statistics released by the relevant administration say that there are now 620 species of wildlife in Beijing, with 527 of them being birds.

But there are challenges too. Reports of boars destroying farmland near the capital and wolves and foxes invading farmhouses for chicken and goats have become common. I look at these reports as good news, but only if people's safety is ensured and their losses sufficiently compensated by the government.

Back at the park, the geese at Shichahai were friendly to people. Smart enough to know that we are not hostile, some of them even came very close to take food from our palms. But the park officials were trying to persuade visitors not to feed the geese and other birds. "If you keep feeding them, they will not migrate to the warm south as destined. That will hurt them."

As wildlife lovers, we immediately stopped feeding them, wishing the birds a safe migration journey so that they come back to this friendly land next year.

Guo Cunhai

US used muscle over mind in Venezuela

The world woke up stunned on Jan 3 to the news of "Operation Absolute Resolve". In brazen defiance of international law and conventional diplomatic conduct, the United States struck the capital of Venezuela, abducted President Nicolas Maduro and his wife and illegally transferred them to New York for what Washington terms as a "trial". Shortly afterward, US President Donald Trump bluntly announced that the US would now "run" Venezuela and tap into the country's oil resources.

Power politics has returned to the Western Hemisphere with a vengeance. This was not an isolated military adventure. The US administration has transformed the state machinery into an instrument of personal and political whim, dismantling the institutional frameworks designed to enable collective action.

The US military action is a rejection of international collective action mechanisms. By circumventing all domestic and international procedures for collective decision-making, the Trump administration adopted the most violent approach. Rules were not seen as sources of legitimacy but as obstacles to unilateral action. The operation effectively asserted that sovereign equality and international law were principles upheld by "losers" while victors now create new ones.

Internationally, this was a flagrant trampling of multilateralism and the

In the process, international politics was dragged into domestic politics and a sovereign nation was reduced to a tool for advancing election agendas.

principle of sovereignty. Washington completely bypassed the United Nations Security Council and the Organization of American States, proceeding without any international authorization. Its so-called legal basis rested solely on the US Department of Justice's charges of "narco-terrorism" against Maduro. By placing domestic law above international law and using it to justify the cross-border abduction of a head of state, the US has set an extremely dangerous precedent.

The irony is striking. Just two months ago, the US pardoned former Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernandez, who had been sentenced to 45 years in prison by a US court for drug trafficking and other charges. This double standard starkly demonstrates the arbitrary manner in which the US treats legal principles.

For the Trump administration, the Venezuela operation served multiple purposes. It removed a geopolitical thorn in its side, asserted what might be called

"symbolic sovereignty" and sent the message that Washington places itself above international rules. It also tested a new paradigm of unconstrained action, which, once established, would sever institutional continuity and reduce international relations to the execution of political will.

The Trump administration intends to "personalize" US foreign and military policy. National interest is deftly re-framed to fit a political slogan — "Make America Great Again" — positioning the administration as a US hero. By portraying Maduro as the mastermind behind the drug inflows and illegal migration into the US, Washington manufactured a tangible external enemy and theatrically "brought him to justice". In trying to stage a heroic return, the operation aimed to craft a dramatic reversal within the narrative of US decline. In the process, international politics was dragged into domestic politics and a sovereign nation was reduced to a tool for advancing election agendas.

The action also blurred the line between commercial and national interests. Trump openly discussed prospects for US companies to take over Venezuelan oil fields. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth explicitly stated that the mission aimed to secure "additional wealth and resources" for the US. By candidly linking military action to commercial exploitation, they laid bare the real motive behind the strike.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

Labour’s destructive infighting

Starmer’s move to block a rival will not avoid months of internal plotting

Faced with a bid from Greater Manchester mayor – and pretender to the Labour leadership – Andy Burnham to fight a by-election that could return him to parliament, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer had no good path. Failing to use Labour rules to block Burnham would have looked weak. But blocking him, as the party’s national executive has done, looks weak too – as if Starmer is running scared of his rival. The decision will not halt Labour’s slide into the infighting and “psychodramas” for which it mocked previous Conservative governments. For a UK battling to rekindle growth and mend public services, this is the last thing the country needs.

Starmer’s decision will prevent Burnham from becoming, within weeks, an alternative leader-in-waiting on the

backbenches, and neutralise him as a challenger if Labour performs as woefully as expected in Scottish and Welsh parliament and English council elections in May. But it risks riling voters and allowing the previously safe Labour seat of Gorton and Denton to fall to Nigel Farage’s Reform UK. That could stoke up speculation around Starmer’s future well before May.

All this only underlines the frailty of Starmer’s, and Labour’s, position. The party’s ruling circle are increasingly taking decisions on the basis of trying to save the prime minister’s job. Eighteen months after winning a resounding electoral majority, Starmer’s flailing performance has made him the least popular premier in memory. Since Starmer seems unable to hold Labour’s majority together whenever he tries to drive through difficult but necessary policies, he can arguably no longer fulfil a prime minister’s core function.

Labour’s instinct to hunt for a replacement who might have time to turn the

government’s fortunes around before the next election is understandable. If there were a credible alternative with a more compelling vision, stronger communication skills and a genuine chance of uniting Labour MPs, it might be worthwhile, for the party and for Britain. None of the likely candidates, however – including Burnham – ticks all those boxes.

Any successful challenge is likely to produce a more leftwing leader, and unsettle financial markets. At best that will limit Labour’s room for manoeuvre; at worst, it could lead to bond market turbulence. The same would be true of replacing chancellor Rachel Reeves – a lever Starmer might in theory pull in an effort to salvage his premiership.

Given the alternatives, the best outcome for the UK might be not a change of prime minister but for Starmer to become a better one. Sadly, there is little sign that he knows how. Despite glimmerings of a vision, and of some political steel, around the time of Labour’s party

Given the alternatives, the best outcome for the UK might be not a change of prime minister but for the incumbent to become a better one

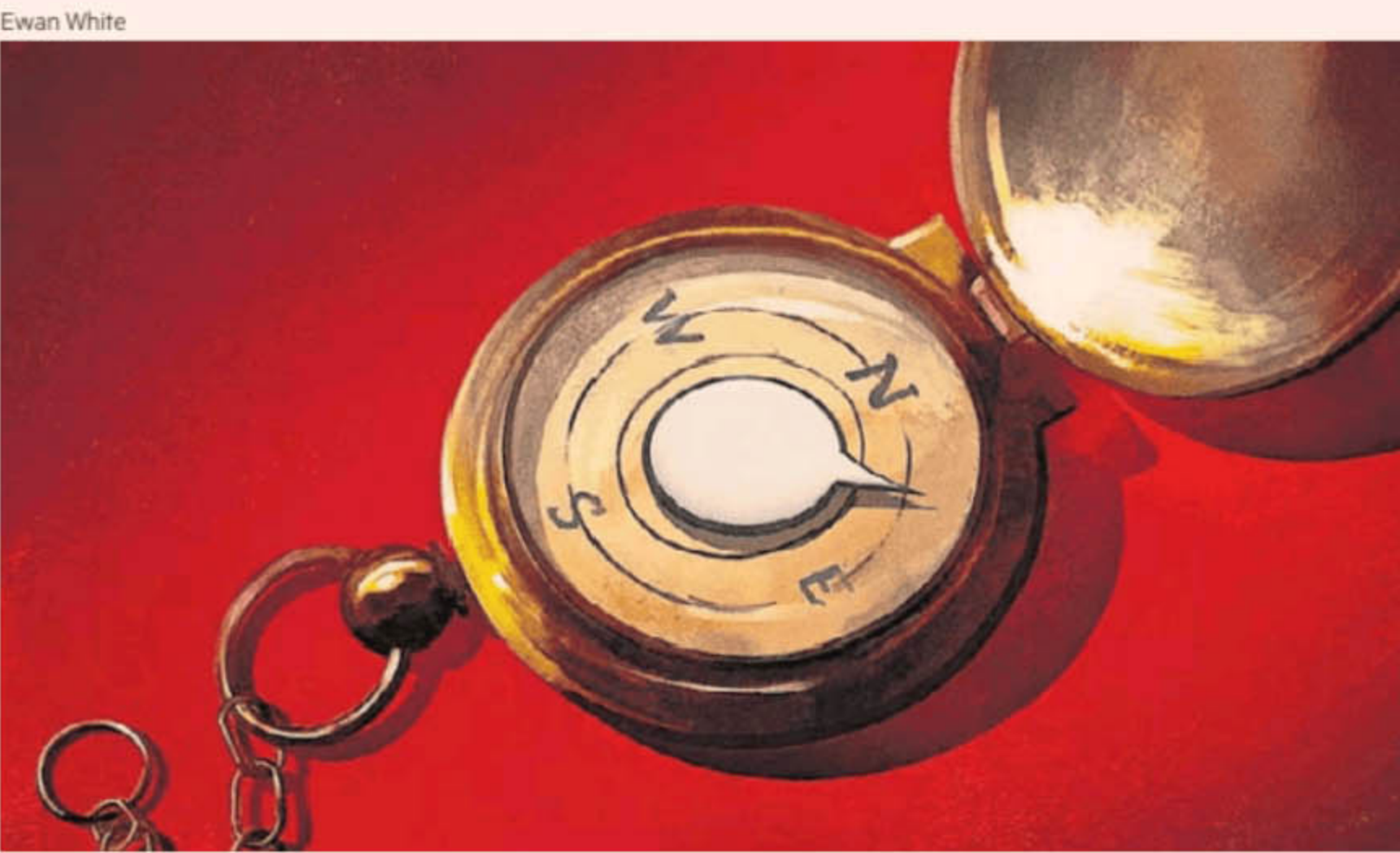
conference last September, Starmer has struggled to raise confidence in his domestic leadership.

Further revamps to his Downing Street team might yet benefit Starmer. For restive Labour MPs, however, redemption is unlikely to lie in months of political infighting culminating in a rebellion that pulls the party leftward. It would risk validating Reform’s claims that the old parties are defined by self-interested incompetence.

If Labour’s results in May are as awful as current polling portends, the clamour to replace Starmer may become deafening. Unless they are certain they have a replacement capable of rebuilding Labour’s majority around a credible programme, however, its MPs should think hard about what is best for them and even more so for the country – whose interests are ultimately indivisible from their own. In a turbulent world, where bond investors are again becoming restive, Britain’s relative stability is one of its main assets.

Opinion Politics

Carney, Trump and the power of a good speech



Does it matter that Mark Carney wrote his excellent speech to Davos himself? In part, it matters because it is demoralising to me personally to learn that the list of jobs that I am worse at than Carney now includes not only central banker, political campaigner, prime minister, university ice hockey player but also writer. But it matters, too, because it is a reminder of a neglected truth, that writing is a core part of providing effective leadership.

Or, more accurately, writing first drafts. Margaret Thatcher delivered many speeches that, like Carney’s, quoted philosophers and drew from history to make points. And although she astutely presented herself as a no-nonsense figure, Thatcher was undoubtedly a first-class intellectual who took the time to engage similarly

the bigger and more complex the organisation you lead, the more important it is that people know what you want without having to ask.

The overwhelming majority of people who need to know what Carney thinks about foreign policy or what German Chancellor Friedrich Merz thinks about, say, transport policy, will never meet them. But whether you are a business, a public official, a charity campaigner or something else entirely, your job is easier if you know what it is that a leader wants and what drives them. Speeches are one of the best tools in a politician’s locker to do that. They allow a leader’s aides to shape what messages they might send out.

Beyond being re-elected and surviving in office, what does Starmer want? It is almost always unclear. He not only did not write the two biggest speeches of his first year in office – his “things will get worse” Rose Garden address and his “island of strangers” speech on migration – but has since disavowed them in conversation with his biographer. In government that is a recipe for confusion and backbiting, for the civil service to lapse not into governing but instead to focus on managing relationships between departments and stakeholders. No one can plan sensibly when the head of the government gives such mixed messages and confusing signals.

By a good speech I don’t mean one I agree with, but one that provides a clear argument and direction. I agreed with Carney’s speech, but what made it good wasn’t the precise content of his arguments but that he set them out clearly and lucidly in a way that anyone can follow and understand. Plenty of speeches have good jokes or tickle the prejudices of their audience, but what truly makes a good speech is one that people can read and then go out into the world with a better understanding of what their leader expects them to do.

For the leader of an organisation, their internal communications are their speeches, sometimes literally, or sometimes metaphorically through global emails or updates on Slack. Leaders who lack confidence in their writing skills should avail themselves of some kind of redrafting system, whether through an aide or by asking ChatGPT to spruce up their ideas. But they shouldn’t fall into the Starmer trap of outsourcing the entire process. The first draft has to come from what the boss actually wants their organisation to do and what they want those working for and with it to understand.

Not every prime minister or CEO needs to be able to weave in classical philosophers, but they do need to be able to set out a vision and a direction that others can follow.

stephen.bush@ft.com

Letters

America’s declining empire: more Vienna 1914 than Suez 1956

Janan Ganesh’s excellent column “Always beware a declining superpower” (Opinion, January 22) nevertheless fails to mention the 20th-century’s most important catastrophe caused by a great power in decline.

The Suez crisis was the “Vienna 1914” moment of the British and French empires. The rulers of declining empires in 1914 and 1956 reacted to growing foreign and domestic challenges with a combination of

arrogance, miscalculation and panic. Anxiety for declining status was compounded by contempt for their “inferior” Slav and Arab challengers.

The key difference was that in 1956 “Big Brother” in Washington said “No”, whereas in 1914 Berlin not only just said “Yes”, but gave Austria a push.

The main cause for this policy was Berlin’s conviction that within a generation Russia would replace Germany as Europe’s most powerful

state. Nonetheless, Ganesh is right not to forget the role of individuals. Far more than any other individual, it was the German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, whose miscalculations led to war.

These miscalculations were rooted in a deeply pessimistic analysis of probable future European geopolitical developments, which owed something to personal anguish caused by the death of his wife shortly before the

assassination of the Habsburg heir at Sarajevo.

Though Bethmann Hollweg was a far more intelligent, balanced and moral leader than Donald Trump, given present geopolitical developments 1914 is a more relevant warning for us than 1956.

Dominic Lieven
Fellow of the British Academy; Honorary and Emeritus Fellow, Trinity College, Cambridge, UK

Why extending the life of Sizewell B is a no-brainer

As Malcolm Moore (“Centrica and EDF in talks to extend life of Sizewell B by 20 years”, Report, January 22) cogently describes in his piece on the offer by EDF and Centrica to invest £800mn if the government guarantees a long-term price for the electricity it produces, Britain is facing the prospect of a declining nuclear output over the next decade, and as a result the “life-extension” of Sizewell B appears to be an obvious next step to slow that decline.

As we await Hinkley Point C and Sizewell C to come online, Sizewell B’s original construction lends itself perfectly to plug the gap. Although the reactor’s design is typically licensed for 40 years, the originally licensed life of the plant and the potential useful life of the plant are two different things.

The principal constraint – neutron embrittlement of the reactor vessel – can be closely predicted and monitored. With proper maintenance, the licence can be renewed and the design can safely generate carbon-free power for up to 60, or even 80 years.

And all that power for the subsequent 20 years will be coming



from an existing asset, not a new power plant with all the challenges that new construction brings.

If ever there were a no-brainer decision, this is it.

Vince Zabielski,
Partner, Pillsbury law firm; and Former Nuclear Engineer and Senior Nuclear Counsel for UAE Nuclear New-build Programme, London EC2, UK

When AI goes wrong and regulators come knocking

The Treasury committee is right to warn of the harm from regulators’ “wait-and-see” approach to AI in financial services (Report, January 20). But the risk lies less in the technology than the data underpinning it.

AI is already influencing credit, insurance and fraud decisions, yet many systems rely on data scattered across different platforms and suppliers. This makes decisions harder to explain or challenge, and leaves companies more exposed when things go wrong, and regulators come knocking. That lack of visibility, combined with growing dependence on a small number of technology providers to store and process critical data, weakens resilience just as regulators are being urged to prepare for an AI-driven market shock.

If AI is to be used safely, guidance should focus on clear access to data, strong governance and the ability to pinpoint what went wrong when problems arise. Without that, AI oversight will struggle to protect consumers or financial stability.

Martin Tombs
Field CTO Emea, Qlik, Wokingham, UK

Raphael’s unicorn

Discovering the world of unicorns through Katherine Rundell’s lens in “Kings, shepherds . . . and unicorns” (The Weekend Essay, December 20) was a multidisciplinary delight. I was quite taken aback – transfixed even – to see the same, aptly described, “stare of adamantine clarity” of Raphael’s “Portrait of Young Woman with Unicorn” used by the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Happy Holidays” card to members.

Raphael’s portrait is one of 200 of the painter’s masterpieces gathered here for the upcoming “Raphael: Sublime Poetry” exhibition, opening on March 29 2026. Rundell may not be able to steal it, as she confessed she would eagerly do if she turned to a life of crime. But she may enjoy seeing it in a different context from its home in Rome’s Galleria Borghese.

I trust the Met will allow visitors to enjoy more of the “wonder” described by GK Chesterton, who acknowledged that “Raphael, as he painted it, probably did not think he was painting something mythic, merely something beautiful that he had not yet seen”.

Candida Clark
Art Historian, New York, NY, US

OUTLOOK

LAS VEGAS

Millennials are cringe and proud



by Niki Blasina

It’s early January and I am on a pilgrimage. To Las Vegas. New year, old me. At the Sphere, the city’s high-tech, immersive entertainment venue, my friends and I are with some 20,000 others intent on recapturing the magic of our youth. We are dressed in white and baby blue, hair tied into spiky pigtails or adorned with butterfly clips, ready to watch a seminal musical act of our adolescence – the Backstreet Boys. Only we’re no longer 15 but 40 years old, with adhesive gems applied to our crow’s feet.

Millennials (those of us born between 1981 and 1996) have, to other generations, become an embarrassing bunch. Our coming-of-age culture is seen as too earnest, too optimistic and too shiny. To those younger than us, for whom being cringe is criminal, millennials are the most egregious offenders. We are considered so uncool that an umbrella term – “millennial cringe” – is now used to cover the behaviours, aesthetics and other habits associated with us. Our nostalgia and comfort fandoms are particularly ripe for mockery.

But millennial cringe should be embraced, not ridiculed. Why not celebrate communal joy in an increasingly divided, lonely world? Millennial cultural touchstones emerged when the world was in a relatively good place. We cling to them now for solace as harsher social and economic pressures accompany us in our transition to middle age.

“If you look at the world that

[millennials] grew up in, it can look naive,” says Charlie Wells, a fellow millennial and author of *What Happened to Millennials: In Defense of a Generation*. “At the time we were preteens, teenagers and coming of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s, culture was really optimistic.” He points to Buffy the Vampire Slayer – the girl next door who trounces evil – and Harry Potter, a nerd who took on and defeated dark forces time and time again.

“It was a reflection of the era and of the economy,” Wells adds. “The stock market was soaring, liberal democracy was presumed to be the final manifestation of forms of government, and you had new ways of accessing media through the internet that initially seemed pretty positive.”

We all know how that turned out. Every generation faces its own set of challenges and as young adults millennials have encountered, in no particular order, stagnant wages and rising costs, surging house prices, a recession, a pandemic, austerity, the rise of the gig economy, increasing political polarisation and the introduction of social media, to name just a few stressors. We are the most educated generation to date. We are also the most indebted. Postgraduate degrees are more financially debilitating than avocado toast.

“Nostalgia is one reaction to such stress,” says Krystine Batcho, a psychology professor at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York. “It provides emotional comfort, social

connectedness and hope.” Nostalgia has taken over social media in recent weeks as users look back to the trends of a decade ago, posting pictures of themselves from 2016.

It is also extremely profitable. The millennial queen of cringe, pop star Taylor Swift, made a record \$2bn in sales during her recent Eras Tour, while rewatches of millennial-era TV programmes like *Friends* are a juggernaut for streaming services and rights holders.

At the Sphere, the Backstreet Boys (or, given the youngest member of the group turns 46 at the end of this month, really the Backstreet Men) are estimated to be pulling in \$4mn per show. Their choreography is a little slower than it was in the early 1990s (yes, they still dance) and their vocals are less pure. But they still deal in teenage-like euphoria. I scream-sang so hard during the 90-minute set that I lost my voice for days afterwards.

It was ridiculous but worth it. “We consume a lot of this nostalgic stuff now but it is with a sense of irony,” Wells says. “It’s fun to reflect on the exuberance of the ’90s but with life experience . . . It’s a marker of how far we’ve come.”

If five 40- and 50-somethings can put on metallic space suits and sequinned duster jackets and perform on stage as “Boys”, to the shrieking delight of their ageing, Spanx-wearing fandom, it’s safe to say that us millennials are in on the joke.

niki.blasina@ft.com

Opinion

Europe is finally waking up to the Trump threat

Sylvie Kauffmann

Donald Trump avoided conscription during the Vietnam war and never served in the military. When four US soldiers died during a training exercise in Lithuania last year, he skipped the ceremony for the repatriation of their coffins at Dover Air Force base, spending the day at his golf club in Mar-a-Lago. His contempt for European troops who fought alongside US forces for 20 years in Afghanistan but, according to him, “stayed a little back, a little off the front lines”, should have come as no surprise. Yet this comment last week proved to be the last straw for European leaders. After a tumultuous week in Davos loaded with more claims of “ownership” of Greenland and new threats of tariffs, some of them decided that they’d had

enough. And then something happened: they protested. Publicly. Insulting the memory of more than 1,000 troops who would still be alive if, indeed, they had stayed “a little back”, touched a raw nerve. This episode not only reveals the depths to which the transatlantic relationship has fallen, it also explains why Europeans are finally pushing back. Caught between the Russian threat to the east, the Maga threat to the west and China lurking in the background, Europe sees those challenges differently. By waging war on Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin threatens Europe’s security; confronting this risk costs money and political capital, but the situation is not unfamiliar. The threat from the Trump administration is more unsettling: it is an assault on Europe’s identity, coming from its own ally. This is unprecedented. To make things worse, by weakening the alliance, Trump heightens the security risk posed by Russia and increases China’s appetite. Modern European identity was built on the ruins of a continent devastated

by war and totalitarianism. The US played a major role in this endeavour – militarily, politically and economically. It became the backbone of a military alliance, Nato, and supported the emergence of the very European Union it is now targeting. Trust was central to this system ruled by a benign hegemon. When European governments sent their troops to

The benign hegemon is now a bully, but Europeans can make him back down

Afghanistan to support their American ally in the wake of 9/11, they did so because they trusted the system. It was the first time that Article 5 of the Nato charter was activated to ensure collective defence. Most likely, it will also be the last. When Trump decides to seize a “piece of ice” which happens to be part of Europe’s territory, when he denies that

Europeans helped American troops, he attacks the foundations of European identity: international law, territorial integrity, liberal values. He destroys the trust which cements an alliance and therefore makes the prospect of a just peace in Ukraine even more precarious. On Afghanistan, he reopens another wound: when the US decided that it was time to leave, it did so without serious consultation with its allies who, presented with a *fait accompli*, had to deal with a catastrophic withdrawal and an abysmal failure. Reminder: it was President Trump who, at the end of his first term, decided to negotiate the withdrawal with the Taliban. Needless to say, the Europeans were not at the table. Chickening out on Greenland or backtracking on Afghanistan with a half-hearted tribute on Truth Social to the “very brave soldiers of the United Kingdom”, without a word for the others, has not helped. The damage is done. Trump has antagonised even far right leaders in Europe and managed to unify France’s fragmented political spectrum against him.

Gradually and then suddenly last week, the transatlantic alliance seemed to founder in the worst crisis of its existence. Around dinner tables on this side of the ocean, people hold surreal conversations about what form of fascism America is descending into and wonder whether Europe can be immune to the contagion. In Davos, Christine Lagarde, the usually placid head of the European Central Bank, stormed out of a dinner when Howard Lutnick, the US commerce secretary, launched another all-out Maga attack against supposed European sins. After so many wake-up calls over the past decade, Europeans seem to be finally doing it. The benign hegemon is now a bully, but they can make him back down. It took a non-European leader to remind them of “the power of the powerless” dear to Václav Havel, the Czech dissident turned president. Europe is not powerless but it has for too long been power-adverse and complacent. Now is the time to de-risk, be brave and find new friends.

The writer is a columnist at Le Monde

Why the Arctic is important for allied security

Alexander Stubb Jonas Gahr Støre

For Norway and Finland, the Arctic is not some distant place. It is our geography, our history, our immediate neighbourhood. It is part of our DNA. We have vibrant cities and communities in the Arctic. Over centuries we have contended with how to make a living here. We have found ways to use its opportunities. We have worked to keep it safe and stable. As leaders of two Arctic countries, we recognise the increasing geostrategic importance of our region, including its significance for allied security. Norway and Finland both neighbour Russia. We have a shared Nordic and European identity. When Finland and Sweden joined Nato, all five Nordic countries became part of the alliance, thereby enhancing Nato’s Arctic profile. Now seven Nato members have territory in the Arctic, the five Nordics, Canada and the US. We have always been present with military, political and diplomatic capacities, not to threaten anyone, but to make sure that nobody threatens us. Nato engagement in the Arctic is both legitimate and nothing new. The Arctic is not a legal vacuum. All basic tenets of international law apply, including the UN Charter and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Although the US has not ratified the convention, it is – together with all Arctic coastal states – a signatory to the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration, which confirms that the rights and the obligations of the Law of the Sea apply in the Arctic. As a result, the Arctic is a well-regulated area. And compared with many

To strengthen Nato’s presence further west, we first need to respect each other’s sovereignty

hotspots around the world, the High North has been characterised by stability. Nevertheless, Russia’s war in Ukraine has increased tensions. One of the largest concentrations of nuclear weapons in the world is located on the Kola Peninsula – close to our borders. These are strategic weapons directed first and foremost against the US. This is also where Russia is testing new weapons systems. Every day, we keep track of these activities – a contribution to collective security that benefits all Nato member states. Looking ahead, we must strengthen our capabilities and preparedness. With melting ice, new sea routes are gradually opening. New actors, like China, are building capacity to operate in the Arctic. The quest for energy and mineral resources is intensifying, although climatic conditions and a lack of infrastructure makes commercial activity difficult. To strengthen Nato’s presence and capability further west in the Arctic, including in Greenland, we first need to respect each other’s borders and sovereignty. We stand with Denmark in our unwavering support for territorial integrity. The future of Greenland is for the Greenlanders and Denmark to decide. On this, there can be no compromise.

Second, we need to further strengthen our common Arctic security and we have a solid base to build on. Regional plans and command structures have been updated. Through large Nato exercises, allied troops get invaluable winter training on our soil. Right now, we are preparing to host “Cold Response”, an exercise that will assemble 25,000 troops from 13 allied countries in northern Norway and Finland. We have modernised our defence capabilities, at sea, in the air and on land – we have trained thousands of our own forces and colleagues from our allies. We have concrete plans to take this further both nationally and collectively. The recent establishment of a Nato Forward Land Force component in the Arctic is testament to this. And over the past year, the seven Arctic allies have driven a process in Nato to further intensify co-operation in this vast region, plans that all allies stand behind. We welcome these efforts, and are ready to engage. Together, as partners in Nato, we can further advance security in the High North. We must use our combined strength as allies to do so.

The writers are President of Finland and Prime Minister of Norway

In Ukraine, it’s all about the land

WORLD AFFAIRS

Gideon Rachman

Could peace in Ukraine finally be on the horizon? Over the weekend trilateral peace talks were held in Abu Dhabi between Russia, Ukraine and the US. This is the first time that has happened since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Encouragingly, the talks did not break down and seem set to reconvene next weekend. For now, the US has successfully positioned itself as an impartial mediator – rather than as a partisan on one side of the conflict. Both the Ukrainians and the Russians are also striving to sound engaged. Speaking in Davos, just before the Abu Dhabi talks, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian president, said that he was now satisfied with the postwar security guarantees offered by the US. The big remaining issue is territory. As Zelenskyy put it: “It’s all about the land. This is the issue which is not solved yet.” Steve Witkoff, Trump’s main negotiator, had a similar assessment, telling his European counterparts in Davos that the peace deal is basically done – apart from the issue of territory. Unfortunately, that is no small matter. Vladimir Putin continues to insist

that the minimum that Russia can accept is possession of the whole of the Donbas. The Russians currently control about 80 per cent of that region. But the remaining 20 per cent is known as Ukraine’s “fortress belt”. It contains fortified lines that the Ukrainians regard as indispensable to protecting their country from any future Russian aggression. In any case, the Ukrainians are bitterly resistant to the idea of surrendering territory that they have lost thousands of lives defending. There is no obvious way around this impasse. There would probably have to be a major shift on the battlefield to force a change in thinking in Moscow or Kyiv. The current assessment by western security officials is that Russia is taking staggering losses in the conflict. It is said that the Russian military sustained 30,000 casualties (killed and wounded) in December alone – with the Ukrainians losing just one soldier for every 25 Russian casualties. These casualty rates are attributed to Ukraine’s skill in drone warfare and to Russia’s “meat-grinder” assaults – which pay little regard to the loss of human life. This horrifying bloodbath has led to a reassessment of the direction of the war in western capitals. Last spring and summer the conventional wisdom – particularly among American officials – seemed to be that Ukraine was doomed to lose a war of attrition and that the collapse of Ukrainian forces could happen quite suddenly. Now there are growing questions



about Russia’s ability to sustain its war effort. For the first time in a while, the Kremlin is struggling to find the new soldiers it needs to replace those lost at the front. The size of signing-on bonuses offered to new recruits has surged – and more foreigners are being sought to fight on the Russian side. The Russian economy is also under increasing pressure – with the government’s financial reserves dwindling, growth faltering and inflation rising. But while all these pressures are rising, western officials see no sign yet of a change of heart in the Kremlin. For Vladimir Putin, conquering the whole of the Donbas still seems to be a minimum requirement. These are also no indication Russia is yet prepared to accept western security guarantees that see European

Kyiv is resistant to the idea of surrendering territory that has cost thousands of lives

troops stationed on Ukrainian soil. The Ukrainian side is also under severe pressure. Russian missile attacks on the country’s energy infrastructure deprived Kyiv and other cities of power and heating last week – when temperatures were at sub-zero levels. Zelenskyy’s willingness to engage in talks with the Russians partly stems from his desire not to antagonise Trump. But it also reflects a growing war weariness on the Ukrainian side. European fears that the Trump administration is hopelessly biased towards Russia have receded in recent weeks. There are still concerns that Witkoff’s head can be turned by Putin during visits to Moscow. But, on the European side, there is real respect for the diplomatic work done by Jared Kushner – who is regarded as serious and diligent. While some Europeans still object to the American insistence that Washington should be an even-handed mediator, rather than an ally of Ukraine, there is also a sense that Europe and the Trump administration can play com-

plementary roles in attempting to end the war. The Europeans can provide the financial and military assistance to keep the Ukrainians in the fight. The Americans can keep channels open to the Russians and sponsor the peace talks. The worry expressed to me by one senior European official was not the old fear that the US will betray Ukraine. The new concern is that the Trump administration will lose patience with a peace process that is likely to be frustrating and to eat up time – just as other concerns, foreign and domestic, are crowding in on the Trump administration. Negotiations to end a protracted and bitter conflict can take many years. Talks to end the Vietnam war began in 1968 and did not conclude until 1973. As the fourth anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine approaches, the beginnings of a proper peace process are now in place. But, sadly, the chances are that the fighting will still be going on this time next year.

gideon.rachman@ft.com

How China pulled off a great tech reversal

Kyle Chan

We are witnessing a great reversal in global technology flows. For decades, China lagged behind the west. American and European companies sold products to Chinese consumers and set up factories in the country, lured by its vast market and low labour costs. Apple and Tesla built mega-factories in cities like Zhengzhou and Shanghai. GM and Volkswagen established lucrative joint ventures with Chinese automakers. But the diffusion of technology between China and the west is increasingly a two-way street. Across a growing array of products – electric vehicles, batteries, drones, rare earth magnets – it is now China that stands at the global frontier. None of this is an accident. China has long pursued a deliberate industrial

strategy aimed at acquiring technology from global leaders and upgrading the country’s economy. In exchange for market access, China pushed foreign companies to share technology and knowhow in everything from telecommunications equipment to welding techniques. Western companies trained not only Chinese factory workers but a whole generation of Chinese managers and engineers. They helped Chinese suppliers move up the value chain. This shift is most apparent in EVs and batteries, where China has become the clear global leader. Ford is licensing battery technology from China’s CATL to produce LFP batteries for EVs and energy storage in Michigan. Western automakers such as Volkswagen and Stellantis are partnering with Chinese EV start-ups to gain access to Chinese EV platforms. Renault, which does not even sell cars in China, established a new R&D centre in Shanghai to take advantage of China’s EV technology ecosystem. This is not just happening in the automotive industry. In biotech, western pharmaceutical companies are signing

billions of dollars in licensing deals to access intellectual property from Chinese drugmakers, reaching \$41.5bn in 2024. In robotics, American start-ups are building with Chinese hardware platforms, such as Unitree’s G1 humanoid robot. In AI, Chinese open-source models such as Alibaba’s Qwen series are being used by developers in the US. Beijing has long pursued an industrial strategy of acquiring knowhow from global leaders Meta’s recent acquisition of agentic AI start-up Manus offers a striking case study. At the end of 2025, Meta announced it was buying Manus in a deal reportedly valued at more than \$2bn, delivering a windfall for the start-up’s early Chinese investors such as Tencent and HSG. In an intensifying AI race, one of America’s biggest tech companies turned to a start-up founded in China in order to gain an edge.

But the Meta-Manus deal also illustrates the geopolitical complications around such technology flows. In April 2025, Manus secured a \$75mn funding round led by American VC firm Benchmark, which was criticised in the US for using American capital to support China’s AI development. In May, the US Treasury Department launched an investigation. Not long after, Manus relocated from China to Singapore in a move that was criticised by Chinese commentators for caving to US pressure. When the deal with Meta was announced in December, a Meta spokesperson said Manus would cease operations in China and close out all Chinese ownership stakes. Manus has managed to tread a delicate journey from Chinese start-up to American acquisition target by moving its headquarters. Could this be a pathway for future Chinese tech start-ups? In 2022, AI start-up HeyGen moved from Shenzhen to Los Angeles and reportedly unwound most of its Chinese ownership stakes. A growing number of Chinese companies have shed their Chinese corporate identities and moved to Singa-

pore to get around geopolitical issues, including TikTok and Shein. However Beijing is likely to clamp down on such moves if they become a trend. China has already tightened export controls on key technologies, such as batteries, lithium processing and rare earths. In the tussle over TikTok in the US, Beijing proved it was willing to block the handover of ByteDance’s algorithms and source code, which appear to remain under Chinese control. There are reports that China’s commerce ministry is reviewing the Manus sale to determine whether it violates technology export controls. As China continues to move up the technology ladder, Beijing is going to seek to capitalise on its cutting-edge innovations while protecting its hard-won technological edge, just as the west has tried to do. Now that the tables have turned on global technology flows, the question is how Beijing will try to control them.

The writer is a fellow at the John L Thornton China Center at Brookings and writes the High Capacity newsletter

OPINION

Sanctuary Cities Can Be Deadly



MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

Here is a way to prevent altercations and violence involving federal officers on the streets of Minneapolis: order local police to cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and other agents enforcing the nation's immigration laws.

The corollary ought to be obvious but clearly isn't: Tell citizens exercising their right to protest not to get in the way of those enforcing the law.

This weekend America saw how deadly the consequences of noncooperation can be. In the tragic ICE shooting of Alex Pretti, much of what happened is still in dispute. But we know—largely from videos that have been broadcast around the world—that the handgun Mr. Pretti legally owned and carried was taken from him before he was killed.

The sides harden into their positions, using words they will probably come to regret. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem accused Mr. Pretti of “brandishing” his gun, and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz—who last year called ICE “Trump’s modern-day Gestapo”—refers to ICE’s presence as an “occupation.” ICE meanwhile appears to operate safely enough in red states.

Mr. Pretti was the second Minneapolis resident fatally shot by ICE this month. Re-

nee Good was killed when she refused a police order to get out of her car. Surely it's possible to enforce the law and reduce the chances of a fatal encounter such as those that ended the lives of Ms. Good and Mr. Pretti.

The simplest way to make such encounters safer is for local authorities to cooperate with federal law enforcement. If ICE could count on this cooperation when its agents sought to arrest someone in Minnesota, the enforcement would be handled quietly and probably without incident.

One reason so many ICE agents are in Minnesota now is that every operation there needs not only agents to arrest the wanted person but others to protect them. Ideally that role is handled by local police, who know their cities, their culture and their people better than outsiders.

But with so many blue cities—including Minneapolis and St. Paul—having adopted “sanctuary” policies, the rules of the game are changed. Blue-state pols moralize about immigration while shirking responsibility for the signals they are sending. The main signal is for angry people to adjudicate immigration policy on the streets instead of in court or Congress.

The outrage that follows is also highly selective. Take the trespassers who disrupted a service at the Cities Church in St. Paul on Jan. 18 as live-streamed by former CNN host Don Lemon. They were full of

moral indignation because one of the church pastors supposedly works for ICE.

Not one of the trespassers seemed to appreciate that the right to free exercise of religion is the first right mentioned in the First Amendment—even before freedom of speech and of the press. Or that attacking churches has an unsavory history usually associated with Southern men in white hoods.

To reduce tension and violence, let local police departments cooperate with ICE.

Gov. Walz hasn't condemned the Cities Church protesters, though the governor's office issued a feeble statement that he “in no way supports interrupting a place of worship.” In a letter to Mr. Walz Saturday, U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi urged him to repeal Minnesota's sanctuary policies and “reach an agreement with ICE” that “avoids pushing these interactions into your streets.”

Mr. Walz writes nearby that the state Department of Corrections “honors all federal and local detainers.” But last February Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison's office issued an opinion that “Minnesota law prohibits state and local law enforcement agencies from holding someone based

on an immigration detainer if the person would otherwise be released from custody.”

Mr. Walz and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey stoke the flames, perhaps because the unrest helps divert attention from the \$9 billion in taxpayer dollars lost to welfare fraud on their watch, which had dominated the news until these two ICE shootings.

On Fox News this weekend, Minnesota's last Republican governor, Tim Pawlenty, highlighted the corrosive effect of the Walz-Frey resistance on federal law enforcement. He rightly emphasized that the videos of Mr. Pretti being shot provoke questions that demand answers. But he questioned the mentality that Minneapolis is exempt from federal laws because of the self-righteousness of people who don't like them.

“This fact that the locals will not cooperate with the federal government,” he said, “and in fact affirmatively resist them, is one of the main reasons we have so much dysfunction in the situation in Minnesota.”

The details of shootings are messy—no surprise in such a highly charged and confused environment. What we do know is that when the time came for local leaders to use their knowledge and resources to reduce the lawlessness, they preferred that the streets direct events rather than the courts, law enforcement or the political process.

Write to mcgurn@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Amanda Brickell Bellows

Abolition By Any Means

The Great Resistance

By Carrie Gibson
Atlantic Monthly, 624 pages, \$35

Daring to Be Free

By Sudhir Hazareesingh
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 464 pages, \$33

Spanning four centuries, the trans-Atlantic slave trade trafficked some 12.5 million Africans to the Americas. After Columbus reached Hispaniola in 1492, European powers began establishing colonies in the Western hemisphere and transporting enslaved people there to grow lucrative crops. In the years that followed, systems of slavery became entrenched in the American colonies belonging to Portugal, Spain, Great Britain and France.

The story of slavery's abolition in the Atlantic world is often told from a top-down perspective. Historians highlight the legislative achievements, including the British Parliament's abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the U.S. Constitution's 13th Amendment in 1865, or the emancipatory decrees in Cuba (1886) and Brazil (1888). Less attention has been paid to the ways in which enslaved people strove for emancipation through acts of resistance.

A pair of impressive books will change the way readers understand the rise and fall of slavery in the Atlantic world. Carrie Gibson's “The Great Resistance” and Sudhir Hazareesingh's “Daring to Be Free” document the many ways enslaved people fought to free themselves and overturn slavery, from the moment of their capture in Africa to their enslavement across the Americas.

The authors show that organized efforts to end Atlantic slavery began not in the late 18th century, with the rise of Quaker abolitionist groups, but as early as the 16th century, when enslaved Africans on Hispaniola (home to present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and in what is now Georgia revolted by setting fire to buildings or attacking their enslavers. Subsequent generations continued to resist captivity through sabotage and insurrection. These actions undermined the slaveholders' power, destabilized systems of slavery and, in some cases, hastened the enactment of emancipatory laws.

While the two books cover many of the same events, they differ in important ways. Ms. Gibson's “The Great Resistance” is a narrative history brimming with action, while Mr. Hazareesingh's “Daring to Be Free” is a more measured and nuanced account of African resistance. Ms. Gibson, a journalist, historian and the author of “El Norte” (2019), places the history of Atlantic slavery into broader context by beginning her study in the ancient world. Mr. Hazareesingh, who teaches politics at Oxford, stays focused on the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade but includes the colonial territories of the Indian Ocean.

Ms. Gibson's story touches on slavery's origins in Greece and Rome and their expanding empires across Western Europe. Slavery also grew in the Islamic world of North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, we learn, and in sub-Saharan Africa during the first millennium. Human trafficking was rampant in the Black Sea region between 1200 and 1500. Around this time, the trans-Atlantic slave trade started gradually as Portuguese traders pushed farther south along the west coast of Africa in ships with larger cargo holds and more artillery than earlier vessels. Before long, European merchants established a large-scale system of capturing Africans and transporting them to newly established colonies in the Americas.

Resistance to slavery started in Africa, Ms. Gibson contends, citing examples of Africans who attacked European boats or liberated those who had been kidnapped. They rebelled against crews on approximately 10% of Middle Passage voyages. Others jumped overboard to avoid enslavement. In the Americas, acts of resistance continued unabated and in many forms. Ms. Gibson recounts rebellions in Santo Domingo, Panama, Saint-Domingue and Barbados, as well as New York and South Carolina. She also charts instances of plots, poisonings and refusals to work, actions that caused significant upheaval.

Throughout the Americas, acts of resistance undermined slaveholders' power, destabilized systems of slavery and hastened emancipation.

Mr. Hazareesingh, too, recounts numerous episodes of resistance to slavery in the Americas. He identifies notable patterns, particularly in the sphere of religion. Practitioners of Obeah, a belief system from the Gold Coast, for instance, believed that spirits and magical objects could “help bring about desired outcomes” such as “healing, protection, recovery, threat, and harm.” The author sees evidence of this belief system at work among the enslaved. Frederick Douglass and others were known to carry a supposedly magical root to protect them from violence inflicted by slaveholders. In rebellions that occurred in New York, Richmond and Charleston between 1712 and 1822, “African spiritualist presences” influenced participants who believed themselves to possess supernatural protection from harm.

The highlighted role of enslaved women as resistance leaders is another significant feature of “Daring to Be Free.” Mr. Hazareesingh describes how Solitude, a pregnant, formerly enslaved woman in Guadeloupe, encouraged a group of people to fight back against the French soldiers sent by Napoleon in 1802 to reinstate slavery.

Another regular occurrence in the trans-Atlantic world, Mr. Hazareesingh finds, was *marronage*. When enslaved Africans successfully escaped from bondage, they often set up maroon communities. Brazil's Palmares, which Mr. Hazareesingh describes as a republic, had a population of up to 20,000 people. These communities also existed in 16th-century Panama, 18th-century Guadeloupe and the 19th-century United States, among many other places, and are evidence of how Africans rejected the white settlers' “belief in their natural entitlement to rule” by operating completely “outside the framework of colonial institutions.”

Both books show how enslaved people exerted pressure against slaveholders, militias and the political leaders who sought to perpetuate systems of forced labor. During the 19th century, one by one nations finally ended their participation in the slave trade and abolished slavery. Those who made up what Ms. Gibson calls the great resistance ultimately drove the movement toward emancipation for the millions yearning to be free.

Ms. Bellows is the author of “American Slavery and Russian Serfdom in the Post-Emancipation Imagination.”

China's Decadence and the Military Purge



GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

In 1757, a firing squad executed Adm. John Byng on the deck of a Royal Navy warship for “failing to do his utmost” in pursuing the enemy during a battle in the Seven Years' War. As Voltaire put it, they shot one admiral “to encourage the others.”

By that standard, military officers across China should be highly encouraged following Saturday's announcement that the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party had opened an investigation of two senior military officials. As waves of purges took down one senior figure after another in the People's Liberation Army, Gen. Zhang Youxia had seemed untouchable. Hand-picked by Xi Jinping, Gen. Zhang was a member of the Politburo and as vice chairman of the Central Military Commission was second only to Mr. Xi in the military hierarchy. At a Saturday briefing for high ranking military officers first reported by the Journal, Gen. Zhang was accused of everything from conniving at corruption with family members to spilling nuclear secrets to the U.S.

Shocking as this news was, the commentary was even more ominous. As translated by the indispensable China-watcher Bill Bishop in his Sinocism newsletter, an editorial in PLA Daily, the army's

newspaper, said that the two suspects had “seriously fueled political and corruption issues that affect the Party's absolute leadership over the military and endanger the Party's ruling foundation. . . . They have caused immense damage to the military's political construction, political ecology, and combat capability construction, and have had an extremely vile influence on the Party, the state, and the military.”

The implication is that, in addition to engaging in nefarious financial shenanigans, one of Mr. Xi's most trusted henchmen was plotting against him. Had a military coup been nipped in the bud? Was a group that tirelessly portrays itself as firmly united around China's supreme leader actually riven by faction and division? Did high-level officials with far more information than the average citizen harbor concerns about where Mr. Xi is leading the country?

Whispers and doubts will be circulating all over Beijing and at every level of party and army leadership, checked only by the paranoia of officials fearing for their careers and lives. Flattery and lies will proliferate in every official document and meeting as authorities strive to demonstrate their fidelity to the wisdom crystallized in the immortal texts of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

At a time when the unpredictability of the U.S. presi-

dent, the incompetence of many Western leaders, and the political unrest and social conflict in many democratic societies raise doubts about the sustainability and effectiveness of liberal political institutions, the Chinese purges are a healthy reminder that other forms of government aren't without drawbacks. When President Trump threatens to invade Greenland, Republican senators can talk about impeachment.

It's an old lesson: Absolute power leaves those who wield it isolated and confused.

When poorly trained, badly led immigration agents under hotheaded officials fail to handle protesters in appropriate ways, the whole country knows what happened and the Oval Office cannot mute the resulting clamor.

In systems like China's, healthy self-corrective measures cannot function. The worse the party mishandles key situations, the more loudly and unanimously officials and the media must praise its leaders. Almost every family in China is blighted by the ruinous and inhuman one-child policy, which brought a demographic crisis down on the whole country. Yet nobody could oppose the policy when it was in force. Nobody can now demand accountability from the

cruel and misguided leaders who imposed it. Scores of millions of families have seen their life savings trashed by an utterly predictable real-estate bust brought on by decades of misguided central government policy—abetted by corrupt local officials and powerful interests. Nobody can say anything about that either.

Modern history can be seen as a series of contests between liberal societies and autocratic technocracies. From the wars between the highly organized French state under Louis XIV and Britain under William and Mary up through the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the U.S., liberal societies have faced challengers who trusted in the power of a supreme leader unfettered by the restraints of liberal society and civil dissent.

In the short to medium term, the techno-autocracies often did well. Louis XIV, Napoleon, imperial Germany, Hitler, Tojo and Stalin all had some good years. But time and again the poisonous isolation that absolute power imposes on its wielders blunted the edge of their insight and degraded the capacity of their societies.

The question haunting China today isn't whether Zhang Youxia sold military secrets to the U.S. It is whether the Chinese Communist Party is falling prey to the authoritarian decadence that brought so many of its predecessors to ruin and defeat.

DEI Turns Fair-Lending Laws on Their Head

By Russ Vought

One hallmark of the second Trump administration has been the eradication of discriminatory race-based policies that have permeated every aspect of government under the banner of “diversity, equity and inclusion.” The administration of fair-lending laws is no exception.

As acting director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, I am taking steps to correct how the Equal Credit Opportunity Act is enforced. This law was intended to eradicate discrimination in lending, not encourage new forms of discrimination—which it did under the Biden administration.

ECOA's original purpose was simple: Creditors should evaluate applicants on their creditworthiness, not race, religion or sex. The law made clear that it's illegal to give better credit terms to certain borrowers based on those

prohibited characteristics.

The Biden administration turned that mission on its head. Under Director Rohit Chopra, with help from the Justice Department, CFPB enforcement of ECOA became outcome-driven, focusing on treating statistical disparities in lending rates as supposed evidence of discrimination.

The CFPB is ending Biden-era racial discrimination.

One example was the Combating Redlining Initiative. If a lender didn't have an office in a predominantly minority neighborhood, didn't receive enough applications from such neighborhoods, or didn't send enough marketing materials to such neighborhoods, that lender was alleged to have violated fair-lending laws.

No court has ever found a lender to have violated ECOA.

Instead, CFPB and DOJ lawyers secured settlements requiring lenders to establish funds giving better credit terms in certain minority communities. These special-purpose credit programs explicitly considered race to determine whether someone can apply for credit.

Supporters say these policies increase minority homeownership, but the facts tell a different story. Under the Obama administration, which pioneered the use of disparate impact to prosecute lenders, black homeownership rates precipitously dropped. In his first term, President Trump began reversing the decline. But the Biden administration undermined this progress with its coercive tactics, which left lenders considering a retreat from credit markets.

Our proposed regulatory changes will ensure that lenders are held accountable for how they actually treat people and not for the statis-

tical results of their policies. The proposal also protects free speech by ensuring that liability attaches only to statements a lender knows will discourage a person from applying for credit. And our proposal requires lenders offering special-purpose credit programs to prove a real need for them, as Congress intended, while preventing the use of race, color, national origin and sex as eligibility criteria.

This reform reins in government overreach, protects credit markets from arbitrary enforcement and restores fairness to borrowers. The era of DEI and state-sanctioned racism is ending. Enforcement and administration of fair lending laws will begin working for all Americans.

Mr. Vought is acting director of the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau and director of the White House Office of Management and Budget.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Mass Deportation by the Numbers

President Trump and Gov. Tim Walz may be stepping back from the political brink after a phone call Monday that both called constructive. The best result would be for Minnesota and the Twin Cities to cooperate with immigration enforcement, and the feds to reduce their footprint.

Meanwhile, let's look at how the Trump Administration's deportation policy is being implemented by the numbers. Mr. Trump campaigned on a promise to deport criminal migrants, "the worst of the worst," as the Department of Homeland Security put it. That policy has public support, but the migrant roundup has become far broader.

Last week Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem posted on social media, "We have arrested over 10,000 criminal illegal aliens who were killing Americans, hurting children and reigning terror in Minneapolis." Overall, Ms. Noem says Immigration and Customs Enforcement has removed "murderers, pedophiles, rapists, gang members, and terrorists." She told CBS that "70% of them have committed or have charges against them on violent crimes."

It started out that way. At the beginning of 2025, 87% of ICE arrests were immigrants with either a prior conviction or a criminal charge pending, according to ICE data obtained by the Deportation Data Project. Only 13% of those arrested at the beginning of 2025 didn't have either a conviction or a pending charge.

But the criminal share of apprehensions has declined as the months have gone on. By October 2025, the percentage of arrested immigrants with a prior conviction or criminal charge had fallen to 55%. Since October, 73% taken into ICE custody had no criminal conviction and only 5% had a violent criminal conviction, according to a Cato Institute review of ICE data.

ICE arrests are growing but fewer have a criminal history.

Many of the criminal immigrants the Administration counts among those in detention are convicted criminals culled from prisons. White

House border czar Tom Homan objected to Minneapolis's sanctuary city policy because he said it wasn't letting the Administration take prisoners into federal custody. "If they'd let us in their damn jail," he said, "we could arrest the bad guy in the safety and security of the jail."

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz disputes that in his nearby op-ed, but there's no doubt Minneapolis and St. Paul have ordinances that bar using resources to help ICE apprehend people based on immigration status. That complicates ICE's job and makes confrontations more likely.

Syracuse professor Austin Kocher, who tracks official ICE data, finds that between Sept. 21, 2025, and Jan. 7, 2026, single-day ICE detentions increased 11,296. But only 902 of those were convicted criminals, 2,273 had pending criminal charges and 8,121 were other immigrant violators. ICE arrests have been trending upward since January 2025, but criminal arrests have plateaued.

All of which means that the Trump Administration's rhetoric about deporting criminals doesn't match its current much broader policy of mass deportation. As ICE agents target businesses, schools and homes, scenes of arrest involving mothers, children and long-time U.S. residents become more common. This explains why immigration enforcement is becoming a political liability for Republicans.

Ending migrant chaos at the border was necessary after the Biden Administration. But White House aide Stephen Miller's undisciplined mass deportation and zero-immigration policy is building distrust, and the White House pitch that public safety justifies its enforcement is losing credibility.

The Golden Age Arrives, if Not as Planned

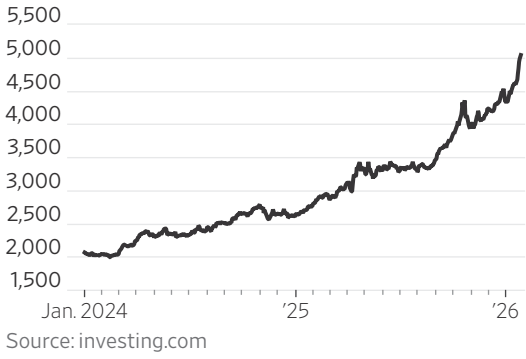
It's unfashionable in many precincts to admit it, but the market for precious metals still sends useful signals every once in a while. Gold's ascent above \$5,000 per ounce—or as some might say, the dollar's drop to less than 1/5,000th of an ounce of gold—is one of those signals, and it doesn't speak well of investor confidence in the world's political leaders.

Investors probably aren't acting on inflation jitters in this instance, although as always the market's motivations are hard to know precisely. Inflation remains elevated, but there's been little new news on that score lately that would cause investors suddenly to flee toward the safety of gold.

Look instead to a recent bout of global economic instability triggered in part by a certain U.S. President. His on-again, off-again trade war with Europe over Greenland constituted a warning that no economic deal is safe—even when, in the case of the European Union and United Kingdom, Mr. Trump negotiated those deals himself less than a year ago. He also threatened Canada with tariffs if Ottawa predictably (but mistakenly) pursues closer ties with China in response to U.S. bullying.

Not all the anxiety is Mr. Trump's fault. Investors are trying to digest significant economic changes in Japan as interest rates normalize and Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi threatens to expand government spending to win the looming election. This helps explain recent swings in the yen-dollar exchange rate, which Tokyo and Washington appear to have

The Price of Gold in USD, Jan. 2024-Present



Source: investing.com

tried to stabilize in recent days.

Some risks are entirely outside Washington's remit. An apparent leadership purge underway in China's People's Liberation Army may or may not augur greater Chinese aggression regarding Taiwan. The opacity of leadership struggles in the world's second largest economy is part of the confidence problem.

Mr. Trump also isn't responsible for political gyrations in Paris that raise questions about France's (and, by extension, Europe's) capacity to repay enormous government debts. Government debt is rising across Western democracies,

with little apparent political will to control the welfare state.

It's enough to make any investor nervous, and that plays to gold's strength as a safe haven. Mr. Trump could ignore this market move, which is what many conventional economists will advise. Many of Mr. Trump's unconventional advisers may even enthuse over gold's

surge under their theory that an "overvalued" dollar harms the U.S. economy.

But markets are signaling a case of nerves about recent developments around the world—and perhaps also hedging against the dollar as a safe investment. Speculators may also be piling into gold, which is reason for non-rich investors to be cautious at such a lofty price. Gold has fallen before as suddenly as it rose.

Mr. Trump can win back their confidence with a consistent economic-growth agenda and less of the histrionics over Greenland or anything else. He'll miss global confidence once it's gone.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Page From Mississippi the Nation Can Use

Kudos to Rahm Emanuel for taking the time to visit Hattiesburg, Miss. ("The 'Mississippi Marathon' Is Teaching Kids to Read," op-ed, Jan. 22). Mr. Emanuel notes that nearby states are trying to emulate Mississippi's success. One of the reasons these efforts have been successful is that those four states have weak teachers unions compared to California and Illinois. The unions protect their bureaucracy first, while putting the education of children second.

Mississippi has found a great solution for the problem that they had for years, and it offers other states a plan to reform and improve their public-education systems.

JEFF KINDL
Mandeville, La.

While Mr. Emanuel and I are on different sides of the political spectrum, I found myself agreeing with much of what he wrote—until he wrote that, "Both sides have given up on our kids."

His main example to demonstrate this on the right, as far as I can tell, is voucher systems, charter networks and parochial institutions. On the left, he mentions, among other things, pronouns and the changing of school names. Conveniently, he doesn't mention critical-race theory or the "1619 Project."

Parents want their children to learn the basics. They want them to be able to think for themselves—not to be instructed on what to think. They want to graduate functionally literate young people, not hand kids a diploma that says they showed up for class for 12 years.

Vouchers, charter schools, and parochial institutions aren't examples of the right giving up on our kids. On the contrary, they show that the right cares.

CHUCK BOYD
Jacksonville Beach, Fla.

Reading Mr. Emanuel's treatise reminded me of a conference we had with our son's fourth-grade teacher in the early 1970s. She informed us that he was reading at an eighth-grade level. She wanted to know what we were doing at home that was working so well. We had to admit we weren't doing anything out of the ordinary. It turned out he learned how to read by watching "Sesame Street" each morning. We were amazed at how wonderfully that program helped our kids get a head start at school. It might be helpful for today's educators to study that program's methods. They might learn something.

MARTIN WALDINGER
Scottsdale, Ariz.

A Free-Market Milestone for India's Economy

Sadanand Dhume mischaracterizes India's recent labor deregulation in "India's Timid Economic Reforms" (East Is East, Jan. 14). On the contrary, the measures are a huge economic reform. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is eviscerating his nation's socialist employment restrictions, redeploying the more than 600 million strong Indian workforce for more productive enterprise.

Mr. Dhume may think that the newly minted labor codes' permissive hiring rules only apply to private firms that have fewer than 300 workers—instead of 100 workers like before—but that's an oversimplified analysis. About 90% of Indian workers are employed under informal arrangements. As a result, the overhaul is sweeping in scope. State governments are also now free to lift the employee threshold

further to promote large-scale employment and heavy industry. The State Bank of India estimates that liberalizing labor will goose up consumption and augment formal employment by at least 15%. Greater hiring flexibility increases the prospect that Indian manufacturing will achieve economies of scale to become an export juggernaut and better compete against rivals like China.

Employment reforms have bedeviled successive Indian governments since the country first opened its economy to the world in 1991, after nearly half a century of autarky. Mr. Modi's de-control of India's labor factor markets is a rare win for the cause of free markets and free people in a polity with a long history of socialism.

NATHAN PUNWANI, M.D., MPH
Phoenix

The U.S. Economy Is Trumping Expectations

Alan Blinder's op-ed "A Year In, Trump's Economy Is Worse Than the Numbers" (Jan. 22) has the story of President Trump's record in 2025 almost all wrong. He writes that his best guess is that real GDP for 2025 will come in at 2.5%. But if we look at the first full three quarters of President Trump's second term, we get an average of a nearly 4.5% growth rate.

Opportunity From Outbreak

Your editorial "Measles as a 'Cost of Doing Business'" (Jan. 23) correctly points out the rise in numbers of cases of measles in the U.S. and what has contributed to decreased MMR vaccination rates. While Dr. Ralph Abraham has shrugged off concerns, the CDC is missing an opportunity to implement a randomized controlled trial on MMR effectiveness and adverse events during this ongoing outbreak. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has repeatedly stated rigorous RCTs haven't been done on vaccines and that data on their harms has been lacking due to less than optimal observation studies. He now has an opportunity to create the studies and to establish a cohort that will be followed prospectively for both short or long term adverse events.

The measles outbreak is on track for the U.S. to lose its "measles elimination status." If leadership at the CDC and HHS are laissez-faire about this, perhaps their shortsightedness is missing an opportunity to gain the evidence-based data that they have claimed is lacking.

EILEEN NATUZZI, M.D., MPH
Encinitas, Calif.

Mr. Blinder attacks Mr. Trump on the Federal Reserve but describes Joe Biden's monetary policy as "excellent" because "he left the Fed alone." How did that work out? Inflation soared to 9.1% after Biden's first year—the highest price rise since Jimmy Carter was in office. The Biden four year total price rise of 21% was the root cause of today's middle class affordability crisis. In Mr. Trump's first year inflation was 2.7%, and that number is coming down.

In March, Mr. Blinder warned on these pages that Mr. Trump's policies raised the possibility of stagflation. That's flat or negative growth with rising inflation. Since he wrote those words, we've seen the exact opposite: soaring growth and falling inflation.

STEPHEN MOORE
Co-founder, Unleash Prosperity
Potomac, Md.

Legacy Over Party for Trump

Regarding Karl Rove's "Is Trump Trying to Lose the Midterms?" (op-ed, Jan. 22): Donald Trump's second term as president is "mystifying" and "puzzling" only if one believes Mr. Rove's assumption that he possesses "political self-interest." But Mr. Trump doesn't. If he did, the Republican losses last November would have since tempered his words and actions, and the obvious reality that "swing voters will decide the midterms" would be influencing his administration. Politics and party are of little concern to a president who governs primarily by executive order and is driven by a pre-occupation with his legacy.

GREG ACOMPANADO
Bogart, Ga.

Democrats Try to Steal Staten Island

President Trump won 43% of the vote in New York state in 2024, yet Republicans hold 27% of its House seats, or seven of 26. Unsatisfied with that partisan tilt, Democrats are now asking the courts to help them take Staten Island.

Last week a state judge said the district held by GOP Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, which has had its basic shape since the 1980s, is racially discriminatory. The trial-court decision from Justice Jeffrey Pearlman is a classic of make-it-up legal analysis.

Staten Island's population isn't big enough to constitute a House seat by itself, so for decades the 11th district has also grabbed parts of Brooklyn, which is right over the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge. The lawsuit asks instead to include southern Manhattan, on the theory that Staten Island's racial minorities are currently denied the opportunity to elect their favored candidates. Read: Democrats.

Justice Pearlman cites figures showing that Staten Island has become more diverse since 1980. Then it was 85% white. Today it's 57% white, 20% Latino, 9% black and 12% Asian, he says. A provision to the New York constitution, passed by amendment in 2014, requires drawing districts so that minority groups, "based on the totality of the circumstances," do not "have less opportunity" to choose representatives.

The constitution provides "no guidance" on what this is supposed to mean in real life, Justice Pearlman writes, so it falls on him to "establish a standard." He cites an expert witness who says that in federal, state and city elections

from 2017-24, the district's black voters stuck together 91% of the time, and Latinos did 88%. Under the current House map, they're "essentially guaranteed to have their votes diluted," the judge says. Therefore he orders the state to redo the lines.

Where to begin? Maybe by underlining that the combined black and Latino population of Staten Island, according to the judge's figures, is only 29%. The federal judiciary has seen endless lawsuits on racial gerrymanders, but the Supreme Court's misguided *Gingles* test from 1986 at least says the minority group should be big enough to constitute a majority. Yet Justice Pearlman says New York's constitution is broader.

Where's the line, then? Is it vote dilution if a district that's 20% black and Latino elects a Republican? There's a similar problem with respect to statistics on racially polarized voting, and those numbers also change every election. Justice Pearlman's expert says the House district's Asian voters supported the candidates favored by black and Latino residents 59% of the time. Is that more vote dilution? Or not? The question has no objective answer.

Justice Pearlman's ruling will be appealed, but it's another reminder that when Democrats wail about Republican gerrymandering, they're crying crocodile tears. The Staten Island case is another from the lawsuit mill of Democratic attorney Marc Elias.

It's also another argument for the Supreme Court to declare soon, via its case pending from Louisiana, that redistricting based on race is unconstitutional.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Here is a prescription for a new drug. I don't know much about it but I like their commercials."

OPINION

The Un-American Assault on Minnesota

By **Tim Walz**

St. Paul, Minn.
The Trump administration's assault on Minnesota long ago stopped being a matter of immigration enforcement. It is a campaign of organized brutality against the people of our state. It isn't just. It isn't legal. And, critically, it isn't making anyone any safer.

Quite the opposite: Immigration agents have now shot and killed two of our neighbors: Renee Good and Alex Pretti. And there are countless other stories of protesters and bystanders being physically attacked

Federal officials are lying. My state's Corrections Department honors all immigration detainees.

by federal agents, to say nothing of the chaos and violence being unleashed against the targets of these raids, many of whom have done nothing wrong except exist as a person of color.

The pretext for all this is the Trump administration's insistence that our immigration laws would otherwise go unenforced. This federal occupation of Minnesota is, administration officials insist, about our predilection for releasing "vio-

lent criminal illegal aliens" from state custody.

I can't stress this enough: The Trump administration has its facts wrong about Minnesota.

The administration claims that Minnesota jails release "the worst of the worst." In reality, the Minnesota Department of Corrections honors all federal and local detainees by notifying Immigration and Customs Enforcement when a person committed to its custody isn't a U.S. citizen. There is not a single documented case of the department's releasing someone from state prison without offering to ensure a smooth transfer of custody.

Yet the lies persist. This week, ICE tweeted that rural Cottonwood County had refused to honor a detainee for an alleged child sex predator. That's not true. The county sheriff followed procedure and contacted ICE when the subject posted bail, but ICE agents were too busy wreaking havoc in the Twin Cities to do their actual job and pick the prisoner up.

Some of the administration's claims are ridiculous on their face. For example: It claims that 1,360 non-U.S. citizens are in Minnesota prisons. The truth: Our total state prison population is roughly 8,000, and only 207 of them are noncitizens.

Earlier this month, the administration published what it claimed was a list of people who have been arrested as part of this ICE sweep, asserting that this list represents



Protesters gather in Minneapolis Saturday.

"the worst of the worst" criminals, and implying that we have been protecting them from capture.

Minnesota Public Radio investigated this claim and found it to be completely false: "Most of the people on the list had been immediately transferred to ICE custody at the end of time served in Minnesota prisons. All of those transfers happened before ICE began its surge of operations in Minnesota on Dec. 1, 2025, with some even happening years before."

In other words, ICE is taking credit for arrests that state and local law enforcement made, activity that took place before this assault on our state even began.

Everyone wants to see our immigration laws enforced. That isn't what is happening in Minnesota. In recent weeks, masked agents have abducted children. They have separated children from their parents. They have racially profiled off-duty police officers. They have aggressively pulled people over and demanded to see their papers. They have broken into the homes of elderly citizens without warrants to drag them outside in freezing temperatures.

That isn't effective law enforcement. It isn't following the rule of law. It's chaos. It's illegal. And it's un-American.

I have repeatedly appealed to

President Trump to lower the temperature. But he refuses. I fear that his hope is for the tension between ICE agents and the communities they're ransacking to boil over—that he wants you to see more chaos on your TV screens, protests turn into riots, more people get hurt.

Minnesotans aren't taking the bait. They are protesting—loudly and urgently, but also peacefully. They are helping their neighbors cope with this violent, lawless assault on people of color throughout the state—walking children to school safely, preparing mutual-aid packages, and organizing to make sure these atrocities are well-documented so that those responsible can face justice.

Minnesota is a state that believes in the rule of law and in the dignity of all people. We know that true public safety comes from trust, respect and shared purpose, not from intimidation or political theater.

This assault on our communities is not necessary to enforce our immigration laws. We don't have to choose between open borders and whatever the hell this is. Mr. Trump can and must end this unlawful, violent and chaotic campaign, and we can and must rebuild an immigration enforcement system that is secure, accountable and humane.

Mr. Walz, a Democrat, is governor of Minnesota.



EDITOR AT LARGE
By *Gerard Baker*

They were, in one account, a terrifying example of the police-state tyranny to which President Trump and his Republican Party have subjected America: first a young mother, then an intensive-care nurse gunned down on the streets of one of our cities merely for exercising their precious right to protest. The killing of Alex Pretti in Minneapolis on Saturday "appears to be an execution by immigration enforcement," declared Rep. Ilhan Omar.

Alternatively, the two killings were the justifiable response of federal officers to existential threats from domestic terrorists as they went about their vital job of enforcing the law.

"An assassin tried to murder federal agents," said Stephen Miller, White House deputy chief of staff, af-

ter Saturday's incident, echoing the language he and others in the administration used after the killing of Renee Nicole Good in her car earlier this month.

The rush to judgment on the basis of online video is tempting but perilous, and I am reluctant to join it. But from what we have seen, the killing of Mr. Pretti is especially troubling. I suspect most Americans are deeply uneasy about it. But I suspect also that most don't think that what has been going on in Minneapolis is evidence of either police-state repression or domestic terrorism. Instead it seems the killings are an inevitable tragic consequence of the tension that has arisen between federal law enforcement's aggressive tactics and the resistance from citizens and local governments. It is time for urgent de-escalation—on both sides.

The Trump administration's efforts to remove people in the country illegally are legitimate and necessary and enjoy full democratic legitimacy. The failure to control illegal immigration, and the Biden administration's decision to open our borders to millions of such migrants, was an act of wanton self-harm that will take years to repair. Mr. Trump was elected in 2024 in

large part to begin that repair not only by closing the border but by removing most of those illegal immigrants already here.

Protesting law-enforcement activity is legitimate, but that intervention itself carries risks and in many cases leads to crime. We have in this country unscrupulous politicians in places like Minneapolis, who seem

Demagogues on both sides are undermining public trust and heightening the risk of further violence.

determined to impede the activities of ICE and to encourage potentially illegal interventions in their activities. Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz seems eager to renew his relevance in national Democratic politics in the wake of his defeat in the 2024 vice presidential contest.

But as we now stand, after these two avoidable killings, we must also acknowledge that the administration's approach to achieving its reasonable objectives is failing the tests of proportion, fairness and legiti-

macy in the eyes of the public.

The far left and its mainstream Democratic enablers want us to abandon all efforts at immigration enforcement. But their efforts to undermine the process are nothing compared with the public unease that is being generated by the methods ICE is using. The images of platoons of armed, masked men, seemingly equipped for street warfare, descending on parking lots and shopping malls; the spectacle of grandmothers and children being seized by agents; the reports of U.S. citizens being detained—all repel most decent Americans.

Now that these activities and the protests they have engendered have resulted in multiple deaths, the administration and its allies are further undermining trust by their public response to the incidents.

Calling the two protesters killed in Minneapolis "domestic terrorists" is an insult to the intelligence. Whether or not they were responsible for their own deaths, as in law they might have been, the implication that their killing should be treated as some sort of condign execution is simply loathsome. Lying about what we all can actually see on our screens adds injury to the insult.

While no one can say with confidence exactly what unfolded in Minneapolis on the basis of cellphone video, we can be confident that the description offered by Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem was mostly fiction. If the words of our top government officials can be so easily disproved by the evidence of our own eyes, faith in the policy is destroyed.

Worst of all, by instantly defending and even praising every act by an immigration officer, however dubious, the administration is actively enabling escalation. Such instant exoneration increases the likelihood that worse will happen next time. The message from the administration that every one of these officers hears after these episodes: Whatever you do, whatever the circumstances, we will support you and denounce anyone you harmed as an enemy of the state. Officers may not have "absolute immunity" in law, but the government is encouraging them to act with absolute impunity.

The demagoguery is self-defeating and dangerous. We are sliding toward a low-grade civil war, propelled there by the grotesque cynicism of Ms. Noem and her cohorts and the reckless defiance of Mr. Walz and his.

Lessons for 2020s Minnesota in 1960s Mississippi

By **Robert Doar**

Officials in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Washington could learn a few lessons from the civil-rights movement of the 1960s. Federal efforts to uphold the law faced many challenges then. Local populations and officials fiercely resisted the court-mandated desegregation of the University of Mississippi and the Selma-to-Montgomery voting-rights marches.

The federal government nonetheless prevailed. How? The key was restraint: Federal leaders from presidents on down realized that lasting change could only occur by working with Southern leaders—using police power as a last resort.

I know this story well. My father, John Doar, was in charge of federal civil-rights enforcement in the South during the most intense years of the civil-rights movement, 1960-67. Our country was fortunate that he—a Wisconsin Republican working for Democratic presidents—was deeply committed to working with local leaders.

"We can't solve problems from a thousand miles away in Washington" was how he put it. "You have to keep

going back and working with people in Mississippi if you want to bring lasting change." These were his restraints when civil-rights leaders demanded he use federal power more forcefully. His restraint came from his belief that the people closest to a problem were best suited to solve it. Additionally, as a lawyer he refused to take shortcuts that compromised legal processes. Rather than assert

The civil-rights movement succeeded because federal agents and protesters alike showed restraint.

executive-branch authority aggressively, he relied on the courts and ultimately Congress to assert their power. Perhaps most important, he respected the authority of the states in our federalist system. Federalism requires that state governments be viewed as parallel, not subordinate, to the federal government.

Taking this route wasn't easy—there were setbacks, defeats and casualties. A violent riot killed two dur-

ing the desegregation of Ole Miss; voting rights took time to be won; Viola Liuzzo was murdered during the Selma-to-Montgomery march, and Klansmen killed three civil-rights workers in Neshoba County, Miss.

Still, slowly and steadily progress was made. James Meredith enrolled at Ole Miss; African-Americans secured the right to vote; the march to Montgomery, was completed and a Mississippi jury convicted the Neshoba murderers.

I've been reminded of those years while watching immigration officers bypass local police and trample on personal liberty in their overzealous enforcement of immigration law. Illegal border crossings have been brought to a standstill with more than 600,000 illegal aliens deported—a record that more than fulfills President Trump's campaign promise. But the administration continues to send poorly trained Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents into local communities. This use of federal police power is unpopular—undermining support for the administration's

immigration policies—and utterly contrary to the words and spirit of the Declaration of Independence, which expressly opposed the authority of English troops to harass Americans by entering private homes armed with protections that would spare them from prosecution for misdeeds including murder.

Not all fault lies with federal agents. We are missing responsible federal law enforcement, and we are missing responsible protest as well. As Roland Fryer described in these pages last week, the civil-rights movement's protest strategy—nonviolent, peaceful and respectful—wasn't weak but enormously successful in winning over the American people: Martin Luther King "believed that violence collapsed the moral clarity the movement depended on, allowing repression to masquerade as order. Riots were strategic failures. They destroyed the information the movement was trying to convey."

Minnesota protesters are paying little heed to King's strategy. Their tactics of whistling, taunting and ha-

rassing ICE officers are a long way from the steely, quiet discipline of marchers led by John Lewis across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Think how effective these modern-day resisters would be if they followed the example of the most successful protest movement in American history.

The stakes were much higher in the civil-rights movement. Ending segregation and securing the right to vote were far more significant than the pursuit of a few thousand immigrants who sneaked in to pursue opportunities only the U.S. can offer. But what occurred in Minneapolis this weekend has severely harmed Americans' sense of themselves. It reminds me of the old saw that it takes years to build a reputation and only a few minutes to destroy it.

The Trump administration deserves credit for all it has accomplished, including on immigration—which the actions of the DHS put at risk in one weekend.

Mr. Doar is president of the American Enterprise Institute.

Humor Disarms an Angry Brother

By **Mike Kerrigan**

I have two sons still living at home. In brotherly exchanges, Jack, 14, is quite funny, but his mouth occasionally writes checks that his body can't cash, for Finn, 16, has height and weight on him. Thankfully, Finn is a gentle giant. Until he isn't.

One Saturday afternoon Jack ruffled Finn's feathers. So annoyed was Finn, who had friends over, that he intimidated that when his last friend went home, more than words would be exchanged between two brothers with a nonaggression pact theretofore between them.

The kitchen floor suddenly terra incognita, Jack looked to me across the table for help. Such frontier jus-

tice as Finn had meted out to date had fallen short of the physical kind. "What should I do?" Jack asked me, knowing beyond doubt that he'd crossed the Rubicon.

"Write a personal note saying you're sorry," I suggested. "And if you really want to be clever, put a \$5 bill inside. It's impossible to stay mad when a little cheddar falls out of a card someone's sent you." Jack ran upstairs, presumably to follow my advice.

He didn't. Jack dispensed with the card entirely and scrounged up only \$2 from his room, which he handed to Finn with an unceremonious "here." Unsurprisingly, it didn't soothe.

Jack paused, grabbed a pen and stationery from the kitchen hutch, went back to his seat at the table and

began to write. "What are you writing?" I asked, with Finn within earshot. I assumed it was the card. Maybe it was, but I'll never know based on what Jack answered.

"Well, someone has to do the first draft of my obituary," Jack deadpanned. I laughed, Jack laughed and, most important, Finn laughed. The storm clouds dissipated as fast as they'd gathered, and Jack knew the bad blood between brothers was all but forgotten.

A father and his young sons all learned a valuable lesson that day. Humor can de-escalate tension, but it works best when the effort is authentic.

Mr. Kerrigan is an attorney in Charlotte, N.C.

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