

India-New Zealand FTA can boost manufacturing and agriculture

The signing of the free trade agreement (FTA) between India and New Zealand is symptomatic of the Narendra Modi government's newfound enthusiasm for foreign trade. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal underlined this fact "It [the FTA] reflects Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of global economic partnerships for our farmers, women, youth, artisans, and entrepreneurs. This is India's 9th agreement in the past few years with 38 developed countries." Talks for the FTA with New Zealand were on hold for a decade, but when they were resumed in March 2025, everything moved at a brisk pace. The deal was finalised nine months later in December. On Monday, Goyal and New Zealand Trade Minister Todd McClay signed the official document. In New Zealand, the inked FTA has to be reviewed and ratified by Parliament; bipartisan support for the pact is likely to facilitate this in about six months.

The FTA eliminates 100 per cent duty on Indian exports to New Zealand, where it will also allow temporary employment for Indian professionals. On its part, New Delhi has offered tariff liberalisation on 70.03 per cent of tariff lines covering 95 per cent of bilateral trade value. The products India has excluded are mainly from the sensitive rural sector—dairy (milk, cream, whey, yoghurt, cheese etc.), animal products (other than sheep meat), agricultural products (onions, chana, peas, corn and almonds, among others), sugar,

artificial honey, animal, vegetable or microbial fats and oils. Also excluded are arms and ammunition, gems and jewellery, copper and articles thereof, aluminium and articles thereof. While 30 per cent of tariff lines will have immediate duty elimination, 35 per cent are subject to phased elimination, 4.37 per cent face tariff reductions, and 0.06 per cent fall under tariff rate quotas. So, while Indian producers will get immediate access to the New Zealand market, goods from there will get access in a phased manner. The FTA also facilitates mobility of Indian professionals to New Zealand.

On the whole, the FTA is quite fair to India. Now, it will depend on the Indian businesses, farmers, and exporters to capitalise on the

FTAs. Policy and decision makers in Delhi and state capitals will also have to ensure that the goodness of the FTA gets translated to a rise in exports. Sectors such as textiles, pharmaceuticals, engineering goods, and processed foods stand to gain significantly, provided they invest in competitiveness, branding, and compliance with international standards. Farmers and agri-producers, too, can benefit by tapping niche demand, but this will require better access to market intelligence, logistics, and value addition. Politicians too must ensure that exporters—especially micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs)—are supported through easier access to credit, streamlined regulatory processes, and improved trade infrastructure. Addressing

LETTERS

KLIS: Prioritise repairs over accountability

THIS refers to "Govt seeks CBI probe into Kaleshwaran irregularities" (THI April 28). The Ghosh Commission's 700-page KLIS report exposed illegal approvals, defective designs, and financial mismanagement, naming ministers, IAS officers, engineers, and project staff. Yet, the High Court found the inquiry flawed, as statutory safeguards under Sections 8B and 8C—ensuring fair hearings and defence—were ignored, leading to acquittals despite substantive findings. Now, the government seeks a CBI probe, which lacks technical expertise leading to long delays, and repairs to defective barges cannot wait for completion of its investigations. Since the HC upheld the KLIS panel, a practical course can be to have the Ghosh Commission revise its report in line with judicial observations and resubmit to the High Court seeking permission to initiate action against the accused. Immediate repairs to the damaged barges can be carried out to store water in the coming monsoon. Otherwise, KLIS, caught in legal battles, will remain a dead asset.

Dr O Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

TG can take a pioneering lead in EVs and safe battery disposal



ANJANI KUMAR

cars, two-wheelers and buses switching to battery power, thanks to which many big companies have made money. Will they show a similar enthusiasm over the subject of safe recycling or safe disposal?

The shift to electric promises cleaner air and reduced oil import, which is a hot subject owing to the Iran-USA-Israel war. The new challenge that has emerged is the mountain of hazardous used batteries that will pollute States at huge risks. Each battery pack contains lithium, nickel, and cobalt, which can pollute soil and water if mishandled. Improper disposal can even cause fires in landfills and waste facilities, a danger already observed when batteries end up in general waste streams.

Former IMF chief economist Gita Gopinath recently highlighted that pollution is a far more serious threat to India's economy than trade and tariff issues. She said this must be tackled as a top national mission. The time has come for all States to show leadership for allies towards achieving this dream.

States must have an immediate policy of government buyback to ensure safe recycling, prevent pollution and misuse by private players. India's electric vehicle revolution is underway, with



Without strong controls, used batteries may be sold on to scrap dealers or dumped. In fact, around 90 per cent of India's spent lithium batteries are currently handled by the unorganized sector or end up in landfills. Left in private hands without oversight, exhausted EV batteries could be stripped for valuable materials in unsafe ways or resold illegally, leading to leaks of toxic chemicals and fire hazards.

better than any patchwork of private efforts—and close loopholes that might otherwise lead to pilferage and misuse of such batteries. The need for a government buyback: No other disposal method is foolproof. Without strong controls, used batteries may be sold on to scrap dealers or dumped. In fact, around 90 per cent of India's spent lithium batteries are currently handled by the unorganized sector or end up in landfills. Left in private hands without oversight, exhausted EV batteries could be stripped

for valuable materials in unsafe ways or resold illegally, leading to leaks of toxic chemicals and fire hazards. A government buyback programme would close these gaps. They can offer consumers and businesses a safe and guaranteed way to turn in depleted batteries. By paying a fair return price for every used battery, the government can incentivize people not to dump or sell them in the black market, eliminating the profit motive for pilferage or improper reuse.

The State's involvement also means strict quality control: collected batteries go straight to authorized recycling facilities under government supervision, rather than risky backyard recyclers. This measure builds on the country's new Battery Waste Management Rules 2022, which enforce "extended producer responsibility" by requiring manufacturers to collect and recycle batteries—but a direct government-led buyback would ensure even stronger compliance and coverage.

Environmental and economic benefits of a buyback are significant. Safety recycling EV batteries prevents soil and water contamination from heavy metals, protects communities from pollution, and supports India's broader climate goals by reducing waste. It also helps conserve precious materials: each EV battery contains valuable minerals worth Rs one lakh to Rs two lakh per car on average. Instead of letting these resources go to waste or to be exported, a buyback programme allows India to recover lithium, cobalt, nickel, and more for reuse in new batteries. This reduces reliance on imported raw materials and supports a 'circular economy', where materials from old batteries are used to build new ones. It can also spur an entire domestic recycling industry, creating green jobs and economic value from what would otherwise be hazardous trash.

Globally, European Union, USA and China have already been working with government involvement in this field. If Indian States leave battery disposal entirely in private hands, there is a high-risk of dangerous loopholes—from illegal dumping to black-market resale of depleted batteries—that can harm the environment and public safety. A government buyback scheme would ensure that every used EV battery, whether from a car, scooter or bus, is accounted for and processed safely.

With air quality and climate concerns mounting, States cannot afford to let a new form of pollution to take root. A battery buyback programme, led or funded by government, would ensure every exhausted battery is collected and recycled under strict standards and help reclaim valuable metals for India's clean-energy future.

Backed by international examples and echoing Gita Gopinath's warning that environmental threats demand urgent action such as a bold state policy would turn a looming waste crisis into an opportunity for protecting public health and powering India's green economy for years to come. Telangana and Andhra Pradesh can take the lead in this national mission.

(The writer, a retired IPS officer, is a former Director General of Police)

Surekha episode exposes admin paralysis in TG

Your news story on Konda Surekha and the Endowment department conceals more and reveals less. The mystery behind the apathy of the endowment minister to perform his role continuously only speaks volumes about lack of cohesiveness in the ministry. Continuous stories about her exit from the ministry in the social media only hints at her uneasy relationship with the Chief Minister since the time he went to her residence to arrest her OSD. People have voted Congress to power to teach a lesson to K Chandrasekhar Rao, who became inaccessible to the local people with his prime ministerial ambition. The Congress seems to be unprepared for the role of ruling party. With high command holding the reins, there is political and administrative paralysis in Telangana. Your story is only one page of this pathetic script. Each page of it reveals many facets of the state government's predicament and confusion. The Congress high command must give full freedom to the Chief Minister to enable him to plan and perform better in the larger interest of the state and its public.

M N Sansawathi Devi, Secunderabad-10

Govt tie-up with DTDC illogical

THIS refers to the editorial "Courier business delivering great results in India" (THI April 28). The courier industry has grown largely because of an indifferent postal service. Yet, except for a few costly operators, many courier companies fail to provide reliable service. It appears like the government is slowly withdrawing from delivery services. This is evident from its tie-up with DTDC, whose service is often found wanting. Its delivery staff are poorly paid and barely trained, raising questions about the criteria used to choose this company.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad

Post offices-courier pact is a good augury

A PROPOS "Courier business delivering great results in India". For years, private courier companies and the post office saw each other as rivals. Now they have chosen to work together, and that is a smart move. There are over 1.60 lakh post office branches across the country, including in remote villages. Private companies have speed and technology. By joining hands, private couriers can deliver to faraway places without building new offices, and the post office stays useful and busy. This partnership helps the common person, especially in small towns, who will now get faster deliveries at fair prices. The real challenge is to make sure this works on the ground, not just on paper. But small local courier services may find it harder to compete.

K Chidnamd Kumar, Bengaluru

Courier services here to stay

THIS is further to your editorial "Courier business delivering great results in India". When the courier industry began its operation in the country in the late 1970s—the P&T dependent people were not that confident about the efficiency and faultless deliverability of the emerging courier services. But the courier service has effortlessly overtaken the traditional postal service when it comes to fast and hassle-free delivery of goods and documents. The postal service continues to entertain parcel and registered parcel services within the country, and destinations abroad. The entry of professional courier services like DHL, Blue Dart and DTDC and their pan-India network made matters easy for people to send and receive consignments of different kinds, with ease.

K R Venkata Nansimhan, Madurai

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Bengaluru retains top spot in India's startup ecosystem

BENGALURU: Minister for Rural Development, Panchayat Raj, and IT-BT, Priyank Kharge, said Bengaluru has continued to dominate India's startup ecosystem in the first quarter of 2026, attracting significant investment and maintaining its leadership position.

Addressing the media, Kharge revealed that Bengaluru recorded 89 startup deals, securing a total funding of \$823 million during the period. This performance places the city well ahead of other major startup hubs in the country. Comparatively, Delhi recorded 74 deals with funding of \$538 million, while Mumbai registered 34 deals, attracting \$402 million. "The gap clearly highlights Bengaluru's strong lead in both capital inflow and deal momentum," Kharge stated. He emphasised that Bengaluru's success is driven by a well-integrated and mature ecosystem that continues to attract high-quality entrepreneurs and global investors. "Today, Bengaluru stands as the largest startup hub outside the US, Europe, and China. It is also ranked as the fifth-largest unicorn hub globally," he said.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Mob control is everybody's responsibility



RAVULAPATI SETARAMARAO

will win respect and clout within their respective party. Because of that belief, the police face extremely difficult and complex challenges in maintaining public order.

In earlier times, if any policeman hesitated to impose control over a mob, elders would shrewdly remove that hesitation by saying, "Why are you being a coward? You should be ready to take the blows!" The police would say that their duty is to enforce law. These people have become unruly and are breaking the rules.

Police were far less likely to overstep limits, especially with regard to political leaders. Many years ago, when senior leaders of a party staged a sit-in protest in the scorching sun, police said, "We will have to make arrests." The leaders replied respectfully, "Please give us one hour time. In the meantime we will explain to the public why we are holding this protest. That's the point of the demonstration. If you come to arrest us after an hour, we will certainly follow you to the police station."

In that sweltering heat, some of the leaders who sat in the protest were still wearing shirts and had scarves on their heads! They couldn't tolerate it for even an hour and this visiting to see when the police would come to make arrests. Those peacefully protesting hadn't taken on any covert role to disturb public peace, so the police treated them lightly and



There's a felt need for courses on "crowd management" in schools, universities, and research programs. Even those tempted to cause mischief might think twice if informed by such knowledge. A knowledgeable society with law abiding citizens is the compelling need. Similarly, humane police with a touch of firmness are the present day requirement.

turned to other duties. Why the delay? The key leader in the protest shouted, "Why are you late? We're ready to be arrested—come quickly and do your duty," he announced. After the police completed that "formality" the story would end happily. Since the police performed their duty, no problems would arise. Where are the leaders who respect the law now?

In this modern age, everyone treats laws as mere pieces of paper! As soon as the other side slips up, the political opponent makes a huge fuss—accusing them of "violating the law" and saying "the police are in their

to fights and injuries, people pushing onto police, tearing uniforms, grabbing collars, and a small group publicly shaming the police. When those doing this are in power, they turn around and sneer, "What's this! Is it the job of the police to maintain peace and security?" and talk with cynical double-talk. After that, the usual routine follows: inquiries, suspensions. If you count how many clashes like this have happened in our country over time, anyone with even a little insight and sorrow for this wayward society would despair at how to set it right.

Nine people died in a stampede near the Sita Mata temple in Bihar's Nalanda district. On the same day the President came to address the Nalanda University's convocation. At the temple there were many worshippers but only a few police officers were on duty. Far more people were deployed for the President because of protocol—as an example of this kind of failure, the crowd-control breakdown during the RCB victory procession in Bengaluru (2025) can be cited. The stampede at a meeting of a film star in Tamil Nadu and the various similar incidents and failures in the Telugu states are other examples of unresolvable problems.

Given the situation, the police may have no choice but to try new methods to keep mobs under control. They feel compelled to identify agitators—and make it

Regulations have become highly micro in nature in India. Instead, we need to have the kind of ecosystem that rewards innovation, encourages you to scale fast and fail fast, that you can get up again and try again

-Anandhath Bhattacharya, CEO, Salesforce - South Asia

BIZ BRIEFS

Vahan.ai's VPL 2026

Vahan.ai has launched the Vahan Placement League (VPL) 2026, inviting Vahan Leaders across Telangana to compete in its biggest placement competition yet. With a total prize pool exceeding ₹1 crore, this year's league features marquee rewards including Mahindra XUV700, Tata Nexon, Tata Punch, Harley-Davidson X440, BMW G310 RR, and paid international vacations. Running through March 23 and 31, alongside the IPL season, VPL 2026 is a 10-week competition.

April Fiesta at Inorbit Mall

Inorbit Mall Cyberabad turned into a cultural hub this April with fashion, entertainment, and interactive events. A live violin fusion by Amal Varghese set the tone. The ongoing 9-day Style Lab offers workshops and creative activities. Masterclasses by Shikha Khemka drew strong participation. A month-long Decathlon engagement further boosted footfall, attracting families and fitness enthusiasts, enhancing the mall's appeal as an experiential lifestyle destination.

AM/NS India appoints CFO

AccorMittal Nippon Steel India (AM/NS India) announced the appointment of Nobuo Okochi as Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of the company, with effect from July 1. This appointment follows the recent announcement of Amit Harlalka, the current CFO, being elevated as Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Nobuo Okochi has four decades of experience with Nippon Steel Corporation, having held senior leadership roles across finance, financial planning and capital budgeting, as well as global business development.

Cohance's new leader

Cohance Lifesciences Limited, a technology-driven, integrated CDMO platform, announced the appointment of Umang Vohra as Executive Chairman, from May 1 and Group CEO, effective May 20. Vohra succeeds Vivek Sharma, who steps down as Executive Chairman for personal reasons. Umang Vohra said, "I am very excited to be joining Cohance. I believe deeply in the long-term value creation potential of this platform. Cohance's technology offerings, depth of its R&D talent."

ABHFL opens new branch

Aditya Birla Housing Finance Limited (ABHFL), a housing finance company, has expanded its footprint in Telangana with the launch of a new branch in Mynapur (Hyderabad), with this, ABHFL's total network in Telangana has increased to 9 branches. Panikaj Gaddig, MD, ABHFL said, "Telangana is a key growth market for us. With strong demand and rising aspirations, we are scaling our regional presence to deepen customer engagement."

Industrial output loses steam as power sector stalls, mfg stays muted

Mining picks up, but not enough to offset slowdown in core sectors

NEW DELHI

- IIP growth slows to 4.1% in March 2026 (5-month low)
- February revised to 5.1%
- Manufacturing growth at 4.3% (still weak)
- Power sector nearly stagnant at 0.8%
- Mining improves to 5.5%



INDIA's industrial production growth decelerated to a five-month low of 4.1 per cent in March on account of subdued manufacturing growth and almost flat expansion in the power sector amid the West Asia crisis, according to official data released on Tuesday.

The factory output, measured in terms of the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), expanded by 3.9 per cent in March 2025, an official statement said.

The National Statistics Office (NSO) revised the industrial production growth for February 2026 to 5.1 per cent from the provisional estimate of 5.2 per cent released last month.

The previous low of IIP

growth was recorded at 0.5 per cent expansion in October 2025.

The NSO data further showed that the manufacturing sector's output growth remained subdued at 4.3 per cent in March 2026 compared to 4 per cent in the year-ago month.

Mining production growth improved to 5.5 per cent from a meagre growth of 1.2 per cent recorded a year ago.

Power generation grew marginally by 0.8 per cent in March against 7.5 per cent expansion in the year-ago period.

In fiscal year 2025-26, the country's industrial production growth remained almost flat at 4.1 per cent compared to 4 per cent a year ago.

In the manufacturing sector, 14 out of 23 industry groups have recorded a positive growth in March 2026 over March 2025, it stated.

The top three positive contributors for March 2026 are 'Manufacture of basic metals' (8.6 per cent), 'Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers' (18.1 per cent) and 'Manufacture of machinery and equipment n.e.c.' (11.2 per cent).

In the industry group 'Manufacture of basic metals', item groups 'MS slabs', 'Flat products of Alloy Steel' and 'HR coils and sheets of mild steel' have shown significant contribution in growth.

As per the use-based classification, the indices stand at 173.3 for primary goods, 156.2 for capital goods, 181.4 for intermediate goods and 229.0 for infrastructure/construction goods for March 2026.

Further, the indices for consumer durables and consumer non-durables stand at 146.2 and 150.6, respectively.

The corresponding growth rates of IIP as per Use-based classification in March 2026 over March 2025 are 2.2 per cent in primary goods, 14.6 per cent in capital goods, 3.3 per cent in intermediate goods, 6.7 per cent in infrastructure/construction goods, 5.3 per cent in consumer durables and 1.1 per cent in consumer non-durables.

ED attaches Anil Ambani's Mumbai flat, son's Khandala farmhouse

NEW DELHI: The ED on Tuesday said it has attached a Mumbai flat belonging to industrialist Anil Ambani and a Khandala farmhouse held jointly by his son Jai Anshul Ambani under a Rs 3,034 crore worth attachment in a bank "fraud"-linked money laundering probe against Reliance Communications.

The provisional attachment under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) has been made to prevent dissipation of assets and to protect the interests of banks and the public, the Enforcement Directorate said in a statement.

Reliance Communications (RCOM) is a company of the Reliance Anil Ambani Group (RAAG).

According to a RAAG spokesperson, some of the attached properties belong to Kokilaben D. Ambani, Anil Ambani's mother.

The money laundering case stems from a clutch of CBI FIRs registered on the basis of the complaints of State Bank of India, Punjab National Bank, Bank of Baroda and Life Insurance Corporation of India against RCOM, Anil Ambani and others.

RCOM and its group companies availed loans from domestic and foreign lenders, of which, a total amount of Rs 40,185 crore is outstanding, according to the ED.

India's patent boom hits 1.4 lakh, but quality gap widens

NEW DELHI: INDIA'S patent filings crossed the 1.4 lakh mark in FY26, driven by a sharp rise in resident applications, a Nasscom report said on Tuesday, calling for a shift from a filing led mindset to a value driven patent ecosystem.

According to the report, filings grew 30.2 per cent in FY26 after a 19.8 per cent rise in FY25. The surge was driven by resident filings up 46.2 per cent in FY26 and 32.2 per cent in FY25.

Resident filings accounted



for nearly 70 per cent of applications led by strong participation from startups, MSMEs, educational institutions, and individual innovators. Computer technology's share of filings rose to 19.1 per cent in FY26 from 16.3 per cent in FY25.

India's patent filings saw the ninth consecutive year of growth and setting new highs in annual expansion, the report noted. The shift from a filing-led mindset to a value-driven patent ecosystem will require a sharper focus on improving filing-to-grant conversion rates, strengthening the quality of patent applications, and enhancing support across examination and prosecution stages, the report noted.

Mumbai overtakes Bengaluru as fintech funding hub in Q1 2026

Investors shift to selective, high-value bets as deal volume drops 54% YoY

NEW DELHI



FUNDING in India's financial technology (fintech) sector remained largely flat at USD 513 million in the first quarter of 2026, but the number of deals plummeted by 54 per cent year-on-year, signalling a structural shift towards fewer, larger investments, market intelligence firm Tracxn said on Tuesday.

According to the 'QoQ Quarterly Report - India FinTech Q1 2026' by Tracxn, the sector witnessed just 45 funding rounds in the January-March period, a sharp decline from 99 rounds in the corresponding quarter

of 2025. Total funding saw a marginal 2 per cent increase from USD 503 million in Q1 2025, though it declined 9 per cent sequentially from USD 562 million in Q4 2025.

"The flat headline masks a structural shift: the same capital concentrated across half the deals, with average cheque sizes more than doubling. The signal is not retreat, but selection: investors

are writing bigger cheques into fewer, later-stage companies with demonstrated unit economics," the report noted.

A significant chunk of the quarter's capital was driven by a single mega-deal. Mumbai-based housing finance platform Weaver raised USD 156 million, accounting for nearly a third of the total funding in the quarter.

In terms of cities, Mumbai dethroned Bengaluru as the top destination for fintech investments.

Mumbai-based startups captured 61 per cent (USD 311 million) of the total funding, a massive jump from just 9 per cent a year ago.

Infosys tops LinkedIn's 2026 India career growth rankings

Bengaluru stays top talent hub; Hyderabad, Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai follow

NEW DELHI

- Infosys ranks No.1 for career growth in India, followed by Accenture and Amazon
- JPMorgan Chase and SAP complete the top five
- List includes 25 large companies; 10 are new entrants in 2026
- New entrants include SAP, NVIDIA, HP, Microsoft, Sandisk, Marvell Technology, Thomson Reuters



IT major Infosys has emerged as the top company for career growth in India, followed by Accenture and Amazon, according to LinkedIn's 2026 Top Companies' list released on Tuesday.

The 10th edition of the annual list, which features 25 large companies, is dominated by technology powerhouses, global consulting firms, and financial giants. JPMorgan Chase and SAP secured the fourth and fifth positions, respectively.

The 2026 list witnessed ten new entrants. Notable new additions include tech firms such as SAP, NVIDIA, HP, Microsoft, Sandisk, Marvell Technology, and Thomson Reuters.

Geographically, Bengaluru continues to lead as the prominent talent hub for these top companies.

Hyderabad follows closely, while Delhi, Mumbai, and Chennai remain key hiring centres for large corporations. The report highlighted a shifting focus in hiring

trends, noting that companies are increasingly looking for professionals who can blend technical fluency with human skills—such as communication and problem-solving—that artificial intelligence (AI) cannot replace. "This year's top companies list clearly signals that hirers are looking at proof of skills as much as they are looking at their presence. Companies across technology, finance, and software are looking for professionals who can pair irreplaceable human strengths with the ability to work alongside AI to maximise efficiency and value," Nirajita Banerjee, LinkedIn Career Expert and India Senior Managing Editor, said.

UAE exits OPEC, OPEC+ in big jolt to oil cartel

NEW DELHI



THE United Arab Emirates announced on Tuesday that it was leaving the OPEC and OPEC+ cartels in what is seen as a major setback to the group of oil-exporting countries led by Saudi Arabia.

The UAE said the decision reflected its "long-term strategic and economic vision and evolving energy profile".

The Gulf state's Energy Minister Suhail Al Mazrouei said that being a country with no obligation under the groups would provide more flexibility.

In a public statement shared on X, Mazrouei said: "The UAE's decision to exit OPEC aligns with sector policy-driven developments and is consistent with long-term market fundamentals."

"We express our appreciation to OPEC and member states for decades of constructive cooperation. We

reaffirm our commitment to energy security by providing reliable, responsible, and low-emission supplies, supporting global market stability," he added.

The exit of the UAE is expected to weaken the oil cartel at a time when the Persian Gulf countries have taken a huge hit to their exports due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz by an embattled Iran. The UAE accounts for around 15 per cent of the OPEC oil exports.

Analysts see the exit of the UAE from the OPEC cartel as a huge gain for US President Donald Trump, who has been lashing out at the group for inflating oil prices at the cost of other countries.

Demand surges, margins wobble: Maruti's Q4 tells a mixed story

NEW DELHI



THE country's largest carmaker Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) on Tuesday reported a 6.45 per cent decline in its consolidated net profit to Rs 3,659 crore for the fourth quarter ended March 31, 2026, due to mark-to-market impact despite record vehicle sales.

The auto major had posted a net profit of Rs 3,911.1 crore in the same quarter of the preceding fiscal, Maruti Suzuki India said in a regulatory filing.

The net profit declined primarily due to mark-to-market impact, the company said, adding that there was lower non-operating income, a notional loss due to a change in bond yields, which can be recovered at a later stage.

Its total revenue from operations inched up 28.2 per cent to Rs 52,462.5 crore in the fourth quarter against Rs 40,920.1 crore in the same period of 2024-25, it added.

Net sales crossed the Rs 50,000 crore milestone for the first time in the fourth

quarter, the company said.

Total expenses in the quarter under review were higher at Rs 48,125.3 crore compared to Rs 37,585.5 crore in the year-ago period, the company said.

During the fourth quarter, the company said it recorded its highest-ever total quarterly sales of 6,76,209 units, up 11.8 per cent from the year-ago period.

Domestic sales stood at 5,38,994 units and exports at an all-time high of 1,37,215 units, Maruti Suzuki India said. The board of directors has recommended a record dividend of Rs 140 per share for the year, compared to Rs 135 per share in 2024-25, it added.

For the fiscal year ended March 31, 2026, its consolidated net profit grew slightly by 1.24 per cent to Rs 14,679.5 crore against Rs 14,500.2 crore in the previous fiscal.

Markets retreat amid surging oil prices, foreign fund outflows

Deep losses in banking, financial and auto stocks also dragged the equity benchmarks lower



MUMBAI: Stock market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty buckled under selling pressure on Tuesday as a sharp rally in oil prices and foreign fund outflows amid persistent geopolitical uncertainties dented investors' sentiment. Deep losses in banking, financial and auto stocks also dragged the equity benchmarks lower, traders said.

The 30-share BSE Sensex declined 416.72 points, or 0.54 per cent, to settle at 76,886.91. During the day, it lost 562.57 points, or 0.72 per cent, to 76,741.06. A total of 2,257 stocks declined, while 1,998 advanced and 172 remained unchanged on the BSE. The 30-share gauge NSE Nifty dropped 97 points, or 0.40 per cent, to end at 23,995.70.

"The session was largely influenced by persistent geopolitical uncertainty, particularly around US-Iran negotiations, which kept crude oil prices elevated and weighed on sentiment." Additionally,

pressure in banking stocks following regulatory developments related to provisioning norms further capped the upside. Despite these headwinds, buying in select ind-heavyweights and commodity-linked stocks, along with stock-specific earnings triggers, helped cushion the

downside," Ajit Mishra - SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

From the 30-Sensex firms, Axis Bank, HCL Tech, InterGlobe Aviation, Maruti, State Bank of India and ICICI Bank were among the biggest laggards. In contrast, Reliance Industries, Bharti Airtel, Tech Mahindra and Sun Pharma were among the gainers.

The BSE SmallCap Select index climbed 0.42 per cent, while the BSE MidCap Select index dipped 0.27 per cent. Among sectoral indices, PSU bank dropped (2.20 per cent), bankex declined 1.61 per cent, top 10 banks (1.44 per cent), private banks (1.23 per cent), auto (0.98 per cent) and hospitals (0.95 per cent).

"The Reserve Bank of India has finalised the implementation of the Expected Credit Loss (ECL) framework from April 2027, replacing the incurred loss model with a forward-looking system that enables earlier recognition of credit risks and continuous monitoring.

Negative Sentiment

- BSE Sensex fell 416.72pts (-0.54%) to 76,886.91
- NSE Nifty dropped 97pts (-0.40%) to 23,995.70
- FII offloaded equities worth Rs1,151.48 crore on Monday



A false high

The SIRs impact must be factored in before revisiting turnout figures

There is a tendency in India to reduce democracy to the mere conduct of elections, and to confine political life to "political society" — that subset of the population actively engaged in setting policy and in mediating welfare delivery. This points to a democracy that falls short of a deliberative or deeply participative model, even in socio-economically better-off States such as Tamil Nadu (T.N.) and Kerala. Yet, elections are not a one-off event, and turnout remains a useful dipstick for the vibrancy of the democratic exercise, particularly in India where the poorer sections vote in large numbers. By that measure, the headline figures from T.N. and the first phase of the poll in West Bengal appear daunting and unprecedented. According to provisional Election Commission of India (ECI) data, 93.2% of voters turned out in the first phase in West Bengal and 85.1% in T.N. These record numbers must be read against the backdrop of the ECI's Special Intensive Revision (SIR), which led to massive net voter deletions. In T.N., the rolls shrank by 10.5% from the pre-SIR figure, while in West Bengal nearly 13% of the electorate was deleted, with the eligibility of lakhs of voters still being heard by tribunals. If this is factored in, the percentage turnout begins to look inflated by a reduced denominator (total electorate) rather than by genuinely expanded participation (the numerator). The absolute increase in turnout in T.N. — about 27 lakh votes on provisional figures — was in fact among the lowest in recent electoral cycles, suggesting that wrongful deletions may have suppressed real participation even if the SIR did clear the electoral rolls of those who had died or moved out. The effect was sharpest in cities such as Chennai, where several constituencies recorded turnout above 80%, a jump of over 20 percentage points, even though the absolute number of voters — around 24 lakh — remained virtually unchanged from the 2021 elections.

It is also difficult to read too much into turnout in either State. High turnout has long been a feature of politically charged West Bengal, and T.N. has also been no slouch in recent electoral cycles compared to the rest of India. Also, political scientists have found little correlation between turnout levels and pro- or anti-incumbency outcomes. Once published, turnout percentages tend to acquire a life of their own and are cited as proof of democratic enthusiasm or the strength of a mandate, or, in T.N.'s case, the impact of a new political player such as actor Vijay's Tamilara Vetri Kazhagam. But a percentage is only as meaningful as the denominator it rests on, and in these two States, the denominator itself has been substantially altered. Turnout figures must therefore be read alongside how the electorate was determined before any conclusions about the mandate are drawn from the actual results.

Battle of wills

The U.S. should lift its blockade so that Iran can open the Strait of Hormuz

The U.S. war on Iran has turned into a battle of wills in the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman, marked by duelling naval blockades and stalled diplomacy. Iran, which has effectively restricted the free flow of traffic through the Strait of Hormuz since the U.S. and Israel attacks on February 28, has refused to ease its control over the critical waterway. The U.S. insists that its blockade of Iranian ports will stay in place until a deal is reached. Last week, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi travelled to Pakistan, which mediated the first round of direct talks on April 11, but Iran declined further direct talks with Washington. The White House had earlier said it would send special envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner to Islamabad, but President Donald Trump cancelled their trip after Mr. Araghchi left the Pakistani capital. Mr. Trump has repeatedly said that Iran wants a deal. Yet, Tehran continues to refuse talks with the U.S., citing Israel's attacks on Lebanon and America's blockade in the Gulf of Oman. On paper, a ceasefire is in place in Lebanon, and Mr. Trump said earlier this month that Israel was "prohibited" from attacking the country, but Israeli air strikes have continued. He has also indicated no urgency to lift the blockade, betting that sustained economic pressure will force Iran to change its position.

The only silver lining is that the Iran ceasefire, announced on April 8, is still holding. Despite Mr. Trump's threats, he has held fire even after Iran seized ships in the Persian Gulf. Tehran, too, despite warning retaliation over a U.S. seizure of an Iranian tanker, has not followed through. Both sides have remained diplomatically engaged through Pakistan. The alternative to diplomacy is disaster. The U.S. and Israel bombed Iran for 40 days but failed to secure a favourable strategic outcome, and the global economic fallout of this illegal war is now being felt. For diplomacy to succeed, Mr. Trump and the Iranian leadership should adopt a phased approach. Rather than acting as if the war has not changed the region's strategic realities, the U.S. should offer tangible concessions to Iran in return for compromises on core issues. Iran has demonstrated a measure of deterrence by asserting control over the Strait of Hormuz. But if it continues to disrupt commercial traffic, further damaging the global economy, it risks squandering the goodwill it enjoys as the underdog. A practical first step would be reciprocal de-escalation: the U.S. lifting its blockade and Iran reopening the Strait to commercial shipping. This would also reinforce the fragile ceasefire and build confidence, paving the way for the next round of direct talks on outstanding issues, including the nuclear programme.

Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma of the Delhi High Court refused to recuse herself from hearing the Delhi liquor policy case — *Central Bureau of Investigation vs Kalden Singh and Ors.* (April 20, 2026) — involving the former Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, and others. This episode marks an unfortunate deviation from India's jurisprudence on judicial recusal.

Mr. Kejriwal argued the recusal plea by appearing as party in person in the High Court. He submitted that the judge should not hear the Central Bureau of Investigation's plea against the discharge of the accused, including himself, in the excise policy case, as ordered by the trial court. The prominent grounds cited in his plea included adverse findings by the judge in earlier proceedings in the same case; the judge's alleged ideological proclivity, as reflected in her attendance at events organised by the Akhil Bharatiya Adhivakta Parishad, or ABAP (a lawyers' organisation inclined towards the political philosophy of the ruling regime at the Centre); the fact that the judge's children were working as panel advocates under the Centre/government, with case files to be allotted by the Solicitor General, who, incidentally, was representing the opposing side in the case; and a statement by Home Minister Amit Shah implying that Mr. Kejriwal would lose the case in the High Court. Because of these factors, he contended that he reasonably apprehended bias in the process of adjudication.

Law on recusal

The law on recusal of a judge is not codified in India. It is more an ethical issue than a technical one. Yet, the jurisprudence on recusal is rich as it takes in precedents and best practices across the globe. The 19th century idea about judges with its Victorian overtones is reflected in the British case of *Leeson vs General Council of Medical Education and Registration* (1889) where Lord Bowen said that like Caesar's wife, judges should be above suspicion. The proverbial idea that justice should not only be done but also be seen to have been done was articulated by *Lord Hewart in R vs Sussex Justices* (1923).

What transpired in the Delhi High Court exposes the risk of judges not strictly adhering to the Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct, the draft of which was finalised at the Round Table Meeting of judges from many countries at The Hague in 2002. They enumerate independence, impartiality, integrity, propriety, equality, competence and diligence as accepted 'judicial values'. Among other things, they say that "a



Kaleswaram Raj

Lawyer at the Supreme Court of India

Judicial recusal principles have been tested in the Delhi liquor policy case

judge shall avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety in all of the judge's activities".

In *Ranjit Thakur vs Union Of India And Ors.* (1987), the Supreme Court of India explained that the "proper approach" for a judge when faced with a request for recusal "is not to look at his own mind and ask himself, however, honestly, 'Am I biased?', but to look at the mind of the party before him". In *P.K. Ghosh, I.A.S. and Ant. vs J.G. Rajput* (1995) the Court said that when the litigant feels on reasonable basis that a particular judge should not hear his case, and when there are alternatives, recusal by the judge is the appropriate course, for maintaining public confidence in the system. In *State Of Punjab vs Davinder Pal Singh Bhullar and Ors. Etc.* (2011), the Court said that "a mere ground of appearance of bias and not actual bias is enough to vitiate the judgment/order".

In *Supreme Court Advocates-On-Record Association vs Union Of India* (2015), the Court reiterated some of the judicial values. The judgment said, "The simple question is, whether the adjudication by the Judge concerned, would cause a reasonable doubt in the mind of a reasonably informed litigant and fair-minded public as to his impartiality." Unlike administrative decision making, where the adjudicative authority is often stipulated in the statute or the rule, there is no doctrine of necessity in judicial proceedings when there are alternatives.

The judgment of the top court in *State of W.B. vs Shivananda Pathak* (1998) was an admonition against judicial obstinacy. Thus, with the possible exceptions such as Justice Arun Mishra's refusal to recuse in *Indore Development Authority vs Manoharlal And Ors.* (2019), the Supreme Court has, by and large, rejected the "duty to sit doctrine" evolved in the United States.

The challenge before the judge

Legal scholar James Sample opined that "the teachable moments on disqualification are in the Court's Court". This, again, is a call not only for ensuring fairness but also for maintaining the appearance of fairness. The real challenge before the judge is to overcome the possibility for subjectivity in adjudicative process especially when the very same judge whose recusal is sought is deciding the question of recusal.

Distinguished American jurist Benjamin N. Cardozo famously wrote, "We may try to see things as objectively as we please. None the less, we can never see them with any eyes except our own." The maxim that no one should sit in judgment in her own cause is too well settled.

Viewed in the light of these principles, Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma should have recused herself or at least insisted that the recusal plea should be placed before another judge for hearing. Such a course would have facilitated a more objective evaluation of the contentions raised by Mr. Kejriwal apart from averting the present scenario. But neither of these happened and the present judgment followed.

Fairness of process

The judgment issued on April 20, 2026 does not reflect the correct judicial approach. The judge said that she had to decide between a litigant and herself. It was further stated in the judgment that the suspicion of bias expressed in the recusal plea was unfounded and that the allegations were manufactured. The judge asked, "... if the children of politicians can enter politics, how would it be just to question the children of a Judge who study like others, struggle like others, and prove themselves in Court like others to earn their livelihood?" One would wonder if this was the argument made by Mr. Kejriwal.

Mr. Kejriwal, in his rejoinder, had reportedly said that "conflict arises not from prior participation in the present proceedings, but from the admitted existence of a live, active and ongoing professional relationship with the prosecuting side". The judge also justified her attendance at an event organised by the ABAP, and stated that she had attended events conducted by academic bodies as well. The judgment mistakes criticism of the judge as one of judicial establishment. The verdict is also self-defensive, argumentative and accusatorial rather than analytical. It is vulnerable to further legal challenge. After the judgment, Mr. Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia wrote letters to the judge stating that they would not participate in further proceedings before her in the present matter.

In a case with serious political ramifications, the grounds raised by Mr. Kejriwal and others were relevant and required a more objective assessment, rather than a subjective affirmation based on a notion of a "presumption of impartiality", as stated in the judgment. The verdict substitutes the well-settled legal position that a reasonable apprehension of bias is sufficient for a plea of recusal with a requirement to demonstrate actual bias. This is patently erroneous.

The judge rightly said that, in the recusal plea, she was effectively being tried by the litigant. But the outcome of this "trial", unless corrected, will remain an embarrassing precedent for a system already in crisis.

The RTE Act and the idea of social inclusion

In its January 2026 judgment, the Supreme Court of India reaffirmed the purpose of Section 120(c) of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, the landmark provision that reserves 25% of seats in private schools for students from economically weaker sections and socially disadvantaged groups. In words that are deeply symbolic, the Court observed that this provision makes it possible for "the child of a multi-millionaire or even of a Judge of the Supreme Court of India to sit in the same classroom and at the same bench as the child of an auto-rickshaw driver or a street vendor". The judgment reasserted that this provision is a deliberate constitutional strategy to operationalise equality of status by creating shared learning spaces for all children.

This sentiment of social integration often comes alive in thousands of stories across the country. Take Karthik, a footwear vendor, and his wife, Sumita, for example. They always dreamed of providing their children with quality education despite their modest income. This became possible when their younger son joined a reputed private school through this provision. The boy thrived in the new environment, excelling in academics and his favourite sport, kabaddi. Teachers nurtured his growth, while classmates became close friends. For Karthik and Sumita, the RTE Act did not just change their son's future; it altered their family's life trajectory, with the potential to lift them out of poverty. Stories such as Prem's are often told as narratives of access — of doors opened and opportunities unlocked. But at stake is not simply where a child studies, but whether the circumstances of their birth continue to determine the boundaries of their social world.

A constitutional strategy Despite its intent, Section 120(c) is frequently mischaracterised as a tool to promote private



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The Supreme Court of India's judgment strengthens the vision of a socially integrated education system

schooling or to allow the state to outsource its constitutional duty to public education, citing falling government school enrolment alongside rising private school admissions.

This reading is misplaced. First, Section 120(c) does not dilute the state's duty to invest in public schools, but recognises that the right to free and compulsory elementary education, and the creation of shared learning spaces, must be realised within a schooling ecosystem where private schools are not incidental actors but natural participants in fulfilling a constitutional mandate. The RTE Act does not create a zero-sum contest between public and private institutions; it seeks to foster integrated educational spaces.

Second, the shift towards private schooling predated the RTE Act. The Annual Status of Education (ASER) Report of 2006 documents significant movement into private schools "at the expense of government school enrolment". Declining admissions in government schools are rooted in deeper concerns around infrastructure, teacher presence, and perceived quality — not in Section 120(c) itself.

Evidence from the ground

Since its rollout, over five million children have walked through the doors of educational spaces previously out of reach, with retention rates averaging over 90%. In cities such as Delhi and Ahmedabad, blended classrooms are no longer exceptions; they are the norm. Research (such as that by Rao, Gautam, 2019) indicates that mixed classrooms lead to increased generosity, reduced discrimination, and stronger pro-social behaviour, without any adverse impact on academic outcomes or classroom discipline. At scale, implementation has also stabilised: reimbursements under Section 120(c) are centrally streamlined, and State-level online Management Information Systems (MIS) ensure

transparent, low-discretion processing.

For children from disadvantaged backgrounds, these classrooms offer more than just academics. They provide access to social capital, previously unexplored aspirations, peer networks, and institutional cultures. These experiences translate into higher self-belief, enhanced ambition, and a broader worldview.

Acknowledging challenges

There is no denying the challenges that persist in the implementation of Section 120(c). Some private schools continue to resist full inclusion, while families often bear hidden costs for uniforms, books and materials. Implementation remains uneven across States, with persistent gaps in transparency, grievance redress, and last-mile outreach and disbursements.

These challenges do not change the fact that Section 120(c) was not meant to rely solely on moral persuasion — it requires clear, enforceable rules to succeed. Encouragingly, recent experience demonstrates that these gaps are neither inevitable nor insurmountable. State-driven digital admission systems and improved monitoring mechanisms — particularly in Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Delhi — have significantly strengthened access and accountability.

The Court's reaffirmation of Section 120(c) makes clear that it is neither a retreat from public education nor an endorsement of private schooling. The challenge now is administrative. States must ensure timely reimbursements, remove hidden costs by private schools, strengthen grievance redress, and enforce inclusion norms so that equality is experienced. The real test is whether we can operationalise the constitutional promise of social integration with the seriousness needed to match the ambition we hold for our children.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The New Zealand FTA
India's strategy of "friendship diversification" is necessary for safeguarding against global supply chain volatility, especially after experiencing U.S. President Donald Trump's overwhelming friendship, which brought our labour-intensive industries to their knees. The New Zealand FTA serves as a masterclass in "defensive liberalisation". While New Zealand is a powerhouse in dairy and horticulture, India has successfully ring-fenced its sensitive dairy sector, which

is non-negotiable for rural livelihood security. The FTA should be viewed not as a primary market for volume, but as a chance to engage with a quality and technology partner.

A. Thiruganasambantham,
Coimbatore

The serpent's bite
The issue of tackling snakebites in India highlights a crisis sustained as much by superstition as by systemic gaps. Harmful practices persist, such as making the snake bite again in the hope that it will take the venom back, or

delaying treatment while seeking faith healers. Sleeping on the ground further increases exposure in rural areas. Therefore, public health strategy must prioritise behavioural change alongside antivenom supply. Targeted awareness campaigns, school-level education, and community health worker training can replace myths with first-aid protocols grounded in science.

Harsh Pawaria,
Rohtak, Haryana

Equally, preventive innovation matters. The

Kisan Mitra Chhadi — a sensor-based stick that warns farmers of nearby snakes — is a practical, low-cost complement to clinical solutions. Prevention and cure must advance together.

A. Myilsami,
Coimbatore

In India, where snakebites remain a serious public health concern, administering anti-snake venom and managing its reactions cannot be left to a few specialists. Most patients first reach primary and taluk hospitals, where

delays can be fatal. While infrastructure gaps may take time to address, training can be implemented immediately. Structured training in snakebite first aid, anti-snake venom administration, and anaphylaxis management must be made mandatory for all doctors.

Anantha D. Kalyani,
Pallippuram, Palakkad, Kerala

Officials of the Kerala Forest Department have showcased "SARPA" (the Snake Awareness, Rescue, and Protection app) as a

tool that can help save the lives of snakebite victims and connect users with snake rescuers. However, the app is currently available only on the Android platform and can be downloaded only from the Google Play Store. I request the Forest Department to make the app available on the App Store as well, so that iPhone users can also benefit from it.

Surendran K.T.,
Kaloor, Ennakulam, Kerala

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

The fight to eliminate cervical cancer

In 2008, Professor Harald zur Hausen received the Nobel Prize for his discovery that persistent infection with high-risk strains of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is the cause of cervical cancer, an important cause of morbidity and mortality globally, but more so in low and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs). His discovery paved the way for the development of prophylactic vaccines as well as tests to detect the infectious agent. A decade later, in 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced an initiative for the elimination of cervical cancer, and the global strategy was formally launched on November 17, 2020, endorsed by 194 countries, India among them.



Neeraja Bhatla
Professor Emeritus, National Cancer Institute, Hajjar, Former Head of Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi

pap smear screening had been set up in the West, enabling detection of not just cancer but also precancerous stages. The natural history of cervical cancer has been well documented for over a century. It has a long precancerous phase of 10-15 years termed Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN) which can be detected by the microscopic examination of cells collected on a slide by brushing the cervix. At this stage, the cancer can be easily treated by simple day care procedures that do not require the removal of the uterus.

However, in India and other LMICs, we lacked the infrastructure and manpower to implement a screening of all women over the age of 30 years even once, let alone the recommended three-year interval period. Even in good tertiary centres, the laboratory placed a limit on the number of women that could be screened in a day. Outreach camps were conducted at regular intervals by gynaecologists and pathologists around the country, but these were merely a drop in the ocean. Even today, despite a national programme for screening with visual inspection, the screening coverage does not exceed 5%. Moreover, bringing women who test positive into the hospital for a confirmatory biopsy and treatment has extremely poor compliance rates.

The promise of a vaccine
HPV vaccination entered this scenario in 2006 like a superhero for the primary prevention of cervical cancer. Starting off as a three-dose vaccination, research showed that it could be reduced to two, and then it was found that just one dose was sufficient to provide protection against 85-90% of cancers. Over 500 million doses have been delivered worldwide, and nearly four million in India. Cumulative data from systematic trials and post-marketing surveillance show no increase in adverse events

among vaccinated women than in the general population. Transient mild reactions have been observed that are common to all vaccines. There have been no negative effects on reproductive performance, fertility rates, congenital malformations or menstrual patterns. The efficacy of the HPV vaccine is remarkable, with nearly complete protection against the strains which are present in the vaccine. The first generation of vaccines were directed against the two most virulent strains, HPV 16 and 18, that account for 70% of cervical cancers globally but 85% in India. Countries like Australia and the U.K. which introduced the HPV vaccine soon after its launch in 2007-8 have already witnessed significant reductions in pre-cancer and cancer. Similar reports have come from other countries like Sweden, Denmark, Canada and the U.S.

Widespread accessibility
The WHO's cervical cancer elimination initiative envisions making cervical cancer a rare cancer, with an incidence rate of four per 1,00,000. To reach this goal, we must achieve certain targets by 2030: HPV vaccination of 90% of girls before the age of 15 years, screening of 70% of women with an HPV test at 35 and 45 years, and treatment of 90% of those detected with lesions. While the country has already crossed the halfway point since the launch of the global declaration, we are still far away from reaching these targets. However, the launch of the National HPV Vaccination Campaign on February 28, 2026 by the Prime Minister himself signals the highest political commitment to women's health and reproductive rights. All parents need to be aware of this opportunity so that their 14-year-old daughters can avail free vaccination at the nearest government health facilities. One small job will take us towards a cervical cancer-free future and a Viksit Bharat by 2047.

Disease and prevention

Cervical cancer is a source of extreme physical misery, emotional strife and financial hardship. It is the second most common cancer among women in India, with approximately one lakh new cases every year, and half as many deaths, which is one quarter of the global burden. The years of life lost to cervical cancer are more than that of other cancers as these women are relatively younger, with active family and social responsibilities. Women diagnosed with stage 4 cervical cancer could develop urinary fistulas, postmenopausal bleeding, extreme sciatic and lumbar pain, obstruction to their uteruses and renal failure. If one is lucky enough to get diagnosed at an earlier stage, the cancer is curable, but only with radical surgery or chemo and radiation therapy. There is also a risk of recurrence which will require even more difficult operation procedures, stomas etc. That is, while the cancer is curable by providing symptom relief, hormone replacement and other supportive care, it comes at a physical and financial cost.

However, such suffering was preventable. Since the 1940s, secondary prevention by regular

Cumulative data from systematic trials and post-marketing surveillance show no increase in adverse events among vaccinated women than in the general population

A question of choice

A retracted ban on government staff joining parties has led to intense debate

STATE OF PLAY

Shubhomoy Sikdar
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An order by Chhattisgarh's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government that at first glance seemed innocuous – and its hasty withdrawal – has triggered a debate on the political leanings of serving government employees.

On April 21, a circular issued by the General Administration Department – which comes under Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai – stated that no government employee could become a member of any political party or organisation; participate in any of its activities; or hold office within it. Referring to the provisions of the Chhattisgarh Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, it said that it was mandatory for all government servants to discharge the duties of their office with complete "impartiality, honesty, and integrity". It also said that no government employee was to assume any position or responsibility that might affect his or her official duties. Further, the circular warned of action in accordance with the provisions of the Chhattisgarh Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, 1965, and the Chhattisgarh Civil Services (Classification, Control and Appeal) Rules, 1966 for violation of those rules.

However, the very next day another circular was issued which stated that the earlier instructions were suspended till further orders.

On attending RSS events

The suspension of the notice evoked a debate centred on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), State Congress President Deepak Baij linked

both the circulars to the organisation. He said that with respect to the first order, it seemed to indicate that a section of the BJP government was targeting the RSS, angered by its interference in the government. The subsequent suspension, he claimed, was issued after the RSS expressed its displeasure. The BJP government used to pressure and lure employees to attend RSS events, but the April 21 order would have automatically put a stop to this, he said.

Involving history, the Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) president reminded that the RSS had been banned in the past and that many State governments had considered the RSS as "dangerous to the country". He argued that government employees should never be given an exemption to join the RSS. While there was no explicit mention of the RSS in the government's circular, the matter is understood to have ruffled a few feathers within the BJP too with its rank and file questioning the timing and logic of the move.

Questions to the centre

While the ruling party and the RSS, there was criticism of the move as it could directly affect government employees attending the events of the organisation, and because it could invite more public sur-

veillance especially via social media. The silence of top Ministers of the State on the issue has bolstered the belief that the withdrawal was due to pressure.

It is also understood that State BJP leaders have raised the matter with the party's central leadership. There are voices in the party that are asking if such a circular is in contravention of a 2024 order through which the Centre lifted a ban on government employees taking part in RSS activities.

Another view within the ruling establishment is that it was not a very well-thought out order. One of the top leader's interpretation was that it was issued to dissuade government employees from joining other political groups opposed to the ruling BJP or to check proselytisation which had been a raging issue. However, the decision was taken without calculating the impact it would have on the party and the RSS itself.

Against unionisation

In the context of Chhattisgarh, it is common knowledge that lower-level employees associate with semi-religious organisations or caste-based forums. Any attempt to prohibit the same can erode political support.

However, representatives of the employee organisations, on whom the restrictions would have applied had they not been lifted, have a different interpretation of the whole move. They say the scope of the ban as far as the language of the first circular was concerned was wide. They saw this as a move to prevent them from unionising and demanding welfare measures for themselves. Some of them even claim credit for the withdrawal.

Greater Chennai, northern T.N. may shape poll results

The Dravidian majors had pronounced successes in specific regions in recent elections

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Pon Vasanth B.A.

As Tamil Nadu braces for the results of its Assembly elections, the two Dravidian majors – the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) – are keeping their fingers crossed to see whose votes the debutant Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) eats into more. A region-wise and margin-wise analysis of the last two elections, in 2016 and 2021, shows that the AIADMK, in the recently concluded voting for 2026, needs to not only retain its hold in the western region but also gain ground in the northern, central and Greater Chennai regions, which it had ceded to the DMK-led alliance in 2021, to get back to power. For this analysis, the parties have been grouped based on their alliances in 2026.

The 2016 Assembly election, which the AIADMK won, stands out as one of the most closely contested elections in Tamil Nadu in the past few decades. The AIADMK and the DMK won 89 seats each in the 178 seats in which they were facing each other.

In 2021, the north and Greater Chennai regions – which include the most urbanised areas of the State – tipped the scales heavily in favour of the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA). The Greater Chennai region consists of constituencies from Chennai, Kancheepuram, Chengalpattu and Tiruvallur districts. As shown in Chart 2, most of the gains of the SPA, which won a total of 159 seats, were concentrated in the central, southern and Greater Chennai regions. The central region includes constituencies from the Ariyalur, Karur, Mayiladuthurai, Nagapattinam, Perambalur, Pudukkottai, Thanjavur, Thiruvallur and Tiruchirappalli districts. The SPA

gained about 19 seats in the central region. This was followed by gains of 14 seats each in the Greater Chennai and southern regions. Interestingly, though the seats gained were more in the central region, the SPA's gains in terms of vote share were higher in the Greater Chennai region.

In the Greater Chennai region, the SPA secured over 55.1% of the votes, about 9 percentage points higher than what it had secured in 2016 (Table 3). In the northern region, the alliance secured over 49.4% of the votes, about 5 percentage points higher than in the previous election.

While the SPA gained 14 seats in the southern region, which includes constituencies from Dindigul, Kanniyakumari, Madurai, Kanyakumari, Sivaganga, Tenkasi, Theni, Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli and Virudhunagar, its gain in vote share was a negligible 0.3 percentage points.

The AIADMK-led alliance, however, retained its dominance in the western region in 2021 despite a small decline in its vote share. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won 41 of the 57 seats in the region, which comprises Coimbatore, Dharmapuri, Erode, Krishnagiri, Namakkal, Salem, The Nilgiris and Tiruppur. Its vote share in the region was 47.7%, nearly five percentage points lower than in 2016.

Data also indicates that the number of close contests came down overall. In 88 constituencies, the victory margins were within 5% in 2016 (Chart 4). This came down to 67 in 2021. The western region was an outlier, as the constituencies where victory margins were within 5% went up from 22 in 2016 to 25 in 2021.

The entry of actor Vijay's party is expected to throw up surprises. An intense battle between all three would lead to closer margins in more constituencies. Conversely, if the TVK competes with one of the two Dravidian majors for the runner-up spot, the winner may receive a larger share of the seats.

Battle for regions

Data for the charts were sourced from Lok Dhaba. The alliances for the analysis are based on current alliances



CHART 1: Regionwise split of constituencies

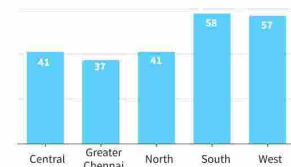


CHART 2: Seats secured by the SPA and AIADMK-led alliance in 2021, and change (in % points) when compared to 2016 polls

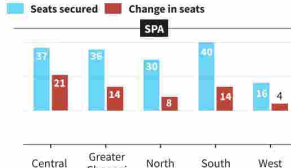
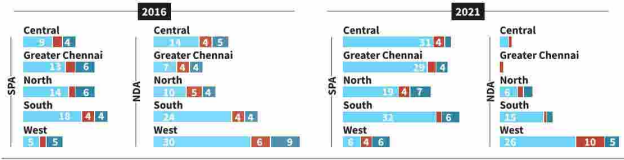


TABLE 3: The regionwise vote share secured in 2021 Assembly election, and change (in % points) when compared to 2016 polls

Region	SPA		NDA		NTK		Others	
	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016
Central	50.1	47	40.2	38.7	7	5.9	2.7	-1.9
Greater Chennai	55.1	9.1	34.4	-14.8	8.2	6.7	2.4	-0.9
North	49.4	4.6	43	-7	5.1	4.5	2.4	-2.3
South	46.2	0.3	42.4	-4.7	7.8	6.6	3.5	-2.3
West	44.6	1.8	47.7	-4.9	5.1	4.2	2.6	-1.1

CHART 4: Margin and regionwise seats secured by the SPA and the NDA. Vote share margin: >5% <2% 2-5%



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 29, 1976

CIA activities: MPs' fears allayed

New Delhi, April 29: The Deputy Home Minister, Mr. F.H. Mohsin, to-day assured members who expressed concern in the Lok Sabha over the activities of CIA that the Government had taken serious notice of all that had been published in this regard. The Government was in no way less concerned about the security of the country than the members and the utmost vigilance was being maintained.

Mr. Mohsin who was replying to points made in a half-hour discussion raised by Mr. Bhogendra Jha (CPI) said what was being done by the Government was not a matter to be publicised. Mr. Jha and four other members – Mr. C.K. Chandrappan, Mr. Bamavatar Shastri and Mr. S. M. Banerjee (all CPI) and Mr. B.V. Naik (Congress) – referred to the disclosures of CIA activities made by the press and in a report of a committee of the United States Senate. They also sought to know whether the Government had gone into allegations of CIA links with some of the organisations in India. Mr. Mohsin said the Government had no information to prove CIA links with some of the organisations mentioned by members in the debate. However, the Government was vigilant not only about organisations mentioned in the discussion but there were many more organisations on which a watch was "necessary".

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 29, 1926

Liquor smuggling in Canada

Ottawa, April 28: Sensational statements with regard to the alleged connection of high officials with smuggled liquor and motor-cars are made in a confidential report of Inspector Duncan to the Special Committee of the Commons, which is enquiring into this matter. Mr. Duncan asserts that investigations showed that large quantities of liquor were being shipped from the Government warehouses at Montreal to various officials at Ottawa, contrary to liquor laws, during the past three years.

The report also implicates a number of customs officers of Montreal in connections with the seizure of smuggled or stolen motor-cars, which Mr. Duncan alleges were secured for the private use of officials.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Accounts involved in digital arrest scams banned by WhatsApp

9400 The action was detailed by the Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre of the Ministry of Home Affairs. The DoT and the Telecom Service Providers have set a strict new timeline for neutralising fraudulent SIM cards, and aiming at a mechanism to block suspicious cards within 2-3 hours of identification, it said.

Expected reduction in carbon emissions by Indore solar plant

1.46 in lakh tonnes. The Indore Municipal Corporation's solar power plant is expected to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by approximately 1.46 lakh tons annually through its 60 MW renewable energy unit. A bulk of ₹308 crore cost of the plant, spread over 211 acres in Khargone district, was raised through a public issue of green bonds.

Investment in the new Google data centre near Visakhapatnam

1.35 in ₹ crores. Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu on Tuesday laid the foundation for a \$15 billion Google Artificial Intelligence data centre near Visakhapatnam. Mr. Naidu said this project was started in September 2025. According to the CM, the Google data centre will generate "thousands of jobs" for the youth of the State.

Foreigners held in Uganda in crackdown on illegal migration

231 Ugandan authorities said Tuesday that they have detained dozens of foreigners in a crackdown on illegal migration, that the Internal Affairs Ministry suggested was linked to human traffickers and cyberscam operations. Authorities say they acted on intelligence showing large groups of foreigners living or working in Uganda without necessary documents.

Electors cleared by tribunals to vote in phase 2 of Bengal polls

1,468 A total of 1,468 people, who have been added to the West Bengal electoral rolls following the SIR-linked tribunal orders, will be able to exercise their franchise in the second phase of the Assembly polls on April 29, an EC official said on Tuesday. The second phase will cover 142 constituencies.

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On TCS harassment and conversion case

Concerns have been raised about the Tata Consultancy Services sexual exploitation and alleged forcible conversions case that involves nine FIRs, related to complaints of alleged sexual exploitation, rape and forcible conversion at the company's office in Nashik, Maharashtra, between 2022 and 2026.

EXPLAINER

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

The story so far:

Last month, Nashik Police claimed that they had busted a racket of alleged forced conversions and sexual exploitation at a multi-national company's office in the city. Nine FIRs were registered and eight persons were arrested. Police said they were looking for one more accused, who they claimed is on the run. A Nashik court has heard her anticipatory bail plea and will give an order on May 2. TCS has ordered an internal probe, suspending all the persons named in the FIRs, adding that no formal complaint has been registered with it yet.

Overview of the sexual harassment and forcible conversions case

The TCS case involves nine FIRs. They are related to complaints of alleged sexual exploitation, rape and forcible conversion at Tata Consultancy Services in Nashik, Maharashtra, between 2022 and 2026.

Timeline of the complaints

On March 26, 2026, the first FIR was registered at Deolali Camp Police station. It was filed by a 23-year-old woman employee of TCS, claiming that since 2022, an accused had tried to convince her into a relationship with him. She said that the accused had asked her to apply to TCS, where he was already working. She claimed that after she got selected, she was allegedly forced into physical relations by the accused, on the pretext of marriage. She further alleged that another co-accused, on learning of their relations, also sought physical favours from her.

She has claimed that three accused – Danish Sheikh, Tausif Akhtar and Nida Khan, used to allegedly speak ill about Hinduism, trying to dissuade her from following Hinduism. She claimed that she learnt in February 2026, that the main accused was already married with two



GETTY IMAGES

children. She further alleged that the three accused hurt her religious sentiments, that Danish Sheikh kept physical relations with her on the promise of marriage, and that Tausif Akhtar sexually harassed her multiple times.

Police have claimed that the three accused taught her Islamic practices, and convinced her to follow them. The original FIR accessed by *The Hindu* does not mention it, and supplementary statements, if any, could not be accessed. After the first FIR was registered, till April 3, 2026, eight more FIRs were registered in quick succession, at Mumbai Naka Police station. While seven FIRs were registered by women, one was filed by a man who alleged that he was forced to convert, Nashik Police said. The complainant claimed that he was allegedly forced to eat beef, offer namaz and recite *kalma*. He has told the police that the efforts allegedly started in 2023-24. When the victim's father suffered from paralysis, the accused allegedly said he would only recover if the victim accepted Islam, he told the police.

The other cases pertain to rape, obscene comments, insult of modesty, and hurting religious sentiments by

making fun of Hindu gods and goddesses to impress on the victims that they should accept Islam. Police say that the cases pertain to incidents in the last four years, starting 2022. The police have claimed that the accused held senior or influential positions, and allegedly misused their position to take advantage of vulnerable men and women, influencing them or attempting to forcibly convert them.

Steps taken by the police

Nashik Police have formed a 12-member Special Investigation Team led by an Assistant Police Commissioner to investigate the matter. Several stringent sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, have been invoked for sexual intercourse through deceitful means, sexual harassment, stalking, insulting the modesty of a woman, abetment, criminal defamation, intentional or malicious acts to outrage religion, intentionally wounding religious sentiments, common intent, etc. The sections include Sections 69, 75, 78, 79, 49, 356, 302, 299, 3(5) of BNS. In the first FIR, Sections 3(1)(w)(i), 3(1)(w)(ii), 3(2)(v)

and 3(1)(s) of the SC, ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989, have been invoked.

According to the police, they were alerted by a local social-political activist after the parents of the first complainant allegedly expressed apprehensions about her changed behaviour pattern. The police thereafter conducted a covert operation in the concerned TCS office, where police teams went disguised as housekeeping staff to gather intelligence. The FIRs were registered after the police spoke with several complainants and asked them to register formal complaints. A woman officer played a key role in gathering information from women survivors of alleged sexual harassment, police said.

Concerns raised in the issue

Civil rights activists have raised concerns about the process, narrative, and impartiality of the probe. They have claimed that cases of sexual harassment are allegedly being portrayed as 'corporate jihaad' or 'love jihaad'. They have sought an impartial probe into the alleged sexual harassment faced by the women, and about the structural lapses in addressing them. They have also raised concerns about an alleged 'media trial', where a woman accused was allegedly termed an HR professional. TCS later clarified that she was neither an HR manager nor responsible for recruitment, but that she was employed as a process associate without any leadership responsibilities. Civil rights groups have raised concerns about the lack of evidence for any externally funded religious conversion network or organised conspiracy.

Arguments by the defence

The lawyers of the accused have primarily argued on two issues: There is no law against conversions in Maharashtra. They have questioned the legal basis for booking the accused for alleged forcible conversions. They also contend that acts of voluntary choice are being incriminated.

THE GIST

Nashik Police have formed a Special Investigation Team to probe the sexual harassment and forcible conversions case. Several sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, have been invoked.

Civil rights activists have questioned the process, narrative and impartiality of the probe, calling for an independent inquiry into the alleged harassment faced by the women, and the structural lapses in addressing it.

The tragedy of recurring Rohingya refugee deaths

The capsizing of a fishing trawler carrying refugees draws attention to the cost of protracted displacement

Saeed Pande

Story so far:

A fishing trawler carrying around 250-280 people, including Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi nationals, capsized in the Andaman Sea in mid-April 2026 while attempting to reach Malaysia. According to UNHCR - the UN Refugee Agency and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), around 250 people are feared dead or missing, based on preliminary estimates. The vessel departed from Teknal in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and was reportedly overcrowded and overwhelmed by rough seas.

Only around 9-10 survivors were rescued. Survivors reported that the boat travelled for about four days before capsizing, with some people floating for over 36 hours before being rescued by passing vessels.

Life-threatening sea journeys

Since the 2017 Rohingya crisis in Rakhine State, over 7,00,000 Rohingya have fled to Cox's Bazar, in Bangladesh. Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law rendered them effectively stateless, denying basic rights. In Bangladesh, more than one million refugees live in congested camps with limited or no access to education and formal work. According to the UNHCR, funding cuts since 2023 have sharply reduced food rations. Smuggling networks exploit this vulnerability, charging high fees for passage to Malaysia, where informal labour opportunities and diaspora links exist.

The 1,500-nautical-mile Bangladesh-Malaysia route relies on unseaworthy boats, often carrying over 200 people with minimal supplies, for a journey that could take 5-7 days. Reports by humanitarian agencies indicate that vessels are sometimes denied disembarkation or allegedly pushed back,

leaving migrants stranded at sea.

According to a UNHCR report released on April 17 this year, 2025 was the deadliest year on record for Rohingya sea crossings, with nearly 900 dead or missing. The report observes that 6,500 attempted the journey, with about one in seven perishing. The trend has continued into 2026, with over 2,800 departures recorded between January and mid-April.

A comparison with the Mediterranean Sea highlights both parallels and contrasts. The IOM estimates nearly 28,000 deaths there since 2014, as migrants fled conflicts in Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan.

Europe's response, though contested, is relatively structured. Following the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck, Italy launched Operation Mare Nostrum, rescuing around 150,000 people. It was followed by EU-led missions such as Operation Sophia, beginning in 2015, which targeted smuggling networks while also supporting

rescue efforts. The Frontex coordinates joint operations, while the Common European Asylum System sets standards for asylum processing.

Legal accountability also plays a role. In *Hirsi Jamaa v. Italy* (2012), the European Court of Human Rights ruled that pushbacks violated international law. NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières and SOS Méditerranée have also rescued thousands. In contrast, Southeast Asia lacks binding frameworks. During the 2015 Andaman crisis, thousands were stranded at sea amid delayed responses. Without legal obligations or coordination, responses remain ad hoc.

The governance vacuum

The Rohingya maritime crisis exposes a governance vacuum in South and Southeast Asia. Conflict has strengthened the Arakan Army (a local Buddhist armed group), which by 2024 controlled large parts of Myanmar's Rakhine State, driving displacement in the region. Countries such as India, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, limiting formal protections. The ASEAN's 2021 Five-Point Consensus has been constrained by the non-interference principle and internal divisions between Indonesia and Malaysia versus Thailand and Myanmar, reinforcing policy paralysis. (Saeed Pande is a freelance writer with a focus on current affairs and geopolitics.)

THE GIST

According to a UNHCR report, 2025 was the deadliest year on record for Rohingya sea crossings, with nearly 900 dead or missing. The report observes that 6,500 attempted the journey, with about one in seven perishing.

The Rohingya maritime crisis exposes a governance vacuum in South and Southeast Asia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY



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Everyone is busy building intelligence, but no one can define what it is

In their books, Karen Hao, Max Fisher, and Dwarakesh Patel explore the AI industry that has become a juggernaut even as it still struggles to define intelligence, measure its costs, or agree on its end goal

Areena Arora

American journalist and author Karen Hao spent years reporting from inside and around OpenAI, and what she found was less a portrait of a company and more an autopsy of the larger idea of artificial general intelligence (AGI).

OpenAI was founded on the premise that if AGI was coming regardless, it was better to have safety and ethics-conscious researchers at the frontier than to cede it to those with fewer compunctions. The CEO, Sam Altman, even went as far as to design the company's board such that it could fire him too if he ever came in the way of its core mission. That board, briefly did fire him, but reversed the decision quickly. Hao traces this arc not as a scandal, but as something inevitable; as an outcome of the ideas that come from Silicon Valley founders who have vast resources and the freedom to push boundaries. OpenAI is described in the early chapters of her book, *Empire of AI*, as "a rare intellectual playground without strings attached, a haven for fringe ideas." By the time she finished reporting, it had become one of the most powerful and least accountable corporations on earth.

No clear definition

What is artificial intelligence? Alan Turing's 1950 paper is widely considered the founding document of AI. In it, he begins with the question, "Can machines think?" and quickly reframes it as the imitation game. He proposes that any machine with the ability to convince a human of its sentience more than 30% of the time, passes his test. He never defined what intelligence really is. By his test, most agentic AI models today seem to "think". But what thinking actually is, remains unresolved, even among those

who have staked billions on replicating it. Hao spends a chapter of her book trying to pin down a definition of intelligence with impressive intensity. The AI industry's working answer, for now, borrows from the "pure language" hypothesis: the idea that all human knowledge is encoded in language, and that AGI might therefore emerge from language alone. The cost for training a generative AI model is already approaching a billion dollars, and projections for the coming years are only shooting up. All this money is being spent on a process whose foundation and end goal both remain largely unarticulated.

The consequences

Max Fisher, in *The Chaos Machine*, shows us that this pattern is not new, but that its consequences have grown manifold. While Fisher's book is ostensibly about social media algorithms and radicalisation, it also holds up a clear mirror to what happens when a technology that shapes human behaviour is deployed before anyone has asked what it is shaping us towards. The early conventional wisdom about platforms such as Facebook, he argues, vastly understated their power. Their algorithms amplify moral fury, compress complexity into viral fragments rewarded with small doses of digital dopamine, and make polarisation not a bug but an intended, even celebrated, output.

By the time insiders began to acknowledge this, the architecture was global and deeply embedded. Facebook's founding president, Sean Parker, eventually admitted the goal was to consume as much of conscious human time and attention as possible. By then, a billion people were already inside the wormhole.

Max Fisher wrote about a previous

technological wave, but there are parallels in the inherited arrogance. The same incentives — engagement maximisation, attention as a commodity, and uncontrolled growth as the only metric of success — now underpin the expansion of AI. Fisher's book, read alongside Hao's reporting, gives readers both a long view and a more immediate story: this pattern has played out before, and in building disruptive technologies, their makers are often aware of the very real human cost of progress — and continue anyway. To be clear, neither author rejects scientific progress, but both hold up an important mirror to what it costs to get there.

The God complex

Dwarakesh Patel's *The Scaling Era* is an oral history stitched together with conversations with researchers, engineers, and thinkers who made the last six years of AI possible. Unlike Hao and Fisher, Patel and his interviewees are not cynical of AI. They are, for the most part, people who believe they are doing something necessary and sacred even as they do acknowledge its shortcomings. For instance, Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei in the book says that if agentic AI were to become super powerful and wreak havoc, "we'd have basically no ability to stop it."

The God complex here is not megalomaniacal in the conventional sense; it is more subtle. It is the conviction that because the intelligence being built is unprecedented, the ordinary human frameworks of accountability, consent, and cost-distribution can be changed too.

Patel's book is highly technical, diving into the scalability of AI models and what intelligence is. Curiously, both Hao and his touch on this question and seem to conclude that there is still no unified

definition of "intelligence" or "thinking."

Altman in particular, who is the primary subject of Hao's book, has signed up for Nectome, a startup whose premise is that the brain can be chemically preserved at death to be digitally uploaded to a server later. This is where the pure language hypothesis and the God complex finally converge. If all human knowledge is in language, and language can be extracted and replicated, then perhaps consciousness too can be preserved, transferred, and ultimately made everlasting. The question Turing called too meaningless to discuss has become the basis of an afterlife business. The arrogance is not in the ambition itself; it is in the certainty that whatever the "tech bros" of Silicon Valley end up building will be the answer.

Paying a price

In the meantime, as Hao sharply points out, communities in South American countries are paying a hefty price right now, with their water and land resources. The AI we have has already reshaped medicine, science, and daily life in useful ways. But the industry is not focused on refinement or more environment-friendly improvements to what already exists; it is aiming at something much larger.

What these three books produce, read together, is less a verdict on AI and more a map of its (often) unacknowledged shortcomings. Hao calls these companies an empire — ruthless in their conquest like royal empires of the bygone era. Scoring, discussed in great technical detail in Patel's book, asks an important question: what happens when we run out of data to train models on? Billions of dollars are being spent per model, land and water are being taken to replicate millions of years of evolutionary biology, but to what end? That remains unclear.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of the idiom "by the skin of one's teeth"? (B. V. Satish Kumar, Vizag)

Everyone knows that the teeth are not covered by skin. Then what is the meaning of this rather strange idiom? It first made its appearance in the Bible. Job is the man who is believed to have made first use of it. Job suffered many misfortunes in his life, but throughout his trials and tribulations, his belief in God remained firm. "I am escaped with the skin of my teeth" is what Job says in the Bible. What he meant was that he "narrowly escaped".

If you do something by the skin of your teeth, you just manage to do it; you achieve something by the narrowest of margin. Here are some examples.

Narsimha got through his maths exam by the skin of his teeth.

We thought we would miss the train. But we caught it by the skin of our teeth.

What is the meaning of "nickname"?

How do you use it? (K. J. Ramnarayanan, Cuddalore)

The word "nickname" is from Middle English "eke name" meaning "additional name". A nickname is therefore an additional name given to someone or something by a group of people — like friends or relatives. When I was growing up, I had a friend who was really tall. Everyone started calling him "coconut tree" and it soon became his nickname. Animals too can have nicknames. You may have a dog called "Jacky", but you may affectionately call it "Ugly" all the time.

Which of the following sentences is correct? "Which class are you studying?" "In which class are you studying?" (L. Velumany, Coimbatore)

The second sentence is correct. The first would be acceptable if you had "in" at the end of the sentence. "Which class are you studying in?" — that's what people who are fond of grammar would say. It's also possible to say "Which class are you in?" Here are a few more examples.

Which city were you born in?

Which bedroom do you sleep in?

How is the word "shoppe" pronounced? (Rajani Krishnamurthy, Chennai)

Most people pronounce it like the word "shop". It is also possible, however, to pronounce the final "e" like the "i" in words like "pit", "hit", and "sit". Even when pronounced in this manner, the stress remains on the first syllable.

What is the origin of 'hat-trick'? (Krishna Kumar, Mumbai)

This is a term which originated in cricket. A bowler is said to have performed a hat-trick when he takes three wickets in three consecutive balls. Nowadays, whenever a bowler performs a hat-trick in international matches, he's given lots of money — either by the Board or by some sponsor. And if rumours are to be believed, even if the Board isn't willing to pay the bowler, there are plenty of bookies who are! Just kidding. In the old days when cricket was a gentleman's game, when a bowler performed the "trick" of getting three wickets of three balls, he got a... You guessed it, a hat! Published in *The Hindu* on June 13, 2000

THE DAILY QUIZ

Here's a quiz on the animated TV series *The Simpsons*, which aired its 636th episode on this day in 2018, becoming the longest-running scripted prime-time show in the U.S.

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

Which magazine has named the show the greatest television series of the 20th century?

QUESTION 2

This is the most famous catchphrase used by the fictional character Homer Simpson. It has been adopted into the English language. What is it?

QUESTION 3

What is the name of the greyhound and a cat the family owns?

QUESTION 4

What is the name of the character named after the title character of a celebrated series by Satyajit Ray?

QUESTION 5

What is the name of the episode which mentions billionaire Donald Trump having been President of the United States at one time and leaving the nation broke?



Visual question: Name the characters from the show featured in this image. AP

Questions and answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The Mutiny on the Bounty took place in this year, and in this ocean. **Ans: 1789, Pacific Ocean**

2. Who led the mutiny against William Bligh? **Ans: Fletcher Christian**

3. What was the primary botanical objective of the HMS Bounty's voyage? **Ans: Transporting breadfruit plants to the West Indies**

4. Name the remote island where the remaining mutineers ultimately established a settlement. **Ans: Pitcairn Island**

5. Who was the last surviving mutineer discovered on Pitcairn Island? **Ans: John Adams**
Visual: This 19th-century etching captures the dramatic end of the HMS Pandora, wrecked on the Great Barrier Reef. State its connection to the HMS Bounty. **Ans: The Pandora was dispatched by the Royal Navy to hunt down and capture the mutineers from the Mutiny on the Bounty**
Early birds: Erfanally Oosmany | Sudhir Thapa | Haridas Pal | Akshay Kumar Khanna | Kaveesh Sethi

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

Word of the day

Abominable:

exceptionally bad or displeasing

Synonyms: atrocious, awful, dreadful

Usage: The refugees were forced to live in abominable conditions.

Pronunciation: [newstvlive/J1643b/abominable](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1643b/abominable)

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ə'bɒm.ə.n.ə.bəl/

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

Why science and scientists must learn to celebrate failures

Narratives that present scientific experiments as a smooth story of success are counter-effective; to ensure science remains dynamic, innovative, and honest, it is necessary to foster a culture of appreciating and learning from failure rather than hiding it

Biju Dharmapalan

Failure is part and parcel of research but many scientists consider discussing it in a scientific forum to be taboo.

Laboratories are littered with unfinished experiments and inconclusive facts and theories that failed to stand the test of study. However, when science is being communicated – whether to funding bodies, professional journals, or audiences – it comes across as a smooth story of success. Just narratives are counter-effective.

To ensure science is dynamic, innovative, and honest, we have to foster a culture of appreciating and learning from failure rather than hiding it.

In its essence, science progresses by trial and error. A scientist postulates hypotheses while anticipating that many of them will be discarded. Every unsuccessful experiment sharpens the edges of knowledge and guides further investigation.

However, systems of science such as funding, publication, and career progression are skewed towards successes alone. Grants are generally awarded on the basis of promising results and a large volume of papers, and in favour of those with positive results. Unsuccessful or negative outcomes are often overlooked, leading to a biased ecosystem in which only success is allowed to be seen.

Not to be stigmatised

In the early 1980s, Australian scientists Barry Marshall and Robin Warren claimed that a bacterium called *Helicobacter pylori* caused peptic ulcers. Papers on the idea were however rejected by journals and dismissed by the gastroenterological establishment; the latter had long held that the stomach was too acidic for microbes. (Of course, there was also reasoned scepticism in pockets of the research community, which did not think that the duo had provided sufficient evidence for their hypothesis.)

They were unable to get their findings published and were also not taken seriously, but they had reasons to believe they were right. Then, in 1984, Mr. Marshall famously drank a broth containing *H. pylori* bacteria, expecting he would develop ulcers in around a year and thus prove to the research community that their idea had merit. Rather than a year, he developed symptoms of gastritis within a few days.

The duo won a Nobel Prize in 2005 for their work on identifying *H. pylori* as a cause of gastritis and peptic ulcers. It was a testament to how publication bias allowed a treatable condition to go untreated for years because the system had no process or culture to deal with what it perceived to be a failure.

To really embrace failure, science may need to draw inspiration from domains



Knowledge gambit: Science progresses by trial and error and every unsuccessful experiment guides further investigation. SASUN BUGHADHARAN/UNSPLOASH

beyond academia. The technology sector, particularly in entrepreneurial ecosystems, has long embraced a “fail fast, fail often” philosophy. Here, failure is not to be stigmatised but treated as a stepping stone, an essential part of iterative learning.

Psychological aspect

While academic science cannot replicate this model entirely, given its different stakes and responsibilities, it can certainly adopt its underlying mindset: that failure is informative rather than shameful. Another valuable analogy is in sports. Athletes incorporate replays and coaching sessions to analyse their failures and convert them into learning opportunities. However, failures in science do not tend to include well-orchestrated reflection.

Some changes are commendable. New publication formats like “registered reports” – where scientists commit to publishing the results of an experiment even before they begin it, whether they are positive or negative – are shifting the focus from results to research design and thus to methodological rigour. Nonetheless, these efforts are still spreading their wings. The major transformation the enterprise as a whole requires in mainstream practice is pending.

There is always the possibility that experiments do not pay off without a clear explanation, and researchers internalise failure as personal rather than as a natural occurrence in the process of intricate enquiry. This psychological

There is always the possibility that experiments do not pay off without a clear explanation, and researchers internalise failure as personal rather than as a natural occurrence

aspect is especially important to novice researchers.

In a highly competitive environment where not everyone feels safe at work, the fear of failure may lower the incentive to take risks. This makes researchers more inclined towards safer, incremental projects rather than risky, innovative ideas. Such a fear of risk can eventually impede the pace of scientific development.

Communicating science

A culture change is thus much needed. Younger scientists would like to see their senior counterparts and principal investigators set good examples by talking openly about their failures and uncertainties. Mentorship should also not be limited to success: it should also openly deal with setbacks. People can become more resilient and honest in their intellectual practices by acknowledging that doubt and failure are parts of science.

Funding bodies and institutions can also play a role. The criteria of evaluation need to shift from the success of specific research outcomes to the quality of the

research questions, research methods, and the lessons learnt. Grant proposals and academic CVs can include sections that document and articulate failures as part of the research experience.

Establishing platforms to share negative findings and failed experiments could also contribute to a richer scientific ledger. Through open science projects and online archives, novel possibilities are available to share such knowledge, minimise repetition, and foster collaboration.

Notably, the public communication of science needs to change as well. The representation of science as a succession of discoveries creates unrealistic expectations and diminishes confidence in the face of failure. Scientists can raise a more informed and appreciative population by showing that science is a messy, iterative, and sometimes uncertain process. This is necessary, especially in the case of developing drugs or going to space, where errors are bound to happen, and it could be the most important lesson to go through.

Science in practice is a long journey characterised by perseverance, failure, and slow success. Science should not conceal these features but accept them. That is when every failure can serve as a stepping-stone to significant and hopefully sustainable breakthroughs.

(Biju Dharmapalan is Dean (Academic Affairs), Garden City University and an adjunct faculty member at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru. bijudharmapalan@gmail.com)

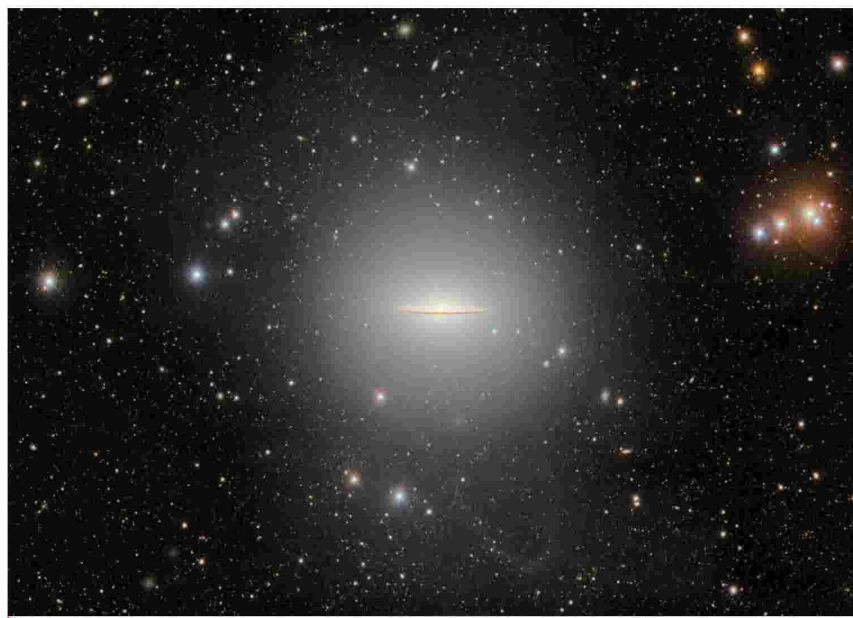
THE GIST

Science in practice is a long journey characterised by perseverance, failure, and slow success

In a highly competitive environment where not everyone feels safe at work, the fear of failure may lower the incentive to take risks which can eventually impede the pace of scientific development

A culture change is thus much needed where mentorship is not limited to success with criteria of evaluation focused on quality of the research

BIG SHOT



The Sombrero galaxy is a popular target for amateur observing and astronomical research. Its recognisable extended halo and dust-filled disk are captured in this image from the Dark Energy Camera mounted on the Victor M. Blanco Telescope in Chile. C110/NOIRLAB/DOE/NSF/AURA.

WHAT IS IT?

A face of Pompeii

Reuters

Archaeologists in Italy's Pompeii have for the first time used artificial intelligence (AI) to reconstruct the appearance of one of the victims of the volcanic eruption that destroyed the ancient Roman city nearly 2,000 years ago.

The AI-generated image, released by the Pompeii Archaeological Park on Monday, shows a man ducking for cover while holding a large bowl over his head, with a flaming Mt Vesuvius in the background. It is based on the recent discovery of the remains of a male adult, just outside one of the southern gates of the city, which were lying next to a terracotta mortar that he presumably used as protection.

Archaeologists believe the man was killed by a shower of volcanic rocks, in the early hours of the second day of the eruption, while trying to escape towards the sea. He was also carrying a lamp and 10 bronze coins, the park said.

“If used well, AI can contribute to a renewal of classical studies, illustrating the classical world in a more immersive way,” the head of the archaeological park, Gabriel Zuchtriegel, said in a statement.

The once-thriving city of Pompeii, about 25 km southeast of Naples, was buried in the eruption of Mt Vesuvius in AD 79, preserving buildings, objects and graffiti under metres of ash. Rediscovered in the 18th century, it is



A view of the Pompeii Archeological Park, near Naples, Italy, December 14, 2022. AP

now one of the world's most significant archaeological sites, and one of the most popular tourist sites in Italy, with 4.3 million visitors in 2024, according to the latest statistics.

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

the hindu businessline.

WEDNESDAY - APRIL 29, 2026

Fuel for thought

100 per cent ethanol vehicles, a debatable idea

The conflict in West Asia has understandably lent a new urgency to the need to curb energy imports. The government is set to expedite the roll-out of flex-fuel vehicles (FFVs). While a 20 per cent ethanol-petrol blend (E20) is the current mandate, FFV engines are engineered for any mix all the way up to 100 per cent ethanol (E100).



The motivation for this push is not difficult to understand — according to a statement issued by the Centre in August 2025, ethanol blending over 11 years up to July 2025 had resulted in savings of over ₹1.4 lakh crore in foreign exchange and crude oil substitution of 245 lakh tonnes. A study by NITI Aayog claims that emissions from the use of sugarcane and maize based ethanol are much lower than those of petrol. But ethanol's merits have been a subject of considerable global debate. A big shift to ethanol raises questions about its impact on rice, sugarcane, pulses, millets and maize availability. Recent reports suggest that the Centre is considering a lower allocation of broken rice to the public distribution system — a move that would free up 90 lakh tonnes of broken rice for ethanol use. For current levels of ethanol output (12 billion litres annually), 30-40 lakh tonnes of sugar are used, while the Food Corporation of India allocated five million tonnes of rice last year for ethanol.

Efforts to encourage broken rice use, even as close to half the ethanol produced in India is made from maize, are hard to understand. Maize, whose acreage has been rising sharply on account of ethanol demand, is less water intensive than paddy or sugarcane, but its cultivation seems to be cutting into area under millets and pulses. As ethanol ambitions rise, the costs of food crop diversion and the implicit energy (power and fertilizer) and water use will become harder to ignore, *vis-à-vis* the crude oil import bill saved. The use of new cropland makes ethanol seem more unviable. Besides, as a fuel ethanol generates less energy than petrol. Economists have, however, noted the benefits of producing ethanol from agriculture and industrial waste. India generates at least 500 million tonnes of agricultural waste, of which about 35 per cent comes from paddy alone. Using such waste as the raw material for what is referred to as 2G ethanol is already under way but needs to scale up. Recently released short duration maize varieties would help maintain the cropping balance.

Ethanol vehicles can be considered as an element in the auto mix, especially to offset the dependency on critical minerals for EV batteries. However, research suggests that solar-powered EVs are 180-250 times more efficient than ethanol vehicles. Meanwhile, EV batteries are evolving rapidly in terms of capacity and recyclable ability. It is best that auto policy develops a well considered, consistent position, that incentivises the use of EVs produced from renewables and FFVs produced by ethanol from residues in particular. The rest is smoke and noise.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WORLDWIDE

China's AI 'Hotel California'

If you're an artificial-intelligence startup or investor in China, you can check in but you can't check out. With apologies to the Eagles, that's the lesson of Beijing's decision Monday to reverse Meta's \$2 billion acquisition of AI firm Manus. China's National Development and Reform Commission killed the deal, which had closed in December, in a one-sentence notice that didn't explain Beijing's rationale. Presumably the regulatory objection isn't related to China's antitrust law since it's hard to see how that would apply to this case. Beijing's general anxiety about the national-security implications of its growing AI industry is a likelier explanation. (NEW YORK, APRIL 27)

GULF NEWS

Hormuz: When energy shock becomes a food emergency

The global conversation about the Strait of Hormuz has centred, understandably, on oil prices and geopolitical brinkmanship. Yet it obscures a slower, quieter crisis already unfolding in countries far from the Gulf, in places where families were skipping meals long before a single missile was fired. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz is not only an energy shock. It is, as the FAO's Chief Economist, Maximo Torero, warned, "a systemic shock affecting food systems globally." Nearly 20 million barrels of oil pass through the Strait each day, alongside roughly a fifth of the world's liquefied natural gas and up to 30 per cent of all internationally traded fertilizer. When the Strait closes, it does not merely raise fuel prices; it raises the cost of producing and purchasing food. The countries now bearing the brunt of this crisis had little margin to absorb it. (DUBAI, APRIL 26)



GIRIRAJ SINGH

When we speak of an Aatmanirbhar Bharat we are not just speaking of self-reliance in production but of leadership in global value chains. Few sectors capture this opportunity as clearly as footwear. It is one of the most universal products in daily life used by a school student walking to class, a worker standing through long shifts, a delivery partner constantly on the move and an athlete pushing physical limits. Yet, despite being the world's second largest producer India holds only a marginal share in global footwear exports.

The gap is not due to lack of capacity but due to the need for a shift towards materials design and performance. At the centre of this shift lies a category that often goes unnoticed — technical textiles. I began to understand this more clearly during a recent visit to Agra. Agra is known for its footwear industry. Walking through its production clusters and interacting with manufacturers it became evident that innovation was already underway. Several units were using materials that improved comfort, durability and flexibility. Yet many of them did not describe these as technical textiles, they simply saw them as better inputs that met evolving consumer needs.

This insight deepened during a subsequent meeting in Delhi with the footwear association. Industry stakeholders spoke about changing consumer expectations — lighter shoes, better cushioning, improved breathability, and longer durability. These were no longer premium features but were becoming standard requirements. It was in this discussion that my department highlighted a critical point: the footwear industry is already using technical textiles extensively even without formally recognising it.

That realisation reframed the entire conversation. Globally the footwear industry produces nearly 23.9 billion pairs annually with a market size of around \$500 billion. India contributes about 12.5 per cent of global production yet its export share remains at only 2 per cent which highlights a clear gap between capacity and global positioning. At the same time nearly 86 per cent of global footwear is non-leather while India's industry has historically been centred around leather.

At home the story is evolving rapidly. The Indian footwear market reached a size of \$20.67 billion in 2025 reflecting rising incomes and changing consumption patterns. While the



THE HINDU

Technical textiles critical to footwear sector

SMART MOVE. Bringing the footwear sector more explicitly within the technical textiles ecosystem can drive innovation, expand exports and create high quality employment.

average Indian still buys around two pairs of footwear per year compared to seven to eight pairs globally. As affordability improves and consumer preferences shift towards comfort and performance the domestic market is set to expand significantly.

NEXT PHASE OF GROWTH

This is where technical textiles become central to the next phase of growth. At the Ministry of Textiles this transition is being approached through the Smart, Sustainable & Seamless framework. Smart footwear reflects the growing integration of technology and design. Digital tools, AI driven modelling and foot scanning are enabling customised solutions at scale.

This aligns with broader consumer trends. In 2025 India recorded 28.9 million smartwatch sales generating \$750 million in revenue which indicates a growing preference for products that combine functionality with everyday use. The sneakers segment further illustrates this shift.

It is projected to grow from \$3.2

Consumers are clearly moving towards footwear that delivers both comfort and performance and this is where technical textiles play a defining role

billion in 2024 to nearly \$6 billion by 2030 with volumes increasing from 55 million to 70 million pairs. Consumers are clearly moving towards footwear that delivers both comfort and performance and this is where technical textiles play a defining role.

Sustainability is also becoming a decisive factor. Materials such as recycled PET and biodegradable fibres are gradually entering mainstream production. For India this represents not only an environmental imperative but also a strategic opportunity to position itself as a supplier of sustainable materials in global markets. Equally transformative is the move towards seamless manufacturing. Technologies like 3D knitting and advanced fabrication are reducing waste, improving efficiency and enabling faster production cycles. This allows manufacturers to respond more effectively to evolving demand while maintaining consistency and quality.

What strengthens this transition further is the scale of India's existing ecosystem. The footwear industry already employs over two million people with nearly 50 per cent women participation making it a major source of inclusive employment.

With an annual production of around 2.9 billion pairs, productivity stands at approximately four to five pairs per worker per day in India. In comparison global production reflects a much higher level of efficiency with workers producing 17 to 20 pairs per day.

Established clusters in Agra, Kanpur, Chennai, Ranipet, Ambur and Kolkata are not just production hubs but the foundation on which India can scale efficiency competitiveness and global leadership in footwear.

The shift towards technical textiles is not about building a new industry but about unlocking the full potential of an existing one. The visit to Agra and the discussions in Delhi brought out a simple but powerful insight, that technical textiles in footwear are not an emerging concept. They are already embedded in the industry, quietly shaping products and processes.

The task ahead is to recognise, organise and scale this integration. Bringing the footwear sector more explicitly within the technical textiles ecosystem can drive innovation, expand exports and create high quality employment. It can also align India's manufacturing capabilities with global demand trends particularly in non-leather and performance-driven segments.

India's journey towards becoming a global manufacturing leader will depend on how effectively it leverages such intersections where traditional industries meet advanced materials and modern design. Footwear is one such intersection. Technical textiles are the thread that can help stitch this opportunity into a global success story.

The writer is the Union Minister of Textiles. The views expressed are personal

India-New Zealand FTA opens up high-value frontiers

Beyond trade, the deal paves the way for deeper collaboration in manufacturing, infrastructure and innovation

Chandrajit Banerjee

The ambitious target of becoming a Viksit Bharat by 2047 requires sustained efforts across multiple fronts. Trade remains central to this vision. Over the past few years, India has actively pursued free trade agreements (FTAs) across regions. These include agreements with Mauritius in Africa; the UAE and, recently, Oman in the Gulf; EFTA and the UK and EU in Europe; and Australia in the Oceania and Pacific region. The FTA with New Zealand further strengthens India's engagement in Oceania and sets the stage for doubling bilateral trade within five years. The challenge now is making that aspiration real.

Bilateral merchandise trade grew by 49 per cent to \$1.3 billion in 2024-25 but still falls short of its potential despite strong complementarities, with India accounting for just 1.84 per cent of New Zealand's imports. The FTA addresses this gap by granting zero-duty access to 100 per cent of Indian exports from day one, eliminating tariffs of up to 10 per cent on sectors like textiles, leather, engineering, and footwear, and 5 per cent on pharmaceuticals, agriculture, electronics, and more — offering a major boost to labour-intensive clusters across India. At the same time, India has safeguarded sensitive sectors such as

dairy and select agricultural products. Additional benefits include enhanced agricultural productivity through Centres of Excellence and faster customs clearance for express and perishable goods.

SERVICES-LED ECONOMIES

India and New Zealand are both services-led economies, with services contributing about 49.9 per cent and 67.4 per cent of GDP respectively. While New Zealand runs a services trade surplus with India — largely driven by travel — its imports from India are diversified, spanning telecommunications, IT and business services. This positions Indian providers well to scale and move into higher-value segments.

Tourism, education, and the creative industries offer strong growth potential, combining India's expanding creative economy with New Zealand's global appeal. The agreement opens market access across 118 services sectors and eases mobility. It removes caps on Indian students, allows 20 hours of work per week during study, extends post-study work opportunities, and introduces a Temporary Employment Entry visa for skilled professionals for up to three years. Together, these measures enable deeper engagement and long-term collaboration in services.



INDIAN INDUSTRY. Must leverage the bi-lateral trade agreement

India's trade agreement model with EFTA, which included a unique investment-linked provision, has been echoed in its agreement with New Zealand. This framework is expected to facilitate \$20 billion in investment into India over 15 years, supported by a rebalancing clause to address any shortfall in commitments, ensuring steady inflows.

Beyond trade, this paves the way for deeper collaboration in manufacturing, infrastructure, innovation, and job creation. Combining India's scale, execution strength, and digital infrastructure with New Zealand's design, innovation, and governance capabilities, the partnership holds strong potential for co-investment, co-manufacturing, and co-innovation,

extending to third markets across the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

The partnership's true potential spans several high-value frontiers. Agritech and food processing represent the most natural area of complementarity. New Zealand's expertise in precision agriculture, post-harvest technology, and food safety, combined with India's scale and processing capacity, is a powerful combination.

Clean energy is another priority where both economies can genuinely co-invest; India's renewable ambitions are vast, and New Zealand brings real innovation strengths. In digital technology — AI, cybersecurity, digital public infrastructure, and quantum computing — India's population-scale platforms and New Zealand's agile innovation ecosystem are natural complements.

Even in the near term, low-hanging fruit is clearly visible. Dairy equipment manufacturing, automotive, including electric vehicles and medical and scientific equipment are sectors where India's cost competitiveness and scale align directly with New Zealand's market demand and quality orientation. The onus is now on Indian industry to leverage this agreement to translate intent into tangible outcomes.

The writer is Director General, CI

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US-Iran dialogue

With reference to 'Iran talks in limbo' (April 28), the US-Iran talks have been deadlocked with both sides refusing to yield on their respective demands. While the impasse in talks continues, the respective intransigent positions on reopening the Strait of Hormuz by Iran and ending of blockade of Iranian ports by the US has put a Gordian knot on the issue. President Donald Trump has upped the rhetoric, as he is worried about the impact of war on the US midterms coming up in November. However, Iran received a boost with Russia saying that it

would "do everything possible to bring peace to West Asia", during Iranian Foreign Minister's visit to Russia, in the meantime, world continues to suffer. The closure of Strait of Hormuz is pushing global oil prices north again and increasing the possibilities of a global economic downturn. Trump should realise the extent of harm he is inflicting on the world by starting the Iran war and find out a quick way to end the war.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

Depository structure

With reference to 'A quiet revolution

in depository architecture' (April 28), the slew of depository operational and administrative reforms in the securities market code 2025 are timely and expands the functional scope towards investor protection. The depository, in its new form as market infrastructure institution, paves the way for holding the instruments and documents in non-physical form, of various classes of assets and other regulated instruments apart from the securities in securities market, to ensure custodial trust and safety. The redesignation of depository

participants as members of depository, no doubt shifts the accountability and improves operational efficiency, however in the absence of upgradation of skills in handling huge and complex volume of transactions at the DP level, the same may end up in more investor complaints.

Sitaran Popuri
Bangalore

Assist JK&K horticulturists
This is with reference to 'JK&K horticulturists need storage infra, access to markets' (April 28). The government cannot afford to ignore

the hardships faced by farmers and others dealing in Kashmiri apples, which are a source of livelihood to nearly 25 lakh people. The authorities should improve infrastructure including the transport system and roads so that the apples can move swiftly from Kashmir to various parts of the country. Also, construction of cold storage facilities on a co-operative basis will go a long way in reducing the problems faced by these apple growers.

Veena Shenoy
Thane

W Asia shadow on exports

Export resilience under route disruptions is crucial

Sanjaya Mariwala

India has signed free trade agreements with several countries and is negotiating one with the EU. Market access is now no longer a problem. But the assumption that goods will move freely once markets open up is beginning to weaken.



EXPORTS. Take proactive steps

Disruptions in West Asia are adding 10-15 days to transit times, while freight and insurance costs have risen sharply, which cannot be passed on to customers given the margin pressures. For exporters, the bigger challenge is in committing to delivery timelines.

At the same time, planning shipments has become a lot less predictable. Buyers are building in buffers or delaying decisions. For businesses operating on tight margins, even modest increases in logistics costs can shift competitiveness.

In pharmaceuticals and preventive healthcare, the pressure is more layered. India exported over \$30 billion worth of medicines last year, but a large share of key inputs continues to be imported, particularly APIs from China. This creates a clear dependency at both ends. If inputs don't arrive on time, production gets pushed back. And when outbound routes are disrupted, finished products can't move as planned. What starts as a logistics delay doesn't stay limited to transport — it begins to affect manufacturing timelines and, in regulated markets, even compliance. In sectors like pharmaceuticals, where timing is tightly controlled, these delays can have consequences well beyond just late deliveries.

ROUTE CONCENTRATION

A large share of India's exports still moves through a limited set of routes and logistics hubs. That concentration works in stable conditions, but leaves little room to adjust when disruptions occur. Smaller exporters don't have the cushion to absorb sudden cost increases, so either take a hit on their top-line or bottom-line.

India has built an export system that performs efficiently under stable conditions, but not one that adjusts easily when those conditions change. Alternatives are usually explored only after problems on routes show up.

There isn't advanced thinking around which sectors depend on which routes, or what realistic options exist if those routes are disrupted. As a result, decisions end up being made under

pressure, when both costs and timelines are already working against you. Urgent shipments like medicines don't really get treated any differently.

When freight costs rise or insurance premiums increase, exporters are usually the first to absorb the impact, even though these are outside their control. Over time, this has concentrated volatility at the weakest end of the chain. Contracts will need to evolve to reflect a more balanced arrangement, where pricing and delivery terms adjust when disruptions occur. Without that shift, exporters will continue to operate under pressure each time the system is strained.

In pharmaceuticals and preventive healthcare, resilience will depend on building flexibility into sourcing. Domestic API capacity will take time to scale. Until then, alternate sourcing and manufacturing arrangements across geographies can help reduce the risk of production being disrupted.

Exporters face immediate cost pressures, but access to additional working capital often lags. Aligning financial support more closely with the timing of disruptions would help ease that pressure.

Trade agreements, too, will need to reflect the new reality. Provisions that support faster clearances, recognise alternate routing and improve coordination across systems can strengthen trade in ways that go beyond cost or tariff advantages.

India still tends to assume that once an order is ready, it will move smoothly from origin to destination, but that's no longer always the case. In a world where disruption is becoming routine, competitiveness will be defined not just by how much a country can export, but by whether it can keep exporting when conditions deteriorate.

The writer is Executive Chairman and Managing Director of OmniActive Health Technologies

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 29, 2006

Indiabulls Sec gets a breather

The Securities and Exchange Board of India on Friday climbed down on its trading ban order against Indiabulls Securities in further directions, hours after it had banned the company and several other market intermediaries yesterday. SEBI today said, "the ex parte ad-interim order dated April 27 in the matter of initial public offering, in so far as it relates to Indiabulls Securities would be kept in abeyance subject to verification of clients and until further directions."

Sensex rebounds after a crash

Even a crash, almost as bad as the one on Black Monday — the worst seen by the Indian bourses — could not keep the markets down on Friday. Overall, the Sensex gained 16,911 points and closed at 11,851.93 and the Nifty ended up by 0.25 points at 3508.35.

Bharti Airtel net up 49pc on user growth

Riding on a 78 per cent increase in its cellular subscriber base, Bharti Airtel on Friday reported a 49 per cent increase in net profit to Rs 682 crore during the fourth quarter of 2005-06 against Rs 459 crore during the corresponding period last year.

Need to ramp up energy storage

STILL IN INFANCY. Battery based energy storage systems are beset by execution and structural challenges

CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICHA MISHRA

India's power demand is seeing a massive surge, driven by extreme weather, industrial expansion, and rapid electrification. As part of its energy transition story, India has set a target of achieving 500 GW of installed electricity generation capacity from non-fossil fuel-based sources by 2030.

A major share for renewable energy (RE) is expected from solar and wind energy, which are inherently intermittent and variable in nature. To ease the integration of these sources, deployment of Energy Storage Systems (ESSs) is essential for storing surplus energy during periods of high RE generation to ensure 24x7 electricity supply.

According to the National Electricity Plan (2023) published by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), a requirement of 208 GWh of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESSs) has been projected by 2030 to enable seamless integration of the increasing share of RE in the grid. The government has undertaken a series of coordinated policy, regulatory, demand-supply side measures to promote and deploy energy storage technologies, including the BESS.

WHERE IS THE PROBLEM?

Problems arise when in the zeal to achieve the target, ground realities are ignored. According to information available, India's power grid in 2025-26 has adequate generation capacity, with over 500 GW installed and more than half sourced from non-fossil fuels. However, it is increasingly constrained by transmission and operational limitations.

It is a fact that structural power shortages have largely been eliminated, but the concern is that RE capacity is being added faster than the grid can absorb it — particularly in renewable-rich States such as Rajasthan



BATTERY STORAGE. Huge gap between planning and implementation (JSTOCKPHOTO)

and Gujarat — leading to congestion, curtailment, and inefficient ramping of thermal plants. In this backdrop BESS has become essential rather than optional.

BESS enables surplus solar and wind generation to be stored during low-demand periods and dispatched during evening peaks, thereby reducing curtailment, easing congestion, and stabilising grid frequency. By limiting excessive thermal cycling, reducing reliance on volatile short-term markets, and providing localised flexibility near load centres, storage allows far better utilisation of existing grid infrastructure.

This requires large-scale BESSs and renewable-storage hybrids, additional renewable capacity risks translating into inefficiency. With storage, the same grid can reliably integrate significantly higher levels of clean energy at a lower

BESS enables surplus solar and wind generation to be stored during low-demand periods and dispatched during evening peaks

overall system cost. This has been formally recognised by the CEA, which now classifies BESS as a critical grid asset and permits its use for functions such as frequency regulation, peak shaving, ramp-rate control, and ancillary services, all key to maintaining grid security and reliability.

THE CHALLENGES

Despite a strong policy push, domestic BESSs face significant on-the-ground execution and structural challenges. While tenders are at record highs, only about 0.8 GWh is currently operational. There is a massive gap between planning and implementation.

If one takes a look back, the projects saw aggressive underbidding creating viability risks as input prices (copper, aluminium, and cells) fluctuate, making it difficult for first-time developers to deliver at promised price points.

Another challenge comes from distribution companies, that often delay signing Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) or Power Sale Agreements (PSAs), waiting for battery prices to drop even further. This, according to information, has led to the cancellation of over 6.4 GW of awarded capacity. Then there is grid inter-connection

bottlenecks — RE growth is outpacing transmission build-up.

At present, imported BESSs enjoy higher operational credibility than most Indian-assembled solutions. Observers say that even if it is made in India, there are more than 20 components required for the product, and not all are available here.

The domestic BESS ecosystem is transitioning from simple assembly to full-stack manufacturing, driven by the ₹18,100 crore Production Linked Incentive Scheme for Advanced Chemistry Cells (ACCs). Several Indian conglomerates and start-ups have jumped into the BESS components or systems business, locally. But it will take a while before they can meet the requirement.

India's General Network Access and Temporary General Network Access connectivity is seeing rising instances of curtailment in several renewable-rich regions. The grid is struggling to keep pace with rapid renewable additions, largely due to lagging transmission build-out and system flexibility. Given this, BESS emerged as a critical near-term solution. However, India's BESS ecosystem is still at an early stage compared to its PV industry.

BESS, in India, is at a stage where solar was in 2010. Besides, there are issues of customisation — each plant will be using the product for different purpose. There is also a need for skilled personnel for specialised BESS operations and maintenance (O&M) — which is significantly more complex than solar O&M.

A right approach is to create a conducive environment while moving towards Make In India, BESS. The capacity building in the near-term can leverage on established global players with proven technology, long operating track records, and robust safety standards across markets.

Such an approach would help mitigate near-term risks, uphold stringent safety standards, and preserve grid security, while domestic manufacturing and integration capabilities continue to mature — ultimately ensuring that storage strengthens, rather than constrains, India's energy transition.

STATISTALK.

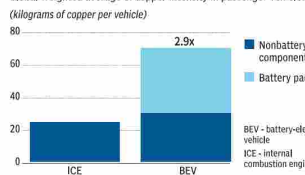
Compiled by Nishanth Gopalkrishnan | Graphics KS Gunasekar

Dichotomy in copper's medium- and long-term outlook

Copper finds broad economic applications — from infrastructure and mobility to household appliances — earning the moniker 'barometer of the economy'. As seen from charts below, the structural drivers for copper demand are intact. However, the energy shock brought about by the war in West Asia has weighed on its medium-term outlook, tilting it to the downside. Elevated energy costs are likely to dent global economic activity, thus dampening copper's demand. Conversely, a de-escalation in the conflict could support copper prices

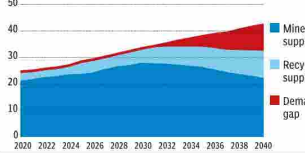
BEVs use 3x more copper than ICE vehicles

Global weighted average of copper intensity in passenger vehicles (kilograms of copper per vehicle)



Over 10 million tonnes of additional copper needed to meet 2040 demand

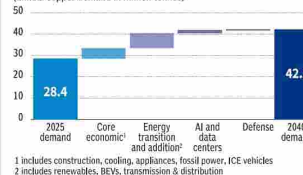
(million tonnes of copper per year)



Source: Plugged in and politicized: Copper in a fractured world by S&P Global. Copper prices outlook: Bearish macro risks remain a major concern by J.P.Morgan

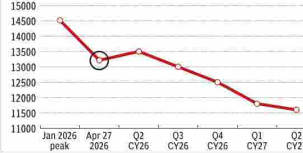
Energy transition: The primary driver of demand

(Annual copper demand in million tonnes)

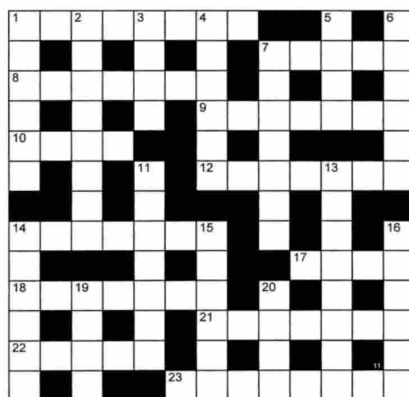


Weak medium-term outlook underpinned by weak demand

(Copper price: \$/tonne)



BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2668



EASY

- ACROSS**
- Wound dressings (8)
 - Incantation (5)
 - Ringing (7)
 - Cooked; interrogated (7)
 - Soil of clay and sand (4)
 - In spite of (7)
 - Animals living in burrows (7)
 - Craft polled (4)
 - Gossip (7)
 - Aperture; starting (play) (7)
 - Cut surgically (5)
 - Freed (8)
- DOWN**
- Preserve in brine (6)
 - Lively (8)
 - Produce two young at once (4)
 - Tattered (6)
 - Repeat (4)
 - Soft mud, half-melted snow (6)
 - Makes a mistake (5,2)
 - Fight with holds and throws (7)
 - Wounds suffered (8)
 - Belt fastener (6)
 - Tried very hard (6)
 - Was put on in the theatre (6)
 - Relative (4)
 - Lake, pool (4)

NOT SO EASY

- ACROSS**
- Finishes wall — and half the plot — with flowers (8)
 - Something cast that one will take letter by letter (5)
 - Sounding like a number are joining him with a gin cocktail (7)
 - Was severely questioned over charcoal? (7)
 - Good soil will make one hit out: nothing in that! (4)
 - Nevertheless, it's the wrong seed to have a cherry-stone in (7)
 - Pesters and worries the denizens of the sett (7)
 - Play on words at end of Lent may make progress at Cambridge (4)
 - Idle talk from Tom in Paris with better half (7)
 - Unsealing it is an opportunity (7)
 - Weapon can get broken with the French around (5)
 - Was set at liberty, so took out a fresh tenancy agreement (8)
- DOWN**
- Choose lime I'm leaving for the conserve (6)
 - With liveliness also one consort is included (8)
 - Without hesitation Winter may be used to produce two (4)
 - Tossed the threadbare (6)
 - Gong, a day short, may be set on the table (4)
 - At end of Alps mistakenly dug the French out of melted snow (6)
 - Take a little food involving mouth parts if one is wrong (5,2)
 - Grapple with the others at fifty when you and I are around (7)
 - Where to find panel members, being received by those hurt (8)
 - What may fasten belt may yield in a metallic way (6)
 - Exerted oneself to turn over the good man ahead (6)
 - In a past age determined to have it mounted in the theatre (6)
 - She is related to French one at the outside (4)
 - Stretch of water may form a part of some reservoir (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2667

ACROSS: 7. Contemplative 8. Sentimental 12. Crunch 14. Eaglet 16. Matins 18. Conger 19. Provocation 23. Circumference

DOWN: 1. Moss 2. Stun 3. Impish 4. Fleece 5. Stot 6. Aval 9. Equator 10. Allegro 11. Star 12. Comb 13. Can 15. Ago 17. Stormy 18. Chapel 19. Pail 20. Ouch 21. Item 22. Neck

OUR VIEW



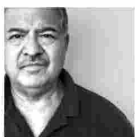
India's banking system can't afford risky links

RBI's cancellation of Paytm Payments Bank's licence shows its concern for financial stability. This is vital for the Indian economy, especially since digital payments are the order of the day

Over the course of just three days last week, India witnessed three important developments in the banking space, all of which have a significant bearing on the larger issue of financial stability. On 23 April, reports appeared that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had granted a non-bank called PayPoint approval to access its Centralised Payment System (CPS). The same day, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman was reported to have met bank chiefs to discuss AI-related risks in the context of global concerns over Anthropic's Mythos model, which is seen as a threat to the data security of financial systems. And then on 24 April, RBI issued an order to cancel the banking licence of Paytm Payments Bank, which must start winding up operations. Take these one by one. The CPS approval for a banking correspondent and issuer of pre-paid payment instruments was a first. For long, RBI policy had been to limit access only to banks and other approved institutions like National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), Clearing Corporation of India, Nabard and Exim Bank. Though it issued a circular some years ago indicating that fintech players would get access, approvals were tightly held. This was because core payment systems like Real Time Gross Settlement and National Electronic Funds Transfer, which are an integral part of the RBI-run CPS, can't afford risk exposure. This system serves as a unified platform for processing both large-value and retail transactions. It helps reduce systemic risks across the ecosystem by ensuring finality in financial settlements. Indeed, it is the very backbone of the country's financial system.

Opening the CPS to a non-bank over which RBI's oversight is less rigorous than for banks raises a question. Do the perceived benefits for a non-bank player in terms of speed and lower cost warrant such risk exposure? The broad issue of vulnerabilities is back in focus. Consider the cautionary note struck by the finance minister on the data security of banks. Globally, banks and regulators are anxious about the ability of Mythos to spot digital-security gaps that could be exploited by bad actors. As Our View in the 24 April edition of *Mint* pointed out, India's digital infrastructure overseen by RBI, including payment rails run by NPCI (for UPI most notably), relies on shared layers of software. Even where the top layer is proprietary, underlying systems are often shared across institutions. As the above-mentioned editorial observed, "A gap in one place could expose others." This may require pre-emptive action on the part of all involved. That brings us to last week's third development: the cancellation of Paytm Payments Bank's banking licence. In RBI's words, "The affairs of the bank were conducted in a manner detrimental to the interest of the bank and its depositors." While the central bank has not disclosed what exactly it found remiss with the payment bank's functioning—reports suggest violations of know-your-customer norms—it was clearly deemed enough to warrant the revocation of its licence. Regardless of how that decision was made, this episode strengthens the case for exercising extreme caution when it comes to India's banking system. If the CPS is to be opened further from hereon, tighter safeguards should be put in place. Given how seriously the central bank takes financial stability, it's probably on to it already.

MANOJ PANT



I can see from your coat, my friend, that you're from the other side. Can you tell me, please—who won the war?
—Wooden Ships by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young

It is now relatively quiet on the West Asian front and there is little doubt that we have moved away from the brinkmanship of 7 April, a critical turning point. On that day, US President Donald Trump threatened a civilizational war against Iran, which responded by mobilizing human shields to protect critical infrastructure and suspending trade talks with the US. In that moment, the price of Brent crude oil for physical delivery briefly surged to \$144 per barrel and headlines warned of 'Armageddon.' This marked the peak of global panic. Yet, just two days later, the hot war was effectively over. Markets reacted swiftly: Brent crude fell to \$96 by 10 April, though it reached \$105 this week after US-Iran talks fell apart. Both adversaries are still blowing

hot and cold, but we are unlikely to see another 7 April-like panic so long as today's uneasy truce holds. However, what we have witnessed is not merely the end of a potential global conflagration, but possibly the emergence of a new kind of Cold War. To understand this shift, we must ask who has actually won. Certainly not Trump. His Republican Party appears to be headed for electoral losses in November, while *NBC* and *Reuters* polls place Trump's approval rating at around 40%, just slightly higher than Joe Biden's before he lost the presidency. Nor is Iran the winner. Despite fighting a remarkable 'David versus Goliath' battle, it has been left with a severely degraded military and battered civilian infrastructure, requiring billions of dollars to rebuild. Israel cannot be considered a winner either. It finds itself reluctantly drawn into negotiations, even though its primary concern has always been Iran itself. The clearest winner is China. In an earlier *Mint* article (24 April 2025), I argued that the ideological Cold War between the US and Russia has ended, giving way to a new era defined by geo-economics. This becomes clearer when we compare this century's two most recent major conflicts. The Ukraine war has lasted over four years. By contrast,

the US-Iran armed conflict lasted just over a month. The Ukraine war initially drove up the prices of oil (Russia being a major producer) and grain (with Ukraine a key exporter), but the economic fallout was quickly contained. US policies let Russian oil be exported at capped prices, while grain exports continued. So, while the Ukraine war drags on, the US-Iran conflict has converged on a battle for control over the Strait of Hormuz. The 20th century Cold War involved visible trade-offs between politics and economics. For example, in 1971, Pakistan attempted to leverage its position to bridge relations between the US and China but failed to prevent the separation of East Pakistan. At the time, India—though without US support—represented a powerful democratic ideal that Washington could not afford to antagonize beyond a point. While the global economy was largely insulated from the Ukraine conflict, this is not so of the West Asian crisis. Iran's use of

the Strait of Hormuz as a strategic weapon threatens a vital trade route. Roughly 93% of global trade depends on maritime routes and any disruption can have severe economic consequences. Despite being one of the world's largest oil producers, market dynamics pushed up US fuel prices too. The resulting US inflation—which has exceeded 3%—placed significant pressure on the Trump administration. Simply put, American consumers do not tolerate wars that directly affect their wallets. But how did China emerge as the winner? It would be naïve to assume that Pakistan has been acting as the principal negotiator. More plausibly, it is functioning as a proxy for both the US and China—two powers unwilling to engage in direct negotiations as the domestic political fallout of a failure would be catastrophic to both. The extension of peace efforts to Lebanon, despite initial resistance from Israel (and even the US), also bears clear Chinese imprint. To attribute these developments

solely to Pakistan's mediation would be an oversimplification. As a fragile peace takes hold and if a *modus vivendi* can be worked out over Hormuz, the next phase will involve the reconstruction of Iran and other war-hit parts of the Gulf. Here, China is poised to play a role similar to that of America's in Europe after World War II. For China, whose economy has been experiencing relative stagnation, this presents an opportunity for renewed growth—even if modest. At the same time, both Europe and the Gulf states are likely to increase military spending in response to shifting geopolitical realities, which could be of benefit to the defence industries of both China and the US. Ultimately, the ideological standoff between Israel and Iran may hold limited relevance for the global economy. As both Iran and the US have learnt since their war began on 28 February, the deep economic interdependence of nations ensures that regional conflicts are swiftly curtailed when they threaten global economic stability. The previous century's Cold War is long over. What has replaced it is colder, more pragmatic and less sentimental. Economics now dictates strategy—and in this domain, China holds a distinct advantage.

THEIR VIEW

Finance Commissions that face fiscal opacity have a tough task

India must promote budget transparency at every level for tax resource allocations to be done aptly



ANOOP SINGH is a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress and was a member of the 15th Finance Commission.

At its core, India's Finance Commission (FC) is a constitutional mechanism for equalization, ensuring that differences in income across states do not translate into differences in access to basic public services. But equalization is only as effective as the information it uses. When fiscal data is incomplete or opaque, the FC's recommendations—however well intentioned—risk misallocating resources, weakening incentives and undermining fiscal discipline. Fiscal transparency is foundational to India's fiscal federal system. However, India's public financial management system continues to face persistent data gaps—misclassification of expenditure, incomplete reporting of liabilities, fragmented data across levels of government and limited visibility of off-budget operations. These distort the measurement of fiscal capacity and need. Consider capital expenditure. A significant portion of reported 'capex' consists of financial transactions—loans, equity injections into public entities or transfers through special purpose vehicles. If such spending is treated as capital formation, it inflates the apparent investment effort and obscures expenditure quality. For the FC, this matters directly. If states appear to invest more than they actually do, assessments are distorted and transfers may reward accounting

practices rather than asset creation. A similar distortion arises on the revenue side. Both the Union and some states treat proceeds from asset sales—privatization and just disinvestment—as current revenue. These are one-off capital receipts, not recurring revenue streams. International standards treat them as financing items. Classifying them as revenue creates a misleading picture: deficits appear lower and revenue buoyancy stronger than it actually is the case. For the FC, this has direct implications. A state reporting higher revenues due to one-time asset sales may appear fiscally stronger and less in need of transfers, while another relying on stable tax revenues may appear weaker. A more serious concern is the opacity of public debt. A significant share of borrowing by both the Union and states has taken place off-budget—through public enterprises and special purpose vehicles. In sectors such as power, losses have often been financed through state-guaranteed borrowing or mechanisms that shift liabilities outside the budget. Infrastructure financing through state-owned entities similarly obscures the true fiscal position. This creates two problems for the FC. *First*, it understates the true fiscal burden of some states. *Second*, it allows others to circumvent fiscal rules, which results in an uneven playing field. States that adhere to on-budget discipline may appear weaker than those that shift liabilities off-budget—rewarding opacity and penalizing transparency. Subsidy reporting presents a related challenge. Subsidies—particularly in power, agriculture and food—are often fragmented across budgetary and off-budget channels. In some states, electricity subsidies have been financed through either delayed payments or borrowing by state-owned companies. For the FC, the absence of a unified subsidy framework makes it difficult to evaluate expenditure commitments. A state with hidden subsidies may appear

stronger than it is, while one that transparently reports its subsidy burden may appear weaker. These issues are not confined to states. India still lacks fully consolidated fiscal accounts aligned with international standards. This fragmentation matters because fiscal responsibilities are shared. Without a consolidated view, it is difficult to assess the overall fiscal stance and the balance between Union and state finances. Recent developments underscore the importance of transparency. The 16th FC marks a shift away from gap-filling transfers in favour of a framework that expects states to undertake fiscal adjustment. But these projections rest on implicit assumptions, such as improved revenue mobilization, rationalized subsidies, reduced off-budget borrowing and stronger expenditure management—precisely where transparency is weakest. Without reliable data and consistent classification, it is difficult to assess whether such adjustment is feasible—or to monitor whether it is occurring. There are encouraging signs of reform. The Comptroller and Auditor General has taken steps to improve reporting. The FC has emphasized bringing off-budget borrowing onto the books. Conditional transfers to local bodies are increasingly tied to audited accounts and disclosure. But progress remains uneven. What is still missing is a system-wide approach to fiscal transparency—uniform classification standards, correct treatment of capital receipts, full disclosure of off-budget liabilities, consolidated accounts and clear reporting of subsidies and contingent liabilities. Ultimately, fiscal transparency is not just about better data, but aligning incentives. When fiscal information is clear and credible, it supports both equalization and discipline. For the FC, this is essential. Strengthening fiscal transparency will strengthen the foundation on which it makes its decisions.



JUST A THOUGHT

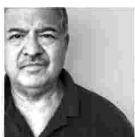
If you're one of these big, powerful countries and you bully the rest of the world all the time, they're going to react, and they're going to react by moving away from you, by not wanting to deal with you, because they're constantly afraid of being bullied.

MATTEO MAGGIORI

GUEST VIEW

The US-Iran conflict heralds a 21st century cold war

MANOJ PANT



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GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Agentic AI is set to revolutionize the financial lives of households

Tech enablers have emerged to transform personal finance at scale but AI-enabled services will need to earn the trust of users



HITESH SETHIA
is managing director and CEO, Jio Financial Services.

In most modern homes, we only think about electricity or wi-fi when they stop working. They are essential, life-altering utilities that function quietly in the background, demanding zero cognitive effort. They enable productivity, comfort and continuity without needing constant intervention. Why then does household financial management still involve a series of manual chores, complex apps and reactive decisions? While e-commerce and media streaming use technology to anticipate what we want before we ask, financial services have lagged, leaving customers to navigate complexity with limited context. For most individuals, managing money still feels like an active responsibility rather than a seamless and intuitive experience.

But that's about to change. India's financial landscape is at the cusp of a once-in-a-lifetime transformation. The sector has moved across three critical stages. The *first* created access through physical and digital financial infrastructure, including branch networks, data connectivity, smartphone penetration, UPI and the account aggregator framework. The *second* has been driving inclusion through payments, credit and insurance. And now a *third* stage of empowering individuals has begun through democratic access to smart finance.

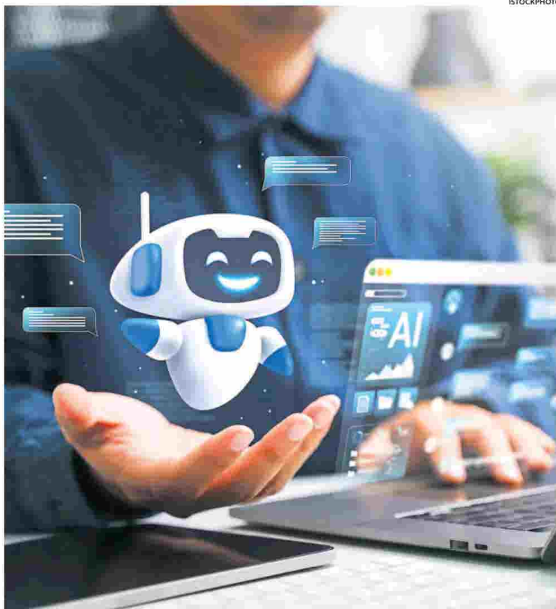
If the past decade was about digital inclusion, the next one will be a decade of intelligent empowerment. This shift hasn't happened by chance. It's the result of a deliberate push to bring about a shift that is not just technological, but deeply human, with the potential to reshape how individuals experience control, confidence and clarity in their financial lives.

The transformation currently underway—driven by agentic artificial intelligence (AI)—is about closing the gap between human intent and digital action. Unlike basic automation, Agentic AI understands intent and acts proactively within defined boundaries. It is the difference between a system that waits for instructions and one that anticipates needs. Instead of requiring users to constantly interact, track and optimize, these systems can interpret patterns, adapt to behaviour and act in alignment with long-term goals.

This future of finance will not be built on apps alone, but on integrated ecosystems that think, adapt and show empathy.

As consumer expectations evolve, the traditional model of generic products and periodic interactions is giving way to a more continuous, context-aware and embedded experience. In this model, finance becomes less about transactions and more about outcomes, aligned with an individual's goals, behaviours and life context.

Finance is thus evolving from a passive tool to a partner that is constantly looking out for the individual. Imagine a finance app that recognizes it is



ISTOCKPHOTO

your salary day and automatically allocates a portion to savings or investments in line with your goals. This isn't a distant dream any longer, but a very plausible near-term reality. Financial services thus move from being visible to invisible, and from reactive to predictive, working quietly in the background in your best interest.

Consequently, the measure of success for service providers will no longer just be how many products are sold, but how much time and money their customers saved. More importantly, it will be measured by how meaningfully the financial well-being of clients improves over time.

At its core, this evolution is about strengthening financial health as a tangible, everyday outcome. When financial systems begin to anticipate needs, prevent inefficiencies and guide better decisions, individuals don't just transact better, they live better. Financial health in this context goes beyond income or net worth.

It includes resilience against shocks, the ability to meet life goals and the confidence to make decisions without anxiety. It is as much about peace of mind as it is about financial returns.

Just as we rely on routine blood work to monitor our biological vitals, it is time we apply the same diagnostic rigour to our financial health. A unified financial fitness score—a single, holistic metric encompassing borrowing, spending, protection and investment—can help people understand where they stand. Think of it as a smart health tracker for your finances—constantly guiding you towards healthier money habits.

But data alone isn't enough. AI can help delegate

the cognitive load of financial management to autonomous systems, allowing individuals to reach their goals without the friction of constant decision-making.

Real progress requires radical transparency, where the logic behind a recommendation is as clear as the advice itself. Empowerment truly begins when customers understand why a particular product is offered, how exactly it benefits them and what digital levers they can exercise to maintain absolute control over their choices.

There is, of course, the question of whether households will invest their trust in these Agentic AI offerings and this new paradigm on the whole. It will take far more than advertising messages and publicity. Trust will have to be earned over time through consistent and demonstrable outcomes.

Indian companies did well to deepen product penetration with 'sachet-sized' offerings, but it's time now for deep personalization. This involves recognizing major changes in a customer's life, such as a child starting school, and adjusting financial plans accordingly. When customers see how data works for them and regulators ensure iron-clad protection, trust can act as a competitive advantage. India's knack for balancing innovation with safety is what can ensure that this new financial system works for everyone and is built to last.

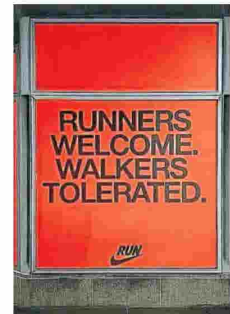
Once finance becomes intuitive, ethical and unobtrusive, empowerment can drive progress. Ultimately, a system that quietly works in the background must noticeably improve the financial health of Indians at scale for it to count as a frontier success story. The tools needed are already exist.

Don't do it: Nike stumbled on its Boston Marathon outreach

Any slogan that defies its brand position risks alienating customers



BETH KOWITZ
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering corporate America.



An adline in the US that seemed to sneer at walkers led to a backlash. X/AFOS

Good marketing can be edgy or cheeky, even provocative. It should have a point of view and be memorable. What it should not do is shame or insult customers.

Nike seems to have missed this lesson from Marketing 101. In the run up to the Boston Marathon on Monday, an advertisement in the window of a store along the city's Newbury Street read "Runners welcome, walkers tolerated." The copy came across as completely at odds with the company's "Just Do It" tagline, a call to action that in the company's own words is "a challenge to start, to try, to move forward even when it's hard."

This was just one ad, directed at a very specific market, but it seized the news cycle because it underlines Nike's struggles with its brand identity at a moment when the world's largest sportswear company can least afford it.

In October 2024, the company brought back former longtime Nike executive Elliott Hill to turn around the ailing athletic shoe and apparel maker, which has seen its stock price tumble some 75% since peaking in November 2021 and its operating income shrink by almost 50%. Hill's fixes, including returning Nike to its roots in sports and mending its relationships with wholesalers, are taking longer to gain traction than management and investors would like. Since 31 March, when the company said revenue is likely to decline for the current quarter and the rest of the year, the stock has dropped 15%, bringing its year-to-date losses to almost 30%.

The Boston marketing misstep—coming from what's supposed to be one of corporate America's most astute and powerful brand builders—is not going to persuade Wall Street that Nike understands what it is. "This shows the broader confusion with the brand," says American Reed, marketing professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. "That's the more disturbing part."

The backlash to the ad was so swift that before runners had even hit the course Nike replaced it with, "Boston will always remind you, movement is what matters." It added in a statement, "We want more people to feel welcome in running—no matter their pace, experience, or the distance."

Next came the backlash to the backlash. The Boston Marathon is the world's most prestigious for recreational runners with its entry based on strict qualifying times. It's just a matter of fact that it's not an event for walkers, some argued. Nike, they said, had caved to snowflakes.

Historically, Nike has had no problem courting controversy (see the Colin Kaepernick partnership). But the Boston ad wasn't just controversial; it was antithetical to what the Nike brand is supposed to stand for. The company's business has been built on enlarging the tent of who gets labelled an athlete. The mantra of its co-founder, Bill Bowerman, that "If you have a body, you're an athlete," is embedded in Nike's mission statement. Its tagline is very intentionally "Just Do It," not "Only Do It If You're Going to Win."

But marketing yourself as an inclusive brand has gotten harder in today's business climate. Christine Day, one-time CEO of Lululemon, told me that she is a fan of Hill and agrees with his moves to fix Nike, but added that finding a brand topic is especially hard for big companies at the moment. "We're living in a time of what I would call a masculine swing," says Day, who is now a brand consultant. "The power of exclusion, or 'I'm better'—that voice resonates with a lot of customers." As such, aspirational, positive brands can get labelled as woke, she says.

Recent moves by Nike make its "walkers tolerated" line feel less like a one-off mistake and more like a signal. Marketing experts told *Front Office Sports* that Nike's move toward a "hard" and "spikier" brand identity is part of its attempt to win back the serious runners it's lost to upstarts.

Earlier this month, Nike also faced criticism for a billboard at a free park run in London that read, "You didn't come all this way for a walk in the park." Nike is missing how the running market has evolved, Lee Glandorf, who writes a newsletter about sports style, told the outlet.

Nike's rivals have seized on the company's shift—and it is resonating. Asics countered with its own billboard in Boston: "Runners. Walkers. All Welcome." Shoe company Altra posted on social media, "Run, Walk, Crawl. No matter how you do it, just stay out there." Even before Nike's Boston Hub, Swiss brand On was running a "soft wins" campaign that featured Elmo.

While Nike plays with a voice that sounds more exclusionary, its competitors are claiming the kind of accessibility that the brand once embodied. It risks losing not just market share, but the voice that once defined the brand. **©BLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Health data and AI can deepen insurance penetration

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and the author of 'The Third Way: India's Revolutionary Approach to Data Governance'. His X handle is @matthan.

Nearly 70% of Indians lack meaningful health insurance. Our penetration rate—just 0.35% of GDP—is lower than that of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The conventional explanation is that Indians either do not understand insurance or cannot afford it. But in reality, the problem is not behavioural as much as the fact that Indian insurers, for the most part, lack the population-level health data that they need to price risk accurately.

When premiums are too high relative to actual risk, healthy people—who know they are unlikely to need expensive care—see no reason why they should buy coverage. When that happens, the risk pool gradually shrinks until it consists largely of those who expect to make claims. This, in turn, results in higher premiums, which, in turn, results in even more healthy people staying away, pushing our health insurance market into a vicious cycle that is hard to escape.

Take the example of diabetes, the single largest driver of chronic disease claims in the

country. Today, insurance premiums for the disease are determined based on crude national averages or the prevalence of the disease across given age bands. This is despite the fact that its prevalence is known to vary widely across regions—from 4.8% in Uttar Pradesh to 26.4% in Goa. None of this regional divergence is reflected in the premiums people have to pay.

At its core, an effective insurance system is a mechanism for pooling risk. The individual premiums are not set based on what the person's bills will cost, but on the expected average expenses of people like them. The larger and more diverse the pool, the more accurately risk can be priced, and the more stable premiums become over time. This is why the vicious cycle described above is so damaging; healthy people who exit the pool don't just reduce revenue, they make the pool itself less representative, the pricing less accurate and the premiums higher.

Better data could break this vicious cycle. If insurers move beyond crude age-band or national-average assumptions and price risk at genuinely granular levels—by region, occupation, co-morbidity profiles and lifestyle markers—they can offer premiums that healthy cohorts might actually find worth paying. A 32-year-old software professional

in Bengaluru with no family history of chronic illness should not be priced as though she carries the average risk of all Indians aged between 30 and 40. She almost certainly doesn't. But insurers need the data to be able to take that call.

For this to happen, we need population-level health data that is sufficiently granular to be useful. Accurate actuarial models built on rich, longitudinal data don't just lower premiums for healthier people, they improve the efficacy of the entire system. Lower premiums attract broader participation. Broader participation generates better data. Better data results in finer segmentation. Finer segmentation allows even more accurate pricing, effectively inverting the vicious cycle.

Where can we source this data from? As it happens, India has a digital infrastructure capable of processing vast amounts of health data at scale. The Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM) currently has access to over 500 million health records across 80,000-

plus healthcare facilities; while its primary objective is to provide access to patient records across the healthcare system, it should not be hard to modify so we can use it to improve our actuarial intelligence. The key is doing so safely, without putting the personal data of patients at risk of exposure in the process.

AI analysis of anonymized Ayushman Bharat data could improve policy pricing in India

The original ABDM blueprint had an anonymizer module that was designed to de-identify health records for use in privacy-preserving applications. To the best of my knowledge, this has not yet been built, but it is evident how an effective anonymization solution could make ABDM data useful for this purpose. Since the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023 only applies to "personal data," properly anonymized data would not fall within its ambit. Which means that it could be used to build actuarial models without requiring the consent of the individuals concerned.

The last element that needs to be added to the mix is artificial intelligence (AI). Tradi-

tional actuarial methods rely on structured tables and known risk factors—age, pre-existing conditions and occupation. They work well enough when the categories are broad and the data is limited. But if we use AI, applying it to the large-anonymized datasets that ABDM can make available, we should additionally be able to identify non-obvious correlations between health indicators, allowing us to identify emerging disease clusters before they appear in claims data. This will enable us to model risk trajectories across demographic cohorts that conventional methods would miss entirely.

At the end of the day, insurance is not really about policies or premiums. It is about information. When insurers cannot see risk clearly, they will price policies defensively, and that is when the system begins to unravel. The availability of useful data allows risk to be measured more precisely, making it possible for insurance markets to expand and stabilize.

India needs to unlock the actuarial intelligence embedded within the data that its digital health infrastructure is beginning to generate. Once we do that, we may discover that the biggest barrier to universal insurance coverage in the country was never affordability, but visibility.

A meme about Mamata Banerjee shows why women's reservation may just be a hollow promise. —By Trishna Sarkar

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The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts. —CS Lewis

The Editorial Page

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IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

In the AAP crisis, a larger waning

THE DEFECTION of seven AAP Rajya Sabha MPs to the BJP — including Raghav Chadda, Sandeep Pathak and Swami Malwal — is part of three intertwined stories. The first is the meteoric rise and steady decline of the AAP itself, marked by successes but also by a steady erosion of the idealism it projected when it dramatically broke through the high entry barriers of the polity to become a viable party. Soon after it made its political debut in 2013, the party began to shed prominent members. Among other things, these departures pointed to the extreme centralisation of power within the AAP, and the weakness of its organisational structures and processes. But they did not seem to affect its electoral prospects in Delhi till the 2025 assembly election — it managed to build the "Delhi model", showcasing successes in education and health.

The AAP's fall also takes place in a fraught context. Its slide speaks of its bruising battle with the Centre's ruling party. Since 2014, the BJP has been politically dominant and it seeks to subdue and conquer all spaces. Investigative agencies like the Enforcement Directorate are often seen to be weaponised to target Opposition leaders selectively and disproportionately, many of whom are given a reprieve and/or positions of power. They cross over to the ruling party. Maharashtra, where the Shiv Sena and NCP were sliced into two, has showcased this politics of "red-phud" (destruction). The AAP and its leadership have arguably borne the brunt of this politics. In the months leading up to the Delhi assembly election, its top leaders were jailed without bail in the so-called excise scam.

The third story is that of the broader opposition space that is under pressure, and shrinking. When the gap between the ruling and Opposition forces is wide, in an environment where politics becomes a zero-sum game, the ruling party has far greater resources at its command, the onus is on the Opposition to summon resilience. "Opposition unity", too, has structural constraints. When it has stood together — as in the 2024 general elections or recently in Parliament to defeat the Delimitation Bill — it has reaped moments of success. However, the many interests of these parties may not always converge, and together, they have not articulated a common minimum programme. The AAP's crisis underlines that in order to step up to its challenge, internal and external, the Opposition needs to first recognise it.

The spread of campus unfreedoms

EVENTS OF the past week at Hansraj College sit uneasily with the idea and promise of the university. The college has clamped down on students, suspending at least 30 for "derogatory language" and "defaming the college" on social media. There is a widening gap between the lofty aim of nurturing critical inquiry on campus and the reality of a heavy-handed crackdown on any form of disagreement or dissent.

The college's move against students allegedly criticising it was followed by an FIR against 13 persons, including some students who had already been suspended, for a fracas that took place during the institution's annual festival earlier in the month. The action comes amid a steady erosion of the rights of students and controls over students. On February 17, orders were issued by Delhi University prohibiting protests and public meetings without prior permission — this was triggered by a protest against a new set of UGC guidelines on dealing with discrimination. While the Delhi High Court observed on March 12 that "there cannot be a blanket ban", on March 23, DU mandated that any protest in central university spaces would require a signed application submitted 72 hours in advance, along with names, affiliations, turnout, duration, logistics, and speakers. No doubt universities are obligated to ensure safety and security — but a prohibition that treats the assembly of students as an inevitable precursor to disorder cramps freedoms and collapses the distinction between dissent and disruption. The consequences are visible across campuses. The student is no longer seen as a participant in a shared intellectual enterprise but a subject to be managed by principals and VCs. This disquieting pattern goes beyond a single institution. From Jawaharlal Nehru University to Ashoka University and South Asian University, administrations deal with faculty and students repressively, stifling debate rather than encouraging it.

To treat protests as inherently suspicious signals an erosion of trust and a misunderstanding of what the campus, and the classroom, stand for. A university that fears its students risks hollowing out its intellectual core.

Where the shadows gather

THE HOUSE is quiet, but never quite silent. In the small hours, when the world outside has fallen silent, it seems to acquire a secret life of its own. Shadows deepen, floorboards creak unexpectedly. The air acquires a watchfulness, as if someone is lingering just beyond the closed door, waiting to be let in. Recall the oppressive interiors of *The Hunting of Hill House*, or the low, encroaching dread of *The Turn of the Screw*. For years and years, this unease — and the conviction that one is not alone — has come to define the imagination of the uncanny or the supernatural. Turns out not all of it relates to the paranormal.

Recent research by psychologists at MacEwan University in Canada, published in *Frontiers in Behavioural Neuroscience*, suggests that such atmospheres may be engineered not by spirits but by sound too low to be audible to the naked ear. Infrasound, those subterranean frequencies produced by ageing systems of heat and ventilation, assumes life of its own when ambient noises die down. The house is not haunted so much as it is resonant, its antiquated mechanisms generating a continuous hum that the mind struggles to interpret. For those predisposed to horror, the body's subtle distress manifests through restlessness and a prickling sense of being observed. For the more intrepid, however, it may simply show up as irritation, and the annoyance that comes with figuring out the maintenance of an old house.

The explanation, it would seem, is to be found in the paranormal. If anything, it relocates the source of dread from the unknown outside to the nervous system. Or, what the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle called the "ghost in the machine" in his critique of Descartes' doctrine of mind-body dualism: "That there is such seamless coherence between body and mind that the faintest physical disturbance can ripple outward into meaning — and in, this case, into distraction.

Why AAP's breakup matters and can an Opposition-free India be far behind?

IT IS perhaps no secret that the BJP's plan for India is not just a Congress-mut Bharat, but a Vipaksha Vilheen Bharat. The recent defection of seven Members of Parliament from the AAP is part of a long chain of extra-electoral measures the BJP has taken to defang any Opposition party that might even slightly challenge it. At one level, it is hard to grudge any political party wanting to acquire and consolidate power. That is one of the core aims of politics. It is also a rule of politics that no one "deserves" power: Power is what you can create. Any serious political party must take this aspiration seriously.

The BJP also has revolutionary aims: Re-ordering the entire constitutional order through the use of current instruments of state. It is inherent in the logic of a party that wants far-reaching constitutional changes that it seeks to command all the legislative power to do so. The play for the Rajya Sabha is hugely consequential. It also, like all dominant parties, wants all social conflicts to be mediated within the party rather than between parties. As a party, it also wants to dominate all non-electoral institutions, from capital to civil society, so that there are fewer countervailing sources of power left in society. To criticise the BJP for seeking total power, as if it were a normal political party in a pluralist competitive system, is to misunderstand its nature: Its version of national change requires unchecked authority.

It is the case that if large sections of the Opposition are opportunistic or cowardly or both, in some fundamental ways, the joke is on them. But usually in a democracy, opportunism can counteract opportunism, provided there is some symmetry. It may be morally unsavoury but a rotating opportunism at least preserves a balance of power. But now we cannot rely on a wide distribution of opportunism to contain the BJP's power, precisely because it is one-sided, for a variety of reasons. The prospects of hugely significant defections from the BJP are low. This is so for a variety of reasons. A dominant party will often generate much more of a bandwagon than Opposition parties.

A ruling party has many more extra electoral incentives at its disposal, from threatening to use state power in the form of the Enforcement Directorate or income tax, or from dangling other incentives. Admittedly, not all of the BJP's strategies are entirely unprecedented. But the ruthlessness, scale, coordination and ferocity with which they are deployed is unprecedented. The lack of countervailing institutions means that no one can rely on the judiciary to protect them, or even the press to mobilise the court of public opinion. In that sense, the BJP has made everyone vulnerable.

But some of the reasons for this domination are ideological in two ways. On the one hand, the core of the right wing seems to have more conviction about its politics and is less ready to abandon it. On the other hand, these defections



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

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remind us that the BJP's greatest success is not just electoral. It is to lower the ideological barriers to its acceptability so that virtually 90 per cent of politicians are capable of joining it. There are no ideological red lines, let alone restraints of self-respect. The naked success of strategies of inducing fear on the one hand, or rewarding opportunism on the other, also serves the BJP's ideological agenda in a deeper sense. It not only exposes the shallowness of the potential opposition to the BJP; it deepens cynicism about the politics.

The biggest tragedy of the breakup of the AAP is not the breakup itself; these things happen in politics. But it is the idea that a new force will now operate under a much larger shadow of scepticism. Cynicism, then, creates a kind of political nihilism: The only god to be worshipped is power, and we can appease ourselves by saying we are doing this for the nation. Everything is easier instrumentalised if it is cloaked in the service of nationalism. If nationalism is the last refuge of the sounder, the more sounders there are, the more propitious the ground for nationalism.

We must not let the casual claim that India is too complex for one party to dominate induce a kind of complacency. Sure, there are regional complexities, and the BJP will also make mistakes. But the BJP has already massively moved the bar on just how pervasive a political control and ideological

dominance a party can exercise, hollowing out everything else to the point where only its shell remains. It has to be said that a lot of this is the consequence of sheer will: The relentless hunger, ruthlessness, energy, grit, and wanting to win at all costs. The sensibility of the BJP is still hard to match for any other party. The hopes that a sense of existential crisis might energise the Opposition have been dashed.

The late Abid Hussain used to joke that one should never say "Reform or Perish" to an Indian politician. They might treat that as a genuine choice. This might even be more apt for an Opposition where even existential stakes cannot get them to summon a will to fight. Depending on the state elections, there may still be pockets of regional resistance. But ironically, those pockets, whether in the TMC, which is struggling, or the DMK, are not going to be able to stem the BJP's ideological tide. We now have to think of two implications. The first is that the new levels of institutional ruthlessness the BJP has shown suggest that the fairness of competition is going to deteriorate further. All significant sources of countervailing power are vanishing, and finally, we may be looking at a world without the Opposition. But we also know that a society on the surface united by too dominant a force is also likely to be more brittle. We will now know what discontent is about to hit us.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

In great-power games over Hormuz, law yields to force



ABHJUT SINGH

THE CRISIS in the Strait of Hormuz has set into a dangerous equilibrium. With prospects for talks uncertain, Iran and the US remain locked in a tense standoff — neither willing to yield, both prepared to impose costs. This is not merely an episode of strategic posturing with collateral consequences. It is far more consequential: An unravelling of the long-settled relationship between law and power at sea. For perhaps the first time in contemporary maritime practice, a critical global chokepoint is subject to competing coercive regimes, each seeking to regulate access through force. Commercial shipping is no longer operating within a settled legal order; rather, it navigates a contested space in which the right of transit passage in an international strait is neither acknowledged nor reliably assured.

This is a profound departure from the logic that has long governed maritime transit. Since Hugo Grotius articulated the idea of *mare liberum* in the early 17th century, the principle of open seas has underpinned the evolution of modern maritime law, finding formal expression in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. At its core lies the proposition that geography should not be permitted to hold commerce hostage. This is a profound departure from the logic that has long governed maritime transit. Since Hugo Grotius articulated the idea of *mare liberum* in the early 17th century, the principle of open seas has underpinned the evolution of modern maritime law, finding formal expression in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. At its core lies the proposition that geography should not be permitted to hold commerce hostage.

The challenge is not simply to navigate the present crisis but to adapt to a future in which access at sea may no longer be guaranteed by law alone. That requires not just naval capability, but strategic foresight

disruption extends to petrochemicals, fertilisers, aluminium, and other industrial goods that underpin regional and global supply chains. The scale of disruption could well deepen. Left unresolved, the shocks could ripple across the global economy on a scale comparable to the oil crises of the 1970s.

Even so, the strategic logic underpinning the US and Iran's actions in Hormuz is increasingly open to question. Washington appears to assume that constricting Iranian maritime exports will impose decisive economic pressure. Yet it has failed to reckon with the reality that sustained disruption of traffic in Hormuz would inevitably impose costs on US allies and partners, and risks escalation with other stakeholders. Tehran, for its part, is leveraging its geographic position to raise the costs of coercion. In doing so, it risks broadening the conflict and inviting forms of retaliation that may exceed its capacity to manage.

For India, this presents a stark dilemma. As a trading state dependent on external energy flows and open sea lanes, it cannot afford to accept the erosion of transit norms as a new normal. New Delhi, however, has neither the leverage nor the incentive to directly challenge either belligerent. The appropriate response lies in calibrated pragmatism. Operationally, India must ensure the safe transit of Indian shipping through naval escorts and careful deconfliction, while avoiding entanglement in escalation dynamics. Diplomatically, New Delhi must work to underscore the wider stakes involved and support efforts to restore a measure of normalcy to the strait.

At a deeper level, the events in Hormuz carry a more enduring lesson. Long-held assumptions about universal access to the maritime commons are no longer tenable. Chokepoints — from Hormuz to Malacca — are increasingly susceptible to great-power contentions. For countries dependent on maritime trade, this is not a temporary disruption but a structural condition. The challenge is not simply to navigate the present crisis but to adapt to a future in which access at sea may no longer be guaranteed by law alone. That requires not just naval capability, but strategic foresight — and a recognition that the balance between law and leverage at sea is once again in flux.

The writer is a retired naval officer and former head of the maritime policy initiative at ORF, New Delhi

Future of medicine: From treatment to balance



SHASHANK JOSHI

A time when non-communicable diseases dominated global health conversations, the thyroid gland, small yet metabolically powerful, is emerging as a barometer of how modern life is altering human biology. At the 35th annual scientific meeting of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinology in Las Vegas, the Hossein Gharib Educational Lectureship offered an opportunity to reflect on a small gland with a large message. The lecture, "Impact of Iodine on Thyroid Autoimmunity, Goiter and Oncogenesis", centred on one simple truth: In thyroid physiology, more is not always better. Both deficiencies and excess can be harmful.

The thyroid operates within a narrow biological window, and when iodine intake strays outside this range, disease follows. While iodine leads lives by balance. Too little iodine, and it struggles — goiter, hypothyroidism, nodular disease, impaired neurodevelopment. Too much, and it may rebel — autoimmunity, thyrotoxicosis, thyroiditis, altered disease patterns. Endocrinologists call this a U-shaped curve. Life calls it wisdom. For decades, iodine deficiency was the enemy. Iodised salt became one of public health's greatest success stories, including in India. But today, iodine exposure is no longer limited to dieting. Iodine also comes from supplements, seaweed-based products, processed foods, iodinated contrast, antiseptics, and unregulated "health" practices. Environmental exposures, from plastics like bisphenol A to fluoride and other endocrine-disrupting chemicals, are interacting with iodine biology in ways that amplify risk.

The thyroid is exquisitely sensitive to such shifts. It needs iodine to make T3 and T4, hormones that influence metabolism, growth, energy, and brain development. Yet when iodine crosses its biological threshold, the same nutrient can disturb the very gland it was meant to nourish. Truly, dose becomes biology. Even more concerning is the growing evidence that excess iodine may enhance thyroid autoimmunity. A newer concern is the "double hit" model, where iodine imbalance interacts with endocrine-disrupting chemicals, which may interfere with thyroid hormone signalling, iodine uptake, and immune balance. There is also growing evidence linking iodine excess to cardiovascular changes, metabolic dysfunction, and alterations in the gut microbiome, the complex ecosystem increasingly recognised as central to immune and endocrine health. This is where medicine must become more attentive. Behind every TSH, T3, and T4 value is a person — what they eat, what they inhale, what they apply, what they believe is "natural," and what their body is trying to balance.

The lesson is also spiritual. *Vedanta* has long taught that harmony, not accumulation, sustains life. The Bhagavad Gita reminds us that moderation in food, sleep, action, and thought leads to well-being. The thyroid seems to repeat the same truth: Neither deprivation nor excess creates health. Endocrinology calls this homeostasis. Indian wisdom calls it *samata* — equanimity, balance. In iodine intake, as in human living, the path is not "more" or "less," but "right". The future of medicine must therefore move from precision treatment to precision balance — knowing what is enough, what is too much, and what each individual truly needs. Health is not the victory of excess. It is the art of alignment.

The writer is a consultant endocrinologist at Lilavati Hospital and Research Centre based in Mumbai, a Padma Shri awardee and a recipient of the Hossein Gharib Educational Lectureship at AACCE 2026

40 YEARS AGO

April 29, 1986



Chernobyl disaster

A NUCLEAR accident, claimed to be the first one of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), was reported today at the Chernobyl atomic power plant in Ukraine. Without mentioning the number of people affected and the magnitude of the accident, a Tass report said an inquiry had been ordered into the disaster. The appointment of government commissions in the USSR normally follows major catastrophes of this kind, with one exception. The people "affected" in the accident were being treated, and "measures are being undertaken to eliminate the consequences of the accident," the Tass report said.

Congress (I) MLA shot dead

SANT SINGH Gill, Congress (I) MLA from Beas, and Pradeep Kumar, a security guard of Surinder Kumar Billa, Rashtriya Hindu Sanghanna leader, were gunned down in a fresh spurt of terrorist violence in Punjab.

Extradition treaty sought

INDIA TONIGHT sought West German help in combating terrorism and underscored the need to have a extradition treaty between the two countries. Speaking at a dinner in honour of West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said, "We look to your cooperation to curb the activities of those who misuse

territory and hospitality to incite violence, terrorism, and separatism in India." Apparently referring to activities of "pro-Khalistan" activists in West Germany, the Indian Prime Minister said it was this which imparted added urgency to the need to conclude a suitable extradition treaty in the near future.

Proposal to set up NSG

THE UNION cabinet is understood to have considered today a proposal for setting up a National Security Guard. The task of this separate and specialised force would be to deal with the problem of terrorism. The meeting of the cabinet was presided over by the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi.

• **THE OTHERS SAY**
King Charles must do his best to wrest some diplomatic advantage from an ill-timed trip, which Trump will treat as a personal tribute.
— *The Guardian*

AI is bringing the battle to the door of the national-security bureaucracy



RAJA MANDALA
C RAJA MOHAN

SINGAPORE'S FOREIGN minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, has opened a window into the future of diplomacy. In a Facebook post, he declared that "the diplomat who learns to work with AI will have a meaningful edge". The remark accompanied his unveiling of a personal AI agent using open-source software and a low-cost computer.

That a sitting foreign minister coded his own AI assistant is remarkable; that he published the entire architecture on GitHub is even more so. He has shown how accessible AI tools have become, how entry barriers to using AI are lowering, and how profoundly they could reshape diplomatic practice.

The AI assistant that Balakrishnan built is not a regular chatbot. It connects to the minister's communication channels, processes voice notes and images, schedules tasks, and — crucially — retains structured memory. Unlike conventional AI assistants that forget everything between sessions, his AI assistant extracts facts, synthesises them into a knowledge graph, and recalls them when needed. Balakrishnan describes it as an "invaluable" research assistant and admits, "I don't dare switch it off."

Diplomacy has always rested on two pillars: Institutional memory — the accumulated record of who said what, when, and why in the engagement between governments — and individual craft, honed through years of negotiation abroad and persuasion at home. A self-learning AI system does not replace either; it reorganises and amplifies them. It makes institutional memory instantly searchable and aids the diplomat's ability to assess the relevant context in real time.

Balakrishnan's experiment is part of a wider trend. Foreign ministries across the world are beginning to embed AI tools into their workflows. The old machinery of diplomatic craft — slow, paper-bound, and hier-



ILLUSTRATION: C SAKSHI MAHAR

archical — struggles to keep pace with the velocity of contemporary diplomacy and the growing weight of the cognitive load on its practitioners. AI tools will inevitably emerge as a force multiplier in modern diplomacy. A well-tuned AI system can draft communications in minutes and cross-check decades of treaties for consistency. It could generate alternative formulations calibrated to different audiences and improve the choices for the political decision-makers.

In the past, diplomatic advantage often flowed from sheer manpower. Major powers could overwhelm smaller delegations by deploying large teams of experts. AI changes that equation. A five-person delegation equipped with a sovereign AI stack could possibly match the analytical and drafting capacity of a 50-person mission. This technological levelling empowers middle powers and small states to shape agendas rather than merely respond to them.

The deeper transformation lies elsewhere — in what AI removes. Much of diplomatic work is procedural drudgery — drafting, summarising, cross-referencing, and record-keeping. AI eliminates this "documentary friction", freeing diplomats to focus on the irreducible

human dimensions of their craft: Deeper awareness of other societies, political judgment and relationship-building.

Balakrishnan himself has drawn a clear line between AI augmentation and AI automation in diplomatic work. Speaking at the UN Security Council last September, he warned that diplomacy has long assumed that one is negotiating with another human intelligence — "one with a brain and a heart", each shaped by unique cultural, political, and economic characteristics.

If diplomatic decision-making is outsourced to machines, that assumption comes under stress. The danger is not hypothetical. As AI systems begin to simulate negotiation outcomes, generate policy options, and model crisis responses, the temptation to let them decide will grow.



MYTHRI SUDHAKAR

THE BIG-fish-little-pond effect is a theory by Herbert Marsh that states that equally able individuals have lower academic self-concepts in higher-ability environments (top-tier institutions) compared to low-ability environments. The four deaths by suicide over the past two months at NIT Kurukshetra tell us far more than statistics and news articles on "mental health" ever could. The dedication and mental fortitude it takes for a teenager to crack the JEE and earn a seat at an IIT or NIT is immeasurable. If someone was able to weather that pressure at a formative age and earn admission to one of the country's most competitive institutes, where is the gap that makes them struggle later with relationship issues or academic stress?

Every week, the medical officer sends at least two students to my office. "I had self-harm ideation during my JEE preparation. My parents cared enough to take me to a psychiatrist, so it wouldn't affect my exam," one said. "She hasn't talked to me for three days after that. I wonder if someone else is with her," broke down another final-year student. As alarming as it is to hear these accounts, it is equally heartening that they are willing to talk about it to a professional, that they are ready to learn how to cope.

At the same time, considerable efforts are being made by the state to strengthen mental-health sup-

What we forget to teach our students

port on campuses. There are public facilities like TeleMANAS, suicide helplines, private platforms like YourDost, and several AI-based applications. Yet, we find ourselves going around in circles, asking what more needs to be done.

The problem lies in how we only look at one side of the coin, as though mental health and distress are conditions that require a "cure". Distress is a universal experience. The reasons and intensity may vary, but the feeling, more or less, is the same. For one student, it may stem from self-perceived academic incompetence, while for another, a failed relationship. The goal is not to eliminate it, but to regulate it, to keep it within tolerable levels so that it does not consume a life that still has so much ahead of it.

Getting students to come forward and talk is the real issue that needs to be addressed. As long as students are not taught that it is okay to speak up when things get too heavy, as long as they are not taught compassion for others and for themselves, they will not practise it.

Spending years and money on preparing for an examination is not inherently a bad idea, but believing that life will fall into place once you clear it, that happiness is waiting on the other side, is where the line gets crossed. This is what psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar called the "arrival fallacy", the false belief that reach-

ing a major milestone will bring lasting happiness. But the mind has never been prepared to handle inevitable setbacks, everything that once felt tolerable will suddenly feel insurmountable.

Perhaps it is time to move from supply-driven support systems where help is made available and students are expected to find their way to it, toward something more demand-driven where students are equipped to recognise what they need and ask for it. While we prepare them for an exam, why not prepare them for life? A life that does not unfold in straight lines, but in spirals. The resilience, the emotional vocabulary, the simple ability to say "I am not okay", these are not soft skills peripheral to education. They are, arguably, the most important thing a young person can leave campus with.

The classroom taught them to solve for. It is time it also taught them to sit with uncertainty, to lose gracefully, to ask for help without shame and to extend compassion to themselves. The big fish-little pond effect can never be fully avoided. It will always be a bigger fish. But what we can do is tell them that a pufferfish and a jellyfish each have their own remarkable abilities regardless of the size of the pond they find themselves in. Comparison is inevitable, losing yourself to it is not.

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the first technological disruption of the profession. The telegraph in the 19th century collapsed physical distance, allowed capitals to instruct envoys in real time, and reduced the autonomy of "plenipotentiaries".

The rise of mass communication and radio brought public opinion into foreign policy, forcing diplomats to operate under constant scrutiny. The internet revolution extended this transparency to every corner of global politics, accelerating information flows and constraining older systems of assessment. AI differs from these earlier technologies because it introduces a new kind of agency.

AI tools do not merely relay information; they interpret, predict, and simulate. They can act as an intellectual sparring partner — capable of parsing complex treaty language, forecasting crises, and identifying creative compromises that human negotiators might miss. But in the end, it cannot replace the essence of diplomacy: Empathy, trust-building, and persuasion in pursuit of national interest.

As AI "second-brain" tools spread through foreign ministries, the asymmetry between prepared and unprepared diplomatic corps will widen. And as media, academia, and civil society gain access to similar tools, the foreign policy discourse will broaden. This may democratise debate, but it also increases the cognitive load on foreign officials, which must now respond to a more technologically empowered audience — both friendly and hostile.

Like in so many other domains, AI is beginning to envelop one of the most conservative professions — diplomacy and statecraft. Balakrishnan's AI assistant is only one of several new tools that will emerge in the coming years. Foreign offices are among the most conservative, given the implications of their work. But they have no choice but to adapt to the AI revolution. The battle between the inertia of the national-security bureaucracy and the speed of AI-driven technological change will be an absorbing one to watch in Delhi.

Equally important is the internal dimension. Restoring an elected government in J&K and granting statehood would strengthen legitimacy and accountability. CM Omar Abdullah must have a defined role in the security grid, friction between administrative and political authority, LG vs CM, risks weakening coherence. Public sentiment, too, has shifted. The shock that once defined responses has given way to a more vigilant, and at times disaffectioned, public mood. Today's frustrations are more administrative — from smart metering issues to perceptions of bureaucratic high-handedness. These concerns, if unaddressed, can erode the stability that security measures seek to protect.

Ultimately, one year after Pahalgam, the lesson lies not in alarmism or assertion, but in balance. The gains in security must be consolidated with equal attention to polity and economy. Kashmir today is neither a story of resolution nor one of relapse; it is a continuum that must be managed with care. It remains a work in progress — one that demands patience, precision, and quiet resolve.

The author is empanelled as consultant psychologist at NIT, Andhra Pradesh

A year after Pahalgam: Take stock, consolidate



YASHOVARDHAN AZAD

IN KASHMIR, time does not pass in straight lines; it circles back through memory, disruption, and uneasy calm. One year after Pahalgam, the Valley appears composed once again — tourists have returned, roads are busy, the rhythms of life restored. But if the state's response since then has been to project normalcy, the time has come to ask a harder question: Was that normalcy real, or merely held in place? A year on, what is required is not commemoration, but clear-eyed realism.

The Pahalgam attack revealed what may be described as a "terror triangle strategy" — a synchronised architecture involving local logistical support, foreign-trained commandos, and carefully chosen global timing. The use of M4 carbines and body-mounted cameras underscored a dual objective: Tactical lethality on the ground and propaganda amplification in the digital domain. The aim was not merely to inflict casualties, but to maximise economic disruption and diplomatic fallout.

The response, however, has not been static. From urban checkpoints and visible deterrence, the security grid's focus has shifted to high-altitude forest domains. Following Operation Sindoor, there has been a push to flush out foreign militants embedded in the dense terrains of the Pir Panjal and Kupwara ranges. This marks a doctrinal realisation — taking the fight to the adversary's sanctuaries rather than waiting for infiltration to translate into urban strikes. Simultaneously, vulnerable yet economically critical zones — such as the high-altitude meadows of Baisam — are being brought under layered surveillance.

Yet, terror's deeper effect lies in its ability to disrupt narratives. Undoing carefully constructed perceptions of peace, it unsettles tourism and dampens investor confidence. It is therefore significant that the response has emphasised recovery and rebranding, with tourism at its centre. The Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla rail link project is expected to be transformative, and is being complemented by international outreach.

On the diplomatic front, the approach to Pakistan requires clarity and composure. The cross-border ecosystem of support for terror remains intact. At the same time, the geopolitical context is shifting. The Iran war has elevated Pakistan's diplomatic profile in West Asia. Iran, given its long border with Pakistan, cannot afford to be sidelined or its instability in that corridor. And Pakistan's relationship with the US will remain important.

For India, the lesson is one of maturity as a rising power. To react and complain loudly at global forums after every provocation risks signalling weakness. Sporadic attacks across governments and across doctrinal approaches — muscular and conciliatory alike. The answer lies in consistency: A posture that is firm, silent, and measured. It may be time to review and call off Operation Sindoor, which has served its immediate purpose, and transition to a more sustainable posture.

Looking ahead, certain priorities are clear. The Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System, or smart fencing, must be accelerated and fully integrated into border management. Technology must become the backbone of surveillance and response. Intelligence systems must evolve from accumulation to anticipation, combining data analytics with grounded human intelligence.

Equally important is the internal dimension. Restoring an elected government in J&K and granting statehood would strengthen legitimacy and accountability. CM Omar Abdullah must have a defined role in the security grid, friction between administrative and political authority, LG vs CM, risks weakening coherence. Public sentiment, too, has shifted. The shock that once defined responses has given way to a more vigilant, and at times disaffectioned, public mood. Today's frustrations are more administrative — from smart metering issues to perceptions of bureaucratic high-handedness. These concerns, if unaddressed, can erode the stability that security measures seek to protect.

Ultimately, one year after Pahalgam, the lesson lies not in alarmism or assertion, but in balance. The gains in security must be consolidated with equal attention to polity and economy. Kashmir today is neither a story of resolution nor one of relapse; it is a continuum that must be managed with care. It remains a work in progress — one that demands patience, precision, and quiet resolve.

The writer has served as special director, Intelligence Bureau; secretary (Security), Government of India; and Central Information Commissioner

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Herculean task

IT IS true that the elections in Bengal are taking place amidst the deletion of a large number of voters from the rolls. But this is also Mamata Banerjee and her own party's doing ("In the West Bengal election, the anatomy of exclusion", *IE*, April 28). She would have returned the ball to the EC's court had she cooperated with the EC in carrying out the SIR within the stipulated time.

Madhusree Guha, Kolkata

Alaw to divide

FAIZAN MUSTAFA's piece is bold and necessary ("In Punjab, on sacrilege law, a dangerous politics", *IE*, April 28). However, free speech cannot be treated as an abstract principle detached from material conditions and the level of mass consciousness. In the West, the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution succeeded because they dismantled feudal institutions and were backed by rising capitalist forces. Thinkers could critique Christianity because the economic base had shifted. India and Punjab never underwent such a transformation. Colonial industry was artificial, and the emerging capitalist class compromised with feudal-religious orthodoxy instead of confronting it. As a result, literature, philosophy, and public discourse remain chained to sacred texts. The new law will only deepen this stagnation.

Manu Kant, via email

Prices consumers pay

THE CURRENT pricing system serves neither consumers nor oil companies well ("India needs a clear, rules-based framework for petrol prices", *IE*, April 28). A framework linking pump prices to crude costs, exchange rates, and defined margins, would at least make the trade-offs visible. Transparent pricing builds public trust and removes the arbitrariness that currently defines every fuel revision.

K Sakunthala, Coimbatore



C UDAY BHASKAR

ESTRANGED DEMOCRACIES and *Disenchanted Allies* sum up, in a very phony manner, the distinctive texture of the troubled and turbulent relationship that the US developed with India and Pakistan respectively during the Cold War decades.

These phrases are the titles of two highly acclaimed books by Dennis Kux (born 1931), a former US ambassador and diplomatic historian who passed away in France in late March. Born in London, Kux, who was of Austrian origin, joined the US Foreign Service in 1955 and retired in 1989 after serving as ambassador to the Ivory Coast. He was posted to Pakistan first in 1975 and again in

Dennis Kux unravelled the puzzle of US-India ties

1969 and had a ringside view of the Nixon-Kissinger era and the bloody birth of Bangladesh. One of the early Tamil-language experts in the US foreign service, Kux served in senior positions in the South Asian bureau at the US State Department, including as country director. The South Asian dilemma, apropos of American foreign policy, continued to engage him. After retirement, Kux was offered a fellowship at the National Defence University.

He recalls the trigger puzzle, as it were, for his deep exploration of US foreign policy towards India: "One of the things that most puzzled and frustrated me was the uneven pattern of US-India relations, the swings between periods of cooperation and antagonism, and the often emotional character of the relationship. Why was it that these democracies seemed to have so much trouble in get-

ting along? What caused these two countries to have such volatile relations, occasionally friendly, sometimes hostile, more often than not inherently at odds? But believing that life will fall into place once you clear it, that happiness is waiting on the other side, is where the line gets crossed. This is what psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar called the "arrival fallacy", the false belief that reach-

'Estranged Democracies' was the first comprehensive volume that provided an objective American account of how the complex bilateral relationship

Franklin Roosevelt to George H W Bush.

The early 1990s were a happening phase in the troubled India-US bilateral after the collapse of the Soviet Union. PM Narasimha Rao was in the saddle — valiantly dealing with multiple challenges, among which ending the "estrangement" with the US was a major priority. Kux offered sage advice, noting, "For India, a better relationship with the United States requires a strengthening of the approach initiated by the Janata government in the late 1970s and resumed after Mrs Gandhi's 1982 visit to Washington." The Bill Clinton phase was more than eventful for the bilateral relationship and PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's resolute decision to cross the nuclear Rubicon in May 1998 enabled the beginning of a cautious "engagement" between Delhi and Washington.

Equally definitive is *The United States*

and Pakistan 1947-2000: *Disenchanted Allies*, published in 2001. The end notes are over 60 pages and are a treasure trove for understanding the contradictions that plague Pakistan. Kux's sagacious observation about some "constants" related to South Asia provides much grist for the mill in the current context. He notes: "Geography continues to give Pakistan strategic importance as the junction of western, southern and central Asia." The current talks Pakistan is facilitating between the US and Iran show this relevance and the value that Rawalpindi will continue to have for the White House. Indeed, Dennis Kux's contribution in mapping the tempestuous US-South Asia relationship will remain luminous and unsurpassed.

The writer is director, Society for Policy Studies, New Delhi

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ENERGY

Why power grid is facing the most strain at night

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, April 28

AS SOARING temperatures push India's peak power consumption to record highs, the stress on the grid has become pronounced at night, when nearly 150 GW (giga watt, or 1000 mega watts) of solar capacity goes offline after sundown. Data from the Grid Controller of India (Grid India) shows a shortage in meeting peak demand over the past few days during non-solar hours—typically between 6 PM and 6 AM—when solar generation is not available. During this period, the system usually relies on conventional sources such as coal, gas, hydro, nuclear and wind to meet demand.

Peak demand figures, whether daily or monthly, are largely statistical reference points, as they reflect the highest load recorded at any moment on a particular day during a given period, often for a brief duration.

According to Grid India data, Saturday saw peak demand surge to a record high of 256 GW, alongside a peak shortfall of around 4.2 GW at 10:39 PM. A day earlier, peak demand was 240 GW at 10:34 PM, with the shortfall peaking at about 5.4 GW. A similar shortage was also witnessed during evening peak demand, recorded at 8 PM daily. Notably, on both days, the daily peak demand was recorded at around 3:45 pm, and was met without any shortage.

Coal plants affected by heat

The primary reason for the shortfall during non-solar hours was a spike in forced and partial outages, according to officials aware of the matter. While planned outages were expected to be limited to around 3 GW on both days, forced and partial outages surged to nearly 26 GW, *The Indian Express* learned from government sources.

Another senior official attributed the gap between demand and supply during non-solar hours to forced outages at coal-based power plants, which the official said stood at around 18 GW. "There was also a partial outage of around 3-4 GW. So, the total outage is around 21 GW," the official said.

A planned maintenance shutdown of a generation unit is a temporary pause to perform crucial repairs, inspections, and upgrades that cannot be done while the plant is running. In contrast, forced outages are unplanned disruptions caused by technical faults, equipment failures, or fuel constraints.

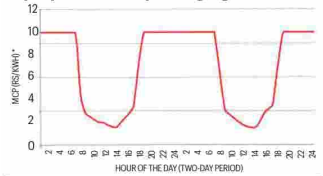
The high level of such outages on Friday and Saturday was largely driven by extreme heat conditions, which put additional stress on generation equipment and reduced plant availability precisely when demand was peaking late in the evening. On these two days, the country's thermal power plants generated 184-187 GW out of an installed capacity of 227 GW.

What makes this year different

Spot electricity prices in the country have also sharply increased at night, reflecting stress on the grid as scorching temperatures drive demand for power to run appliances like air conditioners. Data from Indian Energy Exchange (IEX), the country's biggest power trading bourse, shows the spot price of electricity in the Day Ahead Market segment touching the maximum regulatory limit of Rs 10 per kilowatt hour (KWh) at night before declining to around Rs 1.5 per KWh during the day.

Traditionally, electricity demand peaks during summer (June-July) or early autumn (September-October), driven by widespread air-conditioner use across households and businesses. This year, however, the surge in power demand has occurred in April itself. The last time annual peak demand was reached this early in the year was in 2022-23.

Spot prices went up during night hours



AGRICULTURE

Indonesia's new biofuel push could make cooking oil expensive in India

EXPERT EXPLAINS
PRERNA PRABHAKAR
FELLOW AT THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS

AMID THE surge in oil prices because of the Iran war, Indonesia is rolling out the biofuel B50, a blend of 50% palm oil-based biodiesel and 50% conventional diesel. The fuel is being tested and should be in use by July. This could translate into a tighter supply and pricier cooking oil in India, which relies heavily on Indonesian palm oil imports.

What's driving Indonesia's push?

Indonesia's net imports of crude oil stood at around \$7.8 billion as of 2025. The proposed B50 biodiesel programme aims to partially substitute these imports with palm oil-based fuel. This policy push comes during a period of heightened geopolitical uncertainties and a recent surge in global oil prices, which have crossed \$100 per barrel in recent days.

The policy also aligns with Indonesia's broader sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) roadmap. From 2027 onwards, the government has indicated that flights operating from Soekarno-Hatta International Airport and I Gusti Ngurah Rai International Airport are expected to begin using aviation fuel blended with around 1% SAF, potentially derived from palm oil. While the initial blending ratio is modest, it signals Indonesia's intent to extend its biofuel strategy beyond road transport into aviation.

In parallel, the expansion of biofuel use is aimed at supporting domestic palm oil producers by absorbing surplus supply within the domestic market, especially in light of tightening regulations in key export destinations such as the EU (e.g., deforestation-related rules targeting palm oil).

Overall, the policy serves multiple objectives: reducing import dependence on crude oil, stabilising domestic palm oil demand, advancing alternative fuel adoption, and contributing to emissions reduction goals, positioning Indonesia as an emerging green energy leader in the region.

How might this reshape the global vegetable oil markets, especially for India?

As Indonesia accounts for half of global palm oil exports (as of 2024), the shift toward a B50 programme, which reorients supply from export markets to domestic consumption, is expected to significantly influence global palm oil markets. Export availability will tighten, pushing international prices up.

For India, the implications are particularly pronounced. India imports around \$8.5 billion of palm oil, and more than 50% of it comes from Indonesia (as of 2024). Palm oil is extensively used across household cooking, the food processing industry, and industrial sectors such as soaps and oleochemicals. A supply-demand imbalance in global markets is therefore likely to translate into higher import prices, with broad-based spill-overs. These include rising household expenditure, elevated food inflation, and increased input costs for industry, potentially feeding into higher output prices.

While India can partially adjust by increasing imports of alternative vegetable oils, the scope for substitution is limited. Imports of sunflower oil (primarily from Russia and Ukraine) and soybean oil (from Argentina and Brazil) are relatively smaller in volume. Moreover, these oils are more expensive and sourced from distant markets, increasing both cost and supply-chain risks.

At the same time, there is a potential upside for the domestic edible oil sector. Higher international prices can incentivise greater domestic production of oilseeds, benefiting farmers through improved price realisation and potentially strengthening the domestic value chain over time.

NEW MARATHON WORLD RECORD

How Sawa broke the 2-hr barrier

Kenyan Sebastian Sawa conquered the London Marathon in 1 hr, 59 mins, 30 secs. Behind his feat: science, shoes and strategy



MIHIR VASAVA

SABASTIAN SAWA reached the halfway point of the 42.195 km run in 1 hour and 29 seconds. By all conventional logic, the second half should have been slower. It is almost always the case in marathons. From that point on, it stops being about speed and becomes a question of fuel, of how long the body can hold the line before it runs empty.

But Sawa, 30, didn't follow that script. The Kenyan held his pace deep into the race and got faster, as he became the first person to break the two-hour barrier in an official marathon on Sunday, winning the London Marathon in 1:59:30.

The groundwork for this had been laid hours earlier: a simple breakfast of two bread slices with honey and tea, followed by a meticulously planned in-race strategy that delivered up to 115 grams of carbohydrates per hour, an amount once considered difficult for the body to tolerate.

Carb intake during marathons
In a marathon, long before the legs give way, the body faces a subtler crisis. Glycogen, the stored carbohydrate that powers sustained effort, is finite. At an elite pace, it drains fast. And when it's gone, the slowdown is abrupt, punishing. Runners call it "the wall", but it's really a fuel failure.

The obvious solution, to consume more carbohydrates mid-race, has always come with a catch. Carbs help build energy, but the gut can only handle so much. Push beyond that limit, and the stomach revolts. "So, the companies started making a concentrated carbohydrate source, which is a gel," said Mihira Khopkar, who was the Indian contingent's nutritionist at the 2024 Paris Olympics. "However, it causes gastrointestinal (GI) upsets among the athletes because it sits in their stomachs, making them feel bloated, heavy and uncomfortable. Some even complained of diarrhoea, because there is no blood supply to the gut—all the blood supply is to the muscles."

Technological advancements

Sawa consumed these gels at regular intervals and pushed those very boundaries. But with a difference: the technology used in the gels he consumed changed how the body received the carbohydrates.

The hydrogel he had combines alginate, derived from seaweed, and pectin, a natural fibre found in fruits, to form a protective gel matrix. Khopkar explained that in this semi-solid state, the hydrogel behaves much like a sponge, its structure filled with microscopic pores that hold and transport concentrated carbohydrates efficiently through the digestive system. "Those carbohydrates are made available to use as energy," Khopkar said.

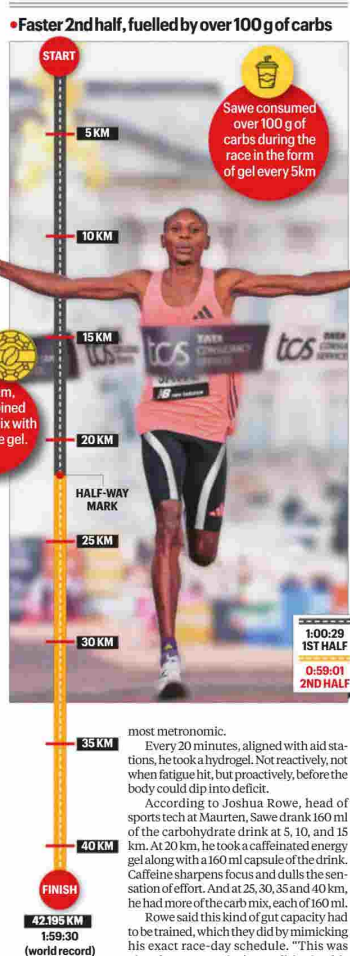
Mauren, a Swedish sports nutrition brand, developed this technology.

Plan measured in minutes

Sawa's run was built on this principle of controlled, continuous fuelling. Sports scientists from Mauren developed Sawa's fuelling protocol over the last 12 months, when they made six trips to Kenya, spending 32 days there with him. They also developed a personalised gut-training plan and a race-day protocol to enhance Sawa's GI tolerance for carbohydrate intake on a race day.

Additionally, Sawa also used sodium bicarbonate to neutralise the lactic acid buildup that causes the burning sensation in muscles.

Once the race began, his strategy was al-



most metronomic. Every 20 minutes, aligned with aid stations, he took a hydrogel. Not reactively, not when fatigue hit, but proactively, before the body could dip into deficit.

Race-day protocol

Sawa's run was built on a principle of controlled, continuous fuelling. Scientists also developed a gut-training plan and race-day protocol to enhance Sawa's carb intake tolerance.

As the race entered its decisive phase, Sawa was managing momentum. His glycogen stores, though heavily taxed, had not emptied. His muscles still had access to fuel. His mind remained clear, his stride controlled.

He covered the distance from 20 to 25 km in 4:47. Last year in Berlin, he covered that distance in 15:05. His final 10 km were even quicker, he covered it in 28:53 in London, compared with 29:14 in Berlin.

Sawa sped towards the finish line at an average pace of 2:50 minutes per km. And by the time he crossed the tape, he'd achieved sporting immortality. The hours Sawa put in training, running 30 km daily, showed that training still built the engine. But fuelling now determines how long it can run at full power.

Not the 'sole' factor: 'Super shoes' that aided Sawa's strides

Mihir Vasava
Mumbai, April 28

TECHNOLOGY Has always aided runners. Even Roger Bannister, in his 1954 breakthrough mile run, removed the extra weight from his shoes, sharpened the spikes and covered the soles in graphite to optimise traction. Innovation isn't new.

What's changed is the science. Enter the shoes that Sebastian Sawa wore: the Adidas Adizero Adios Pro Evo 3. At just 97 grams, they are among the lightest elite racing shoes ever built, roughly 30% lighter than their predecessors. To put it in perspective, one pair of shoes roughly weighs as much as four pairs of socks or less than a bar of soap.

But weight is only part of the story. Beneath the minimal uppers sits a potent combination of carbon-infused structure and ultra-responsive "Lightstrike Pro" foam, engineered to enhance power and efficiency. The carbon technology that wraps around the midsole helps maintain running economy and reduce overall weight.

The Adizero Adios Pro Evo 3 is the culmination of a tightly controlled, years-long development cycle overseen by Patrick Nava, the Italian engineer who has been central to Adidas' performance footwear push since joining the company in 2019.

Rather than relying solely on lab innovation, the process blended precision engineering at the German shoe manufacturer's headquarters in Herzogenaurach, with extensive real-world testing across the high-altitude training environments of Kenya and Ethiopia, where elite runners could provide direct feedback under race-like physiological stress.

"At that level, every detail really matters — we were measuring things down to the nearest nanogram," said Nava, Adidas' VP of running, according to the BBC. "It was a long process, but it led to something we believe genuinely changes what race-day

shoe can feel like." A limited edition of the shoe was launched on April 25, two days before Sunday's marathon. According to the rules, the technology should be made available to all before it is used in a race. They are priced at \$500.

Sports scientists estimate the gains are tangible: up to 1.6% improvement in running economy and potentially as much as 15 seconds saved over marathon distance compared to last year's models. The forefoot area, softer and bouncier, alone delivers an 11% increase in energy return, turning each stride into a controlled rebound rather than a drain.

"The design borrows from unexpected places too, with materials inspired by kite-surfing sails — light, tensile, and built for forward momentum. It's no surprise the brand dubbed it "a record-breaker before it's even laced up".

What separates the Evo 3 from earlier 'super shoes' is how it strips away everything that doesn't translate into forward motion. The midsole design has been fine-tuned in a way that each stride results in minimal energy loss. It also resulted in reducing ground contact time while preserving stability. The carbon-infused rods act like springboards tuned to gait cycle.

For Sawa, those marginal gains became meaningful deep into the race. "The big difference is it's so light and very comfortable," he said. Tigst Assefa, who won the women's marathon and set a world record, said it was down to shoes that "allow me to run fast," apart from years of discipline and hard work.

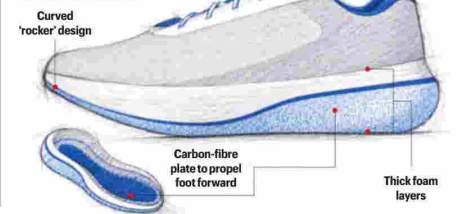
This is the third version of the shoe, which has quickly gained popularity among long-distance runners. Adidas worked with Sawa, Yomif Kejelcha and Assefa over the last three years to produce this iteration of the trainer. In Sawa's case, the shoe played a big role in his breaking the two-hour barrier. They might not have been the sole factor that made the moment, but the shoes amplified it.

Shoes shaved off the minutes

The super-shoe era, beginning 2016, has seen marathon records tumble

ATHLETE	MARATHON	TIME	YEAR
Paul Tergat	Berlin	2:04:55	2003
Halle Gebrselassie	Berlin	2:04:26	2007
Halle Gebrselassie	Berlin	2:03:59	2008
Patrick Makau	Berlin	2:03:38	2011
Wilson Kipsang	Berlin	2:03:23	2013
Dennis Kimetto	Berlin	2:02:57	2014
Eliud Kipchoge	Berlin	2:01:39	2018
Eliud Kipchoge	Berlin	2:01:09	2022
Kevin Kiptum	Chicago	2:00:35	2023
Sebastian Sawa	London	1:59:30	2026

Building a running SUPER SHOE



OPINION

Delimitation, with a new federal compact in mind

OUR TAKE |

More than a Bengal battle

The outcome of the TMC vs BJP contest will shape Indian politics in the near term

Visitors to India may be forgiven for thinking there's only one election, perhaps two, in the current election cycle. Tamil Nadu is as electorally relevant (from the perspective of the Lok Sabha) as West Bengal and saw a keen three-way contest whose outcome could go any way, but it is the latter that has captured mind- and column-space and air-time. That shouldn't surprise anyone; along with Tamil Nadu and Kerala, West Bengal presents the last frontier for the national political hegemon, the Bharatiya Janata Party. On a high from having its nominee named chief minister of Bihar (which has never had a BJP CM thus far), the party believes it now has an opportunity to break through in the home ground of Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of Bharatiya Jana Sangh, a precursor to the BJP. In the second and last phase of the assembly elections in the state, 142 constituencies will vote Wednesday.

For the BJP, the conquest of Bengal is important in multiple ways. The state has almost been an ideological no-go zone for the party since independence: The Congress, the CPI/CPM-led Left Front, and the incumbent Trinamool Congress (TMC) have dominated politics by claiming to be custodians of an inclusive, secular Bengal — an idea that all of them claim is the antithesis of the BJP's Hindutva — although the truth is that they have done so by controlling what Dwaipayan Bhattacharya referred to as "party society", decentralised networks of local strongmen who control all aspects of life and work in the state. Winning West Bengal would be an ideological triumph for the party, cementing its electoral dominance across a contiguous region stretching from West to East. The BJP has pitched its aggressive restatement of identity politics and hard borders in contrast to the TMC's patronage politics, though an all-party consensus prevails on welfare schemes. Ironically, such a framing has enabled the TMC, seeking to return to power for the fourth time, to brand itself as an insider championing Bengali identity and adopt the posture of an opposition party rather than speak in the language of a party of government. A win for the TMC would energise the ranks of the Opposition, although it may also strengthen the chorus for a non-Congress leadership. The outcome, which will be clear on May 4 when the votes are counted, will, however, depend on who controls the party society now.

Reviving the global climate agenda

India recently submitted its updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) — a voluntary action plan expected of signatories to the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) — but made it conditional upon support from rich nations. This seems pragmatic given that the consensus on climate action has frayed significantly over the past few years. The US, despite being one of the largest historical carbon emitters of greenhouse gases, has walked out of key agreements on mitigation efforts and turned actively hostile by deepening its reliance on hydrocarbons. This has emboldened oil economies to neglect decarbonisation, while nations in favour of climate action remain unsure about the future course.

Beyond pragmatism, however, India's new NDC sends three key signals. First, when a major economy like India — with a heavy emission load — reiterates its commitment to the climate action consensus, it sends a strong signal of continued faith in this mechanism, a renegade US notwithstanding. Second, tying the NDCs to climate financing and technology transfer from developed nations upholds the historical responsibility principle. This is foundational for the UNFCCC, and should convey to the non-US West that any meaningful restoration of the consensus on climate action will need it to actively support low- and middle-income economies' efforts. Third, an assurance of intent and accountability on India's part emerges when the scaling up of ambition in the new NDC is viewed together with the country meeting some of its goals for the ongoing NDC period ahead of schedule. This should inspire trust in its readiness to lead the developing world by example.

It is tough to centre attention on the climate crisis in the face of wars and the shrinking of multilateral trade governance. But India and other like-minded nations must pull out all stops in reviving the climate agenda: Submitting new NDCs is a good start.

The federal balance is slowly tilting away from equity considerations in favour of performance-based federal arrangements

The defeat of the 131st Constitutional Amendment Bill in Parliament affords an opportunity to wrest the delimitation debate from narrow partisan concerns and open a wider conversation on India's federal bargain. First, it is essential to call out the bills for what they were: The women's reservation debate was settled in 2023 with the passage of Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam Act. The Act, in its wisdom, linked women's reservation to the census and subsequent delimitation — with no attendant rush to conduct the census. To implement women's reservation, all that is needed is to delink women's reservation from the census and delimitation, and operationalise reservation as a term 33% of the current strength of the Lok Sabha and state legislatures. The goal was, perhaps, to make the country swallow delimitation without debate. It is this intent that has been defeated.

However, the urgency to arrive at a political settlement on delimitation is even greater now, for the issue will reignite in 2027 when the census is completed. The challenge will be recognised. Having frozen parliamentary

seats across states since 1971, India confronts a wide imbalance in political representation. Population growth has widened sharply across the country. The more populous northern and eastern parts of the country are now significantly underrepresented. However, given the scale of divergence between states, any delimitation based solely on a population criterion will result in states that have successfully controlled population growth — largely, but not restricted to, southern India — losing left in terms of seats and, with their political voice on the national stage, population growth and economic development are closely interrelated. Inevitably, the less populous states have witnessed more robust economic growth and thus contribute a far greater share to national revenues — a disproportionate share of which is redistributed to the poorer states.

At stake is a broader re-negotiation of the terms of India's federal bargain, set against the backdrop of a wide and unbridgeable (at least, in the near term) socioeconomic gap within the country. For the moment, the debate has been captured by partisan concerns. The BJP has obvious electoral incentives to push for delimitation. Its conduct over the re-defeated bills, compounded by the special intensive review (SIR) experience with all its attendant problems and gerrymandering in Assam, makes it likely that it will use delimitation as a wedge to entrench its power. On the other

hand, the southern states are approaching delimitation as a zero-sum game, demanding that the 1976 freeze remain. But this demand actively undermines the democratic principle of one person, one vote, one value. A more reasoned debate must go back to first principles.

Consider just one issue — the balance between equity and performance in diverse federal systems. In the constitutional schema, equity in representation (one person, one vote, one value) and public services (via tax redistribution between states) were to serve as the foundation of the federal settlement. De facto, this was achieved via some give-and-take. The delimitation freeze was a willing compromise. Poorer states gave up representational equity. In the bargain they gained in the fiscal realm as richer states abled by the equity principle, ensuring poorer states received a larger share of taxes.

As the socioeconomic gap between states has widened, this too has become untenable. Richer states are now demanding a greater share of their contribution to the nation's tax revenue. The federal balance is slowly tilting away from equity considerations in favour of performance-based federal arrangements. Most recently, the 16th Finance Commission introduced a GDP-performance criterion into its devolution formula. This is a significant shift away from the 1970s compromise where performance and equity were balanced. Most of the pro-



Yamini Aiyar



The urgency to arrive at a political settlement on delimitation is greater now, for the issue will reignite in 2027 when the census is completed.

posals to resolve the delimitation quagmire ranging from the political demand to maintain the freeze, introduce GDP criterion in to the formulae and the proposal to adopt the European Parliament's degressive proportionally formula are effectively making the argument that equity must be moderated to maintain federal balance.

But if this is India's chosen path, its consequences need serious debate. Should the "one person, one vote, one value" principle be held hostage to performance? If performance affords a stronger federal compact, how will the federal system deal with inequality? After all, poorer regions need greater resources and arguably better representation to bridge the socioeconomic gap. If the goal of minimum standards of public services to all citizens is to be achieved, will equalisation be the sole responsibility of the Union government? Will that risk greater centralisation?

A second issue is that of power sharing arrangements in the federal system. India is amongst the most centralised countries in the world. Local governments have few powers. MPs and MLAs, through the local panchayats, have appropriated their constitutional role. The

Union government, through its central schemes, routinely encroaches on functions the constitution assigns to states.

Unsurprisingly, for the voter, it is hard to distinguish representational roles across levels of government. We cannot debate representational equity without arriving at a basic national level governance consensus — what level of government should perform what level of functions?

There are several other aspects of the federal arrangement that need more serious consideration, including the size of states, the role of the Rajya Sabha. But this debate must be had on principles.

Tamil Nadu has already demonstrated what a principled federal conversation could look like through its high-level commission on Centre-state relations. The INDIA bloc could take it forward by widening the debate across the country to forge a vision for a renewed federal compact. In 1996, a meeting of chief ministers in Hyderabad issued a statement titled Federalism Without a Centre. It is time to revive that sentiment.

Yamini Aiyar is senior visiting fellow, Brown University. The views expressed are personal

In Trump talk, echoes of new coarse diplomatise

US President Donald Trump recently stoked widespread outrage after he shared the transcript of a talk-show by American right-wing commentator Michael Savage from his social media account; Savage had termed India a "hellhole country" and Indian immigrants to the US "gangsters with laptops". Angry denunciations of Trump's endorsement of an extremist racist screed, demands that he delete the post, and calls for India to push back much more forcefully underscore the charged emotions in the aftermath.

But hurt feelings about national pride, honour and stature beside the point because Trump is never going to retract, apologise or back off from his heterodox, unfiltered and unscripted mannerisms and deeds, which originate in the brand of domestic politics that he represents in the US.

In linguistic terms, Trump is unlike any previous American president. There is no pretence in his ultra-populist utterances when it comes to respecting time-tested traditions of diplomatic niceties and political correctness.

Making offensive, arrogant, and expetitive-laden remarks against other countries, their people and leaders is a habit for Trump — a calculated art meant to arouse the ideological spirits of his core white, Christian American social base.

Trump reckons that he has been winning elections precisely by discarding the "artificial politeness" and "fake conviviality" that have been trademarks of his predecessors. He is raw, volatile and irascible, and will remain so as these traits are intrinsic to his image as an authentic street-fighter and non-nonsense American leader.

It is noteworthy that there is a total absence of any goodwill between the language Trump uses in domestic American politics and in his interactions with the rest of the world. During his first term as president, he explicitly derided immigrants from the "shithole countries" of Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and wondered aloud why the US does not get "nice people" (i.e. Caucasians) from Denmark, Norway or Sweden as immigrants.

His trademark anti-immigrant slogan, "if you import the Third World, you become the Third World", is not just a racist meme in the American right-wing discourse but a rhetorical device to justify entry bans and "permanent pauses" to immigration from "all Third

World countries" and to also lay the basis for aggressive protectionist trade wars against the Global South.

The degree of separation between America's internal ideological tussles and external politics has been completely eroded under Trump.

The debasement of the US into a brash and foul-mouthed actor which has thrown out of the diplomatic playbook is mirrored by the other contemporary great power, China, which has adopted a fierce and feisty "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" that harasses neighbours, taunts rivals and insults allies in spite of their strength, so as to set an example and poisons into international attitudes and approaches in the cases of both these giants.

When the top two powers in the world are ultra-nationalistic, it affects the meaning of the world order in which we are living. Leaders are supposed to display restraint and discretion in their words, including allies or strategic partners, is the default. There is no longer any inspirational leadership among the most powerful players in the world and it is futile to search for it when narrow ethno-nationalist and zero-sum mentalities are running riot.

The saving grace in this harsh, uncouth and unifying age is the continued courage of together like-minded countries, particularly addressing rising tensions in the Middle East, which find it comforting and stabilising to stay within the old boundaries of genteel diplomacy and steady accumulation of goodwill.

But even these adherents of classic strategies of patient long-term cooperation and coalition-building cannot ignore the fact that trust, warmth and predictability are increasingly in short supply. Networks of international friendships are more fragile and less robust, and the "rules" has to be factored in to survive in these stormy waters.

Starting with the grim premise of expecting the worst and preparing to face the next snide barb or harmful policy from abroad is more realistic now than to hold on to assumptions that commonality of interests will ensure smooth sailing in the international arena.

Realising the big structural shift and accepting the altered anti-social global environment as the new reality is not only a smart adjustment for policymakers, but also a helpful means for ordinary people to better cope with the profusion of foul language and breakdown of decency in international relations. Knowing the roots of this phenomenon and developing a degree of stoicism about it can soften the shock whenever Trump goes off on his next rant or Xi pumps his fist again and issues warnings.

Sreeram Chaulia is dean, Jindal School of International Affairs. The views expressed are personal

Advertisement for Rajnath Singh, Defence Minister, featuring a quote: "We should continue to follow the path of dialogue and diplomacy and not of unrelenting force. We should not allow it to become an era of war".

Understanding the body's non-neural messengers

A doctor seeing patients with hormonal disorders daily, I feel there is a need for better understanding about hormones. Without hormones, our bodies would descend into chaos: Children wouldn't grow properly, reproduction would falter, hunger and metabolism would go all over the place, and the body would swing wildly. Endocrine glands, once called ductless glands, produce effects distant from their location by pouring hormones directly into the bloodstream. Hormones travel to all parts of our body to regulate vital functions such as metabolism, growth, reproduction, mood, and stress. They are crucial links that transmit messages from the gland of origin to the target organs within minutes, but their effects can last much longer. When they reach their target cells, hormones slot into specific receptors like keys into locks, triggering processes within the cells.

An adrenaline rush, something that all of us have experienced, is the body's fight-or-flight response to stress or danger, characterised by a racing heart, rapid breathing, sweating, tremors, and a sharp rise in alertness. This happens because of the sudden release of adrenaline from the adrenal glands, small glands perched on top of the kidneys. Without that surge, we would not respond quickly to danger and might freeze at the very moment we need to act.

Another example of a hormone is insulin, which is made in the pancreas. When blood glucose rises after a meal, the pancreas releases insulin. Insulin helps glucose enter muscle and liver cells, where it can be used for energy or stored for later.

In fact, every endocrine gland can cause two opposite sets of problems: one caused by too little hormone and the other by too much. For example, hypothyroidism results from underproduction of thyroid hormone, while hyperthyroidism results from excess.

The hormone story began with Arnold Berthold's rooster experiment in 1849. In this landmark study, the German scientist showed that transplanting testes into castrated roosters restored aggressive male behaviour and secondary sex characteristics, including the growth of a larger comb. This happened even though the transplanted testes had no nerve connections to the body. The experiment proved that the testes released a substance into the bloodstream that influenced development and behaviour.

In 1902, British scientists Bayliss and Starling showed that injecting acidic fluid into the intestine triggered the pancreas to secrete juice, even after the relevant nerves had been

cut. This demonstrated that the signal was carried by a chemical messenger, not by nerves. Starling later coined the word "hormone" from the Greek *hormao*, meaning "to arouse" or "to set in motion".

The ability to measure minute quantities of hormones in the laboratory, especially through the work of Rosalyn Yalow in New York in the 1970s, transformed endocrine research.

The smooth and coordinated functioning of our endocrine system requires constant communication between glands. The pituitary gland acts like the CEO of the endocrine system. Much like company heads use WhatsApp groups to communicate instantly with their teams, this tiny pea-sized gland at the base of the brain belongs to a group administrator. It sends out messages and the other major glands respond.

The anterior pituitary releases several hormones: Growth hormone for growth and repair, thyroid-stimulating hormone to stimulate the thyroid gland, ACTH to signal the adrenals to produce cortisol, FSH and LH for the testes and ovaries to produce sex hormones, and prolactin for breast milk production. The posterior pituitary releases antidiuretic hormone, or ADH, and oxytocin. Pituitary tumours producing too much growth hormone can cause gigantism in children or acromegaly in adults, while deficiencies can cause dwarfism.

The pituitary itself is under the control of the hypothalamus, a part of the brain located just above the pituitary. If either the pituitary or hypothalamus starts acting up, the whole system begins to creak. A key feature of the endocrine system is crosstalk between glands. If cortisol levels in the blood surge, they suppress the pituitary's production of ACTH, the hormone that stimulates the adrenal glands to make cortisol. As a result, cortisol production declines. If thyroid hormone levels rise, TSH is suppressed, leading to a drop in thyroid hormone production. This is called negative feedback. It ensures that hormone levels stay within a healthy range and that the system functions in a smooth, coordinated way. It prevents flooding when a particular hormone is being produced in excessive amounts.

Hormones are silent messengers, masterfully syncing activities of our body and mind. Stay tuned for deep dives into each of these magic molecules in the months ahead.

Ambrish Mithal is group chairman, endocrinology and diabetes, Max Healthcare, Delhi. The views expressed are personal



The heterodox, unfiltered and unscripted Trump is unlike any previous American president.

Agile deal-making

With New Zealand FTA, it's time to consider joining CPTPP

The recalibration of India's foreign-trade policy continues, with a free-trade agreement (FTA) signed this week with New Zealand. While all Indian goods will receive duty-free access to the New Zealand market, a large proportion of India's imports from there will also be opened up, with certain categories of goods receiving significant tariff cuts or expanded quotas. These include agricultural commodities of importance to New Zealand such as lamb and kiwi fruit. Indian messaging on the tariff-reduction side of the deal emphasises that certain sectors have been ring-fenced, but the only real area of exclusion is dairy, in which New Zealand is extremely competitive, and which in India is politically sensitive, given the millions of livelihoods involved in the sector and, therefore, is rightly protected in all the recent trade agreements India has concluded.

As a smaller and more agile trading entity than, say, the European Union (EU), New Zealand was also able to make the sort of bargains that render an FTA more attractive to New Delhi. For example, it is committed to investing \$20 billion in the Indian economy over the next 15 years. Whether this will be doable is an open question. A similar promise was made by the countries of the European Free Trade Area, composed of Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, and Liechtenstein — except that the commitment there was for \$500 billion. New Delhi has often seen investment as the flip side of trade openness, and thus it has conditioned market access on such promises. For such large sums to materialise, however, India must continue to take forward business- and investor-friendly reform. Judicial and arbitration reform, to ensure that concerns about dispute settlement do not hinder promised capital inflows, must, therefore, be a major priority.

The agreement also includes some provisions on the movement of individuals, which is relatively rare at a time when many countries are growing more closed to immigration. Up to 5,000 Indian professionals will be granted three-year work permits in New Zealand, in specific in-demand sectors such as health care and information technology. New Delhi has long asked for migration agreements to be part of broader trade agreements, but in more recent deals, it has had to shelve that requirement, given the political climate in those geographies. Clearly, it is not yet an issue of the same magnitude in New Zealand, but it needs to be carefully watched since domestic politics on such issues can change swiftly in just a few years.

New Zealand is a full member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP. Of the 12 members of this alliance — Australia, New Zealand, Brunei, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Canada, Mexico, Chile, Peru, and the UK — India now has FTAs with eight. Earlier this month, alongside Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's official visit, negotiations with Canada were relaunched. It is important now to reconsider whether it makes sense to officially apply for candidacy to the CPTPP, a gold-standard trade deal that would significantly increase comfort levels for investors and traders. It would also be the appropriate geopolitical and geo-economic response to the current disruption to global governance. India has shown considerable openness in signing FTAs with a range of countries and trading blocs, including the EU, and it is important that this momentum is maintained. It should also consider reducing its average tariffs, which are out of sync with those of other large economies.

Scale and efficiency

Organon's acquisition will benefit Sun Pharma

Sun Pharmaceutical's acquisition of New Jersey-based Organon & Co will propel the merged entity into the ranks of the world's top 25 pharmaceutical companies with aggregate revenues of \$12.4 billion. The agreement is for an all-cash deal, which values Organon at \$11.75 billion at \$14.00 per share. The transaction has been approved by the boards of both companies. Subject to regulatory clearance and approval by Organon stockholders, the merger is expected to close early next year. Sun is planning to fund the acquisition through cash and debt financing of \$9.25 billion to \$9.75 billion from banks. Organon, which was spun off from Merck in 2021, specialises in women's health, in which it is a global leader, and in biosimilars. Biosimilars are biological medications similar to a reference product, with no clinically meaningful differences in safety, purity, or potency. They are made from living organisms (bacteria, yeast, or animal cells) and are around 60 per cent cheaper. Improving regulatory clarity of biosimilar interchangeability supports faster time to market.

Organon's portfolio includes over 70 products across women's health and biosimilars. It is present in 140 countries, including the United States (US), European nations, China, Canada, and Brazil. Each of the 18 largest markets generated over \$100 million. In the year ended December 31, 2025, Organon reported \$6.2 billion in revenue and adjusted earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortisation (Ebitda) of \$1.9 billion. Despite flat revenues and high debt, Organon has a respectable 31 per cent Ebitda margin and annual free cash flow of over \$1 billion in 2025. Sun Pharma's FY25 revenues also amounted to around \$6.2 billion. It is the world's leading specialty generics company with a presence in innovative medicines, generics, and consumer health care. It is India's largest pharmaceutical company and a leading generics player in the US and emerging markets with a presence in over 100 countries. The manufacturing facilities are spread across five continents.

The merged entity moves sharply higher up the value chain. Apart from the inorganic doubling of revenues, the deal gives Sun an entry to new markets, including China, where Sun has a negligible presence and Organon's revenue is \$800 million, and South Korea, where Sun is not present. It also enables Sun's entry into the league of the top 10 global players (seventh in revenue) in biosimilars and pushes it to the top of the "women's health" segment. After the merger, Sun Pharma envisages its operating profit and cash flow to nearly double. The combined entity could generate a free cash flow of \$2 billion to \$2.5 billion per annum. This will enable deleveraging from the post-transaction net debt/Ebitda ratio of 2.3 times as it pays down the debt taken to fund the merger over four-five years.

Management may realise synergy benefits of \$350 million in two-four years through procurement optimisation, supply-chain consolidation, and workforce alignment. Apart from synergies, there are upsides from entry into new markets such as China and South Korea. Sun's specialty portfolio can be expanded into geographies where Organon is established. Organon's products benefit from Sun's commercial strategy. Mergers frequently turn out to be disappointing with optimistic projections belied. However, in this case, it appears to be realistic with complementary strengths visible for two companies that are in the same size ball-park.



Bringing competition to gas marketing

Public-sector dominance in transmission and distribution is holding back competition, to the detriment of consumers and the economy

The current shortage of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) in India, in the wake of the West Asian crisis, has brought into focus the need to expand the use of natural gas (NG), especially for household cooking. India is import dependent on both NG and LPG, to the extent of about 50 per cent and 60 per cent of domestic consumption, respectively. The key difference that works in favour of NG is the relative ease in diversifying the import sources for NG (in form of liquefied natural gas), compared to LPG, where such diversification is limited.

Our dependence on oil and gas to meet domestic energy needs continues to be quite high, with their proportion in total energy remaining virtually at the same level over the last two decades.

Among fossil fuels, NG is the least polluting. To meet our commitment of achieving net-zero by 2070, a pragmatic approach would be to encourage the use of natural gas, co-mingled with coal gas and biogas (wherein India has tremendous untapped potential), as a transition fuel in the medium term.

Unfortunately, notwithstanding various claims and the government's goal of natural gas reaching 15 per cent of the total energy mix by 2030, the reality is that this proportion has reduced from about 7-8 per cent in 2000 to 5-6 per cent now.

While there are many issues to be addressed in the gas sector, this column focuses on the need to encourage competition in gas marketing in the country. Vertically integrated public-sector undertakings (PSUs), particularly GAIL, combining gas transmission and distribution operations, have dominated these businesses for decades. Gas infrastructure laying is a capital-intensive business with delayed returns. Also, ensuring energy availability at affordable prices throughout the country is a necessary, investments may at times be required in unviable but socially desirable projects. Thus, in the initial stages of the gas sector's development, PSUs occupying the "commanding heights" was understandable.

However, considering the need for additional investments in the gas sector and, with a view to

encouraging more players to bring in competition, thereby benefiting consumers and improving operational efficiency, the government envisaged, more than two decades ago, introducing private sector participation in a phased manner. This objective is manifested in the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB) Act, 2006. The Act, *inter alia*, mandates the unbundling of gas transmission and distribution activities.

The domestic natural gas sector scenario has changed quite a bit over time. For instance, from 2006 to 2024, gas consumption increased from about 85 million metric standard cubic metres per day (mmscmd) to over 188 mmscmd; total natural gas pipeline network expanded from 7,112 km to over 25,124 km; and the number of city gas distribution networks awarded grew from 33 to 307 geographical areas (GAs).

It is high time that PSUs vacated some space in gas transmission and distribution and allow private players to enter, with the regulator ensuring a level playing field. That brings us to the point as to what needs to be done. Let's first start with gas transmission.

Gas transmission: Vertically integrated entities oppose the unbundling of gas transmission and distribution. Their monopolistic power, coupled with opaque pricing practices, virtually shuts out the possibility of any new entrants in the transmission business. One of the reasons put forth by PSUs against unbundling is that it would result in inadequate investment in commercially unviable pipeline projects, which may be necessary as public goods. This argument by PSUs is more about building a moat around their businesses. After all, from the perspective of commercial entities, some of which are even listed and answerable to public shareholders, how far can investments in unviable projects be justified? This is clearly an unsustainable proposition as a policy approach.

The right approach would be to financially support the socially desirable unviable projects through a transparent viability gap funding (VGF) scheme administered by the PNGRB. The schemes should be uniformly



AJAY TYAGI

West Asia macro shock is no repeat of Covid

The Indian economy has been pummeled by a series of domestic and global shocks since the start of the current decade, impacting its gross domestic product (GDP) growth trajectory. The West Asia crisis is the latest addition to this list of shocks, disrupting the stability experienced during the economy's Goldilocks phase in the previous financial year.

At present, the West Asia crisis has largely manifested itself as a supply shock, impacting energy output, its availability and prices, leading to a spike in input costs, given India's excruciatingly high import dependence. However, high-frequency indicators suggest that domestic demand is holding up so far across a variety of sectors.

The Covid-19 pandemic, in contrast, had caused simultaneous demand and supply shocks for a prolonged duration, leading to an anomalous slump in GDP in FY21. The lockdown-led constraints on mobility affected consumption, particularly of services segments, while also shrinking output via business closures. For the period during which plants were closed or supply chains were disrupted, the manufacturing sector faced a challenge. However, inventories were drawn down and replenished later by running plants at higher capacity, limiting the loss in output.

Interestingly, when consumption of some services is skipped, as was the case for out-of-home services during the pandemic, it may not be made up later, resulting in a permanent loss of output to the producer. Examples include labour-intensive services, such as physiotherapy, sports training and personal care, to name a few, which may also be predominantly in the less formal space.

The length of the adverse supply shock owing to the ongoing conflict in West Asia would be crucial in determining the macroeconomic outcomes for

India. So far, while energy prices have spiked, supply chains have been disrupted only for a section of manufacturing and services, particularly those dependent on natural gas.

A prolonged supply shock can, however, transmit to lower incomes, and dampen confidence and sentiment. This could thereby generate a demand shock, as higher inflation impacts discretionary incomes and demand of households, and elevated input costs impact corporate profitability, weighing on expansion plans. In the Indian context, this implies stagflationary outcomes and is reflected in the downward revisions in growth projections along with an upward revision in inflation projections.

Assuming crude oil prices average at \$85/barrel in FY27, against \$70-75/barrel previously, ICRG has pared its GDP growth forecast to 6.5 per cent for the financial year from 7.1 per cent earlier. Besides, we have raised our consumer price index (CPI)-based inflation projection to 4.5 per cent from 4.1 per cent, from the onset of the conflict.

While these numbers don't seem too bad, given the global context for growth and India's past experience with inflation, they are subject to sizeable risks. An average crude price of \$85/barrel factors in a quick resolution of the conflict, leading to a correction in prices for the remainder of the year. An extended conflict that entails crude prices remaining around \$105/barrel would pull down growth to 5.6 per cent, while pushing up the CPI inflation closer to the 5 per cent mark.

The Government of India's initial response to shield end-consumers from the sharp rise in global energy prices by cutting excise duty on fuel prices was present, given that higher fuel prices transmit across the consumption basket. Some constituents of

available to all eligible entities. The VGF corporation could be established by levying a cess on transport tariffs and by utilising funds collected through imbalance charges. In this regard, the following measures should be undertaken in a time-bound manner:

- PNGRB should strictly enforce the separation of marketing and transmission activities in vertically integrated entities into two different legal entities.
- An Independent System Operator (ISO) entity, without owning transmission infrastructure assets, should be set up as a neutral umpire to ensure the independent system operation of transportation activities. The ISO would be responsible for access to pipeline capacities on a common carrier and contract carrier basis.

Distribution: Although on paper, authorisations have been awarded for more than 300 GAs covering almost the whole country, much needs to be done for the gas to actually flow to households as piped natural gas (PNG) and to CNG stations, and industrial customers.

Authorisations for marketing GAs have been obtained by entities through aggressive bidding, with the aim of somehow getting the licence. Such entities later find it difficult to implement the work programme in a timely manner and meet obligations in accordance with the licence conditions.

Yet another issue is that CGD licensees are not honouring their commitments to adhere to the marketing and infrastructure exclusivity periods. According to the regulations on bidding conditions, marketing exclusivity is for 3/5/8 years, and infrastructure exclusivity is for 25 years.

At the end of the marketing exclusivity period, the incumbent entity has to allow potential new gas marketing entrants to use its infrastructure. Such exclusivity periods are already over for more than 80 GAs. However, enforcement is stalled, as many entities have gone to court.

As for infrastructure exclusivity, after it is over, potential new entities could be allowed to lay gas infrastructure in that licence area. In some GAs, even the infrastructure exclusivity period has ended, without sufficient clarity as to how this principle would be enforced. The following should be done:

- Strict monitoring and enforcement to ensure that each authorised entity complies with the obligations and commitments in accordance with the work programme. In case of serious non-compliance, PNGRB may end the authorisation and rebid the GA or a part of the GA.
- Where marketing exclusivity period has ended, the infrastructure be made available for use by third parties on common or contract carrier basis. PNGRB must get court process expedited in these matters.
- Regulations should provide clarity about the procedure to be followed in cases where infrastructure exclusivity has ended, and the same should be enforced.

More importantly, the government and the regulator need to ponder why the gas marketing principles enshrined in the PNGRB Act have not been implemented despite this legislation being on the statute books for two decades.

(Disclosure: The author chaired a committee set up by PNGRB to suggest measures to promote competition and level playing field in gas transmission and distribution businesses. The committee gave its report in 2025. This column borrows from that report.)

The author is a former IAS officer and former chairman, Sebi

Invigorating India's Act East policy



DAMRU RAVI

The remarkable progress of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or Asean, often goes unnoticed because of the traditions of tolerance and secularism ingrained in these nations. Since its establishment in August 1967, Asean has become the world's fifth-largest economy and is home to about 675 million people. Its most significant achievement lies in overcoming mutual suspicion, resolving regional conflicts, lifting millions of people out of poverty and building lasting peace and prosperity in the region.

Ambassador Gurjit Singh, a veteran

diplomat and scholar, offers an in-depth assessment of Asean's progress and shortcomings in his book, *The Durian Flavour*. As India's first Ambassador to Asean from 2012 to 2015, he saw the dynamically evolving region from close quarters. The pivotal role he played in advancing India's engagement with Asean culminated in India launching the Act East Policy (AEP) in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as a logical extension of India's "Look East Policy" of 1992 under P.V. Narasimha Rao.

Next year marks a major milestone: The 60th anniversary of the establishment of Asean and 35th anniversary of its Dialogue Partnership with India. In that context, this book provides a timely assessment of success and missed opportunities in the bilateral relations. He uses the iconic regional Durian fruit as a metaphor to describe the relationship; its respective flavour may present an unstated symbol of contradictions, but when ripe one can enjoy it, he says.

Mr Singh laments that the strong historical ties defining the India-Asean relationship have fallen short of their full potential. Its rich heritage, borne out of its syncretic cultural links with India, is proudly owned by its people as their own. The tales of the Ramayan, Mahabharata, the Buddhist Jatakas are interwoven in their art forms, literature, cuisine, and much more. Contemporary Bollywood, and Indian education, underpinned by people-to-people engagement, enhances India's soft power. The mismatch in perceptions and objectives between the two sides is said to be the main reason for the below-par performance of closer cooperation. While India seeks a comprehensive relationship with Asean through AEP, including security, Asean prioritises trade and economic cooperation. Although bilateral trade had been robust at \$131 billion in 2023 and Asean's cumulative foreign direct investment into India at \$178 billion (from January 2000 to March 2025), the burgeoning trade deficit (\$45

billion in 2023) is a disturbing trend for New Delhi. The Asean-India Trade in Goods Agreement (ATTIGA) concluded in 2010 is the sore point; India believes it is

being used as a conduit for flooding its market with cheap Chinese goods disguised as Asean products through the misuse of rules of origin provisions. India's suggestion for a review of ATTIGA is being resisted by Asean, fearing that it would be downgraded in an attempt to balance trade. Also, Mr Singh writes, Asean was blamed for India justifiably walking out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in October 2019 for failing to work towards adequately addressing India-specific concerns. Interestingly, the grouping seemed interested only in hedging India against the China behemoth for strategic reasons and markets.

However, this broad-cast view overlooks facts. India's exports to the region has been growing, notwithstanding the

trade deficit, and industry's investments are increasing in its search for new opportunities there. The understanding that trade is not a zero-sum game and a

country's export potential is directly linked to its competitiveness and supply chain integration is missing in the analysis. Using cheaper imported raw materials and components (if domestically unavailable) can actually help make finished products for global markets. Of CPTPP, a pragmatic analysis as to whether staying out is in India's interest at a time of growing protectionism would be useful. At the policy level, deep knowledge on global trade dynamics is imperative for making timely course corrections.

Further, the author is concerned about the waning of Asean's centrality. Its inability to stand up to issues of core security concerns to the region is the main reason. China's aggressive posturing in the South China Sea

impinges on its centrality. Also, the emergence of alternative groups such as RCEP, the Indo-Pacific Framework for Prosperity, the Quadrilateral Dialogue, and BRICS, undermines its role. Given that the big powers are bound to be active in the Indo-Pacific region, Asean should strategically align with India's consistent advocacy of a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific, the author observes. The US' unilateral tariffs are said to be having a debilitating effect on the region as it unwittingly creates conditions for China to take the lead and become an even more influential economic power in the region.

The author's suggestion to set up a revised metrics for enhanced cooperation under AEP, with the inclusion of India's low-cost digital technologies, Sustainable Development Goals, green transition and trilateral cooperation, is worth considering. It calls for adjustment, accommodation and acceptance of the bigger picture by both sides to foster an inclusive Global South and shape a fairer multipolar world order.

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Worry About An Impending Seluge?

India's PE party needs a close, hard look

Earlier this month, PE firm EQT's \$15.6 bn Asia-focused buyout fund — one of the largest ever — makes the concentration of capital among a handful of fund management firms staggering. And scary. Between Blackstone, Bain, KKR and EQT, a cool \$50 bn is waiting to be deployed. Some bulge-bracket shops are still on the road to raise even more money. On a conservative basis, most allocate at least a third of their total regional corpus to India. That means each of the four firms needs to invest \$5 bn. This dollar deluge may end up drowning many.

PE suits have historically been among the largest contributors to FDI into India. But their portfolio construction has been heavily reliant on tech services and lending. Significant disruptions in both have made alpha creation in these sectors near-impossible. AI's shattering Saas enterprises, PE tech deals of 2021-25, done with valuations 20x-plus Ebitda, are mostly underwater. In NBFCs, RBI is coming down heavily on PE firms owning large chunks of two lending entities. Unless obsolescence, or volumes, drives consolidation, buyout opportunities will remain limited. But the bigger worry remains that private market valuations remain anchored to public markets, which are still overheated across large swathes of consumption and investment themes. As excess liquidity starts chasing a shrinking pie of good prospects, the competitive landscape will become even more combative as family offices also get in the fray.

Instead of bespoke bilateral deals, auctions are now de rigueur in sectors like hospitals and manufacturing, as entrepreneurs are busy playing one fund against the other to max value. So, global funds must recalibrate their expectations of underwriting 22-25% returns, especially when RUPs is in free fall. Many will have to pivot geographically. Others will hunt for broken transactions that will return to market as the IPO door will shut for several companies. For all those aggregating AUMs for their next fund and the one after, India's PE party needs a close, hard look.



India's advantage lies in its potential to use AI to enhance human productivity, not replace it

It's popular Mechanics 101

Nandan Nilekani & Ravi Venkatesan



Augment more people

It is being framed as an economic inevitability. History suggests technologies do not determine outcomes, societies do.

Industrial Revolution 1.0 drove extraordinary productivity gains in Britain. But for nearly a century, workers saw little benefit. Wages stagnated, jobs were displaced and living conditions worsened. It took decades — and major institutional and legislative changes — for prosperity to spread. The lesson is simple: productivity gains do not automatically translate into shared prosperity. Without deliberate choices, gains are privatised while costs of transition are socialised.

A second lesson comes from the work of 2006 Economics Nobel winner Edmund Phelps: economies flourish when its benefits are widely diffused — when ordinary people can participate, experiment and build.

In much of the developed world, AI is being deployed within large, formal enterprises. Its economic logic is clear: improve efficiency, often by reducing labour. When productivity gains come from headcount reduction, public anxiety is a rational response. India's structure is fundamentally different, and potentially advantageous.

For over a century, economic efficiency has come through consolidation. As another Nobel-winning economist Ronald Coase explained, finding many small actors is costly. This is how economies evolved: large corporations were created, narrowly defined roles.

AI and digital networks are now redefining work. When coordination costs collapse — when software can match buyers and sellers, manage logistics, and enable transactions at scale — need for large, centralised firms weakens. Efficiency can emerge from networks of small actors instead.

India's economy has this shape. With millions of MSBs and hybrid livelihoods, its informality has long been seen as a weakness. In the AI era, it may become a strength. Work in small enterprises is multi-tasked, adaptive and judgement-driven. Precisely the kind of work that's harder to automate and easier to augment, which makes India better positioned than many advanced economies to use AI to enhance human productivity, rather than replace it.

But this advantage is not automatic. The real risk for India is not mass unemployment. It's missing a once-in-a-generation opportunity to raise productivity and incomes at scale. At the same time, India has a distinct vulnerability. Its formal sector may be relatively small, but it anchors middle-class aspirations. For three decades, the pathway to upward mobility has been clear in STEM — especially in AI.

Western economies have large corporations with specialised, narrowly defined roles. AI is reversing that logic. When coordination costs collapse, efficiency can emerge from networks of small actors.

AI and related sectors. AI now directly targets many of these entry-level roles. Even limited disruption could have unintended consequences. In a country with millions of young people struggling to find meaningful work, a weakening mobility ladder isn't just an economic issue but a socio-political one. India's AI trajectory will be shaped by two choices: how widely the technology is diffused, and whether it expands or constrains economic mobility.

AI remains concentrated among large firms and an English-speaking elite. India risks becoming a more unequal, 2-speed economy where growth doesn't translate into broad-based prosperity. If adoption is slow, it risks missing the opportunity altogether. Avoiding these outcomes requires rethinking work.

● Retain mobility ladder India's large employers — especially in IT services, financial services and manufacturing — are at the AI disruption frontlines. If AI is deployed primarily as a cost-cutting tool, entry-level opportunities will shrink, inequality will widen.

The alternative is to use AI to drive growth. Growing firms are better positioned to ensure benefits of AI are widely shared. But this requires sustained investment in capabilities such as problem-solving, judgement and adaptability. It also requires new approaches to workforce transitions: large-scale skilling systems, job-matching platforms and incentives for firms to invest in people, rather than simply shed labour.

● Build AI as public infra Largest gains for India will come from raising productivity in its least productive sectors — agriculture, small retail and micro-enterprises. This requires making AI widely accessible.

The country has already demonstrated how to do this through DPI like UPI. A similar approach for AI — open, interoperable platforms, low-cost models in non-English Indian languages, and population-scale onboarding — can expand access. When AI runs on public rails, benefits are concentrated within a few firms, they diffuse across millions — farmers improving yields, small businesses expanding reach, and individuals accessing capabilities once out of reach.

● Enable mass entrepreneurship The most transformative impact of AI will come not from using it but from building with it. AI lowers barriers to starting and scaling a business — enabling individuals to identify opportunities, create products and access markets with minimal capital.

India should lean into this by making it easier to start and grow enterprises across its districts. In this model, job creation becomes decentralised, driven not by a few large employers but by millions of small ones. It is more resilient, more inclusive.

Three priorities must move together: Progress on one without the others will not be enough. India doesn't need to lead the world in building the most advanced AI models. But it must lead in ensuring benefits of AI are widely shared. The real AI divide won't be between countries that have the tech and those that don't, but between societies that diffuse it broadly and those that allow it to concentrate.

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Nilekani is co-founder-chairman, Infosys, and Venkatesan is former chairman, Microsoft India

Make US (Ballrooms) Safer From Guns

An American president and his entourage escape an assassination attempt, and what does the American president and his entourage talk about? Why the absolute necessity of a bunker ballroom in the White House, of course. Like Mosaic commandment. Second Amendment of the US Constitution — ratified in 1791, the year when Tipu Sultan was fighting Cornwallis in the Third Anglo-Mysore War — continues to protect (read: empower) the right of people to keep and bear arms.

As of April so far, the US has had 126 instances of mass shootings — at least 4 persons injured or killed — in 2026. With no fatality, the White House correspondents' dinner attempt doesn't even qualify in a roster of more than 3,100 gun-related deaths this year. A Secret Service agent joins the club of some 5,300 persons injured so far in 2026. On an average, cardiac-related illnesses kill nearly 1 mn Americans each year. Gun violence claims around 47,000. In other words, cardiovascular disease death outnumber gun-related ones by a factor of about 20. Which makes buying guns that are almost as easy as buying gum seem perfectly fine to 'keep the peace' using the logic of deterrence. But what a pervasive gun culture does is normalise an 'easy' kind of violence, a layer that a self-described 'non-hellhole' surely can do without.

Acting attorney general Todd Blanche, like many Americans, doesn't think so. For them, tightening gun laws is a wrong, knee-jerk response to Saturday night's shooting. But studies from across territories show that strict regulations for buying and possessing guns are far more effective than passing on responsibility to mental health, illegal migrants, drugs, gangs, etc. But what do we know about making ballrooms and streets safe from guns?



JUST IN JEST

Relax, causing heartbreak can make you a sinner, not a criminal

Ending a 'Live-In' Isn't LEGALLY Tricky

Supreme Court has announced that breaking up a live-in relationship is not a crime. Well, would you ever! Just as well the two justices lean back, satisfied at having clarified what most of us kind of know since the invention of sulking, but clarified, just in case. To reiterate, of course we believe the court is right. Ending a live-in relationship is no more criminal than ending that other more socially-accepted live-in arrangement called marriage. Neither is a fling illegal, even as it may get the perp thrown out 'non-consensually'.

Unless of course you're a woman in Biblical times, where adultery was punishable by getting stoned — with the non-cannabis variety. Or under Taliban, where lashes are handed out like a night out at a BDSM parlour. In those jurisdictions, rom-trag (as opposed to rom-com) is considered serious drama-cultural trauma. But here, in our modern giant khap-region, the law has once again confirmed that causing heartbreak is not a penal offence. Once in a while, even such an obvious matter needs to be said aloud. Let us forget that freedom includes the right to walk away. Love may be binding, but the law is not your therapist. As for what you may end up having to worry about after you've upped and left: the fury of a woman or man scorned. Or the collective fury of the woman's brothers out for you on bikes.

When the World's an Oyster for Sun



M Muneer

Rarely does India wake up and decide to go shopping abroad with conviction. So, when Sun Pharma acquired New Jersey-based pharma major Organon for \$11.7 bn, in a deal expected to close in early 2027, it feels more like a declaration rather than a transaction.

For years, Indian companies have flirted with the idea of acquiring global MNCs. They have opened offices abroad, hired consultants with reassuring accents, and printed 'global footprint' on annual reports. But true globalisation is not achieved through airport lounges and LinkedIn updates. It's achieved through ownership of assets, brands, markets — and, sometimes, challenges in unfamiliar time zones.

Acquisitions are certainly a way into relevance. When Tata Group acquired Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) in 2008, it wasn't just buying a struggling car business, but also a brand, engineering capability and a seat at the global automotive table. When Hindalco picked up Novelis in 2007, it became one of the world's largest aluminium players. These were not incremental moves

but geopolitical statements disguised as M&A.

Globally the playbook is even clearer: Microsoft didn't become a cloud powerhouse by realising on its core value. It bought its way with deals like LinkedIn and GitHub. Disney didn't rely on Mickey Mouse alone. It acquired Marvel Studios, Lucasfilm and 21st Century Fox to build a content empire. Global giants don't wait to become great. They acquire greatness, then optimise it.

India Inc has traditionally approached acquisitions the way we cook beefy dinners: cautiously, with a small plate, and a lingering suspicion that something might go wrong. The result has been a series of tentative, often defensive, deals rather than bold, strategic bets.

Which is why moves like Sun's acquisition of Organon matter. They signal a shift from opportunistic buying to deliberate empire-building. And if India Inc is serious about becoming truly global, it needs to turn this into a habit, not a headline.

India Inc has had its share of post-acquisition integration. Cultural mismatches, integration failures, overpayment, and occasional discovery that the 'strategic asset' had little strategic value. Buying a global company is easy. Running it without breaking it is the real test. So, what separates successful acquirers from enthusiastic collectors?

● Clarity of intent

Best questions for acquirers must include:



A whole system lies out there

are driven by a clear strategic gap — technology, market access, brand or content. Leadership needs to align with what success looks like. None of this is glamorous, which is precisely why it's often neglected.

● Financial courage + discipline Most acquisitions involve liquidating an asset in the name of ambition is a time-honoured tradition across markets. The difference between vision and reality is usually visible in the balance sheet 24hrs later.

The writer is co-founder, Medici Institute for Innovation

Let Bharat into the Boardroom



Shefali Goradia & Deepti Berera

Not too long ago, at a roundtable for independent directors, a business leader passionately held forth on the 'Bharat agenda'. The gathering explained the shift in demand patterns, how 'Tier 2/3 cities are driving consumption, and how companies must rethink their strategies for the next decade.

When they finished speaking about new customer behaviours, rise of mid-market competitors, and how board oversight on strategy and operations must evolve to reflect these realities, another director asked: How many of our boards have given a seat to Bharat? Bharat has become a corporate buzzword. It is central to strategy conversations, but absent from the boardrooms where strategy is approved. Bharat banking is in focus, consumer companies emphasise on rural and semi-urban expansion, and new-age tech firms pitch themselves as 'Bharat First'.

This narrative is compelling and real because Bharat is where the next

500 mn customers live. It is where digital payments are rapidly growing, and services such as mobility, healthcare, education, retail and finance are experiencing explosive adoption.

However, this narrative is still 'external'. Boardrooms of India Inc are still dominated by former corporate executives, investment bankers, former consultants and retired bureaucrats, and investor nominees, mostly hailing from Tier-1 cities.

Of course their credibility precedes them, but few of them have lived experience of the Bharat markets that companies are betting on for their growth. Even when regulators, such as RBI, intervene by mandating MSME or agricultural expertise on bank boards, the role often becomes a compliance tick-box rather than a



Bring in the best of the rest of us

strategic capability.

The first step to overcome the disconnect between Bharat and boardrooms is to bring in the best of the rest of us — consumers follow cultural logic, not urban assumptions, and understanding this is crucial. Price sensitivity, family influence and product format preferences differ significantly from those of metro customers.

Cash flow volatility, informal credit and how businesses absorb shocks through capital buffers, as well as reliance on relationships, redefine risk in tier-2/3 cities in India. Trust towards a distributor trumps campaign. Operating models are more frugal and resilient. Businesses innovate out of necessity and build efficiency without excess capital.

Without acknowledging uniqueness of Bharat markets, boards might approve strategies that appear compelling on paper but are not grounded in reality.

Including Bharat in governance is about building a more complete picture. For example, a director who has built a business in a tier-2/3 city brings ground-level realism, mid-market consumer insights, knowledge of how trust is built in semi-urban India, and the ability to sense risks long before dashboards detect them. This perspective is no longer 'niche' to 'have' but 'must'.

Just as boards seek digital, financial and legal expertise in their composition,

● Long-term mindset Acquisitions are beyond QSQT (quarter-se-quarter talk). They're decade-long commitments. Benefits — market share, brand equity, capability — compound over time. So do the mistakes.

For India Inc, the opportunity is enormous. The global economy is wobbling through yet another 'strategic reset'. India is the only major developed market busy shedding non-core assets, and discovering joys of slower growth. For those willing to act, this is a buyer's market in formalist India. Indian companies, armed with discipline, operational efficiency and balance sheets that have recently discovered protein, are perfectly placed to step in.

The time has come for corporate ambition. It's also about national positioning. Countries that produce MNCs shape global markets, influence supply chains, set standards, rewrite rules. If India is to be more than a rising domestic market, it needs companies that think — and act — globally.

Which brings us back to Sun Pharma. Deals like these are not just transactions, but also signals that Indian companies are willing to step onto a larger stage, take on greater complexity and accept that global leadership comes with its own challenges.

One bold acquisition is a story. A series of them, executed well, becomes a strategy.

Boards should appoint at least one director with credible experience operating in tier-2/3 cities. These should not be token roles or regulatory afterthoughts, but leaders who represent the Bharat markets. It may also be advisable to establish a Bharat Advisory Council, a rotating panel of mid-market entrepreneurs, distributors, business owners in semi-urban areas, and sector specialists who provide quarterly briefings to the board. This brings unfettered ground intelligence.

Today every boardroom claims to be preparing for Bharat but few are walking the talk. It is time for companies that will lead India's next decade of growth will be those whose boards have the gender, regional, ethnic and cognitive diversity to reflect the country they aim to serve.

It is time to give Bharat its rightful place in the boardroom. Not as a symbolic gesture but as a strategic move.

Goradia is chairperson, and Berera is partner, Deloitte South Asia

THE SPEAKING TREE

Silence is Strength

SANJAY TEOHIA

Words are powerful tools. Many traditions encourage us to speak three times and only once. There is a saying that one should always express truth, share wisdom and stand for what is right. However, an equally important lesson is often overlooked: knowing when to remain silent. True wisdom lies not just in speaking but in understanding the right time to speak and the right time to stay quiet. Speech can heal, guide and inspire. A kind word can lift someone's spirit, and honest communication can resolve conflicts. In spiritual teachings, Satya, speaking truth, is a virtue; it aligns us with integrity and builds trust with others.

Words spoken in anger or hate can hurt others and create negativity. This is why silence is also considered sacred. Silence is not weakness; it is strength and courage. It reduces ego, builds maturity and deep understanding. There are moments when staying silent protects peace — not our own and that of others. In a conflict, silence can prevent escalation. In quiet moments, we become aware of thoughts, feelings and deeper truths. Meditation and mindfulness emphasise silence as a way to connect with the Divine and find inner peace. Both speaking and silence are essential in life. Speaking at the right time reflects courage, honesty, wisdom and self-control. A balanced person knows when to use each. By mastering both, we move closer to a peaceful and spiritually awakened life.

PEAS IN A PODCAST

Rhythm Of Rails

In a world that rarely pauses to stand and stare — yet marcs the 'Slow Life' as a luxury — railways have, for many, lost their romantic lustre. However, Corwin Bainbridge, host of the Railway Mania podcast, proves that the soul of the iron road is still alive. In episode 5, 'Capturing the Magic of Steam', he sits down with Jonathan Guilbert of Gandy Dancer Productions for a masterclass in locomotive devotion. Gandy Dancers, Guilbert educates us, were North American railroad labourers who manually aligned tracks. The name reflects their rhythmic, synchronised movements — likened to a dance — often performed to work songs to ensure precise, collective effort. Guilbert's work is a love letter to the era of rail and coal. By restoring 8mm and 16mm colour films, he revives the flickering images of British steam. Guilbert recounts a childhood spent in the shadows of railway sheds, driven by a raw, unadulterated passion for these mechanical giants.

The chemistry between Bainbridge and Guilbert is effortless. This 50-min episode is a poignant reminder that while the world speeds up, the magic of a steam engine remains a timeless, grounding force.

Chat Room

No Gift Horse in IPL Equestrian

Aprons the new recruit, RCB's 'Powerplay' Decimates Capitals' (Apr 28), the IPL is less a cricket league than a derby of coloured jerseys. Teams charge from the power play, stumble at mid-range, and surge for the finish in the death overs. A single over can be the decisive hour in a game. In the IPL, champions are the defeated. Owners bark like horse trainers after a poor run, demanding fewer lapses. Delhi Capitals' collapse against RCB was a case in point: one side galloped, the other limped, and the crowd roared at the spectacle. In this carnival, reputations are fragile, and every fan is a champion. It will be a surprise if it is not the thrill. The IPL is less a marathon of patience than a sprint of nerves, where every delivery is a gambit and every side a racehorse chasing glory.

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Letters to the editor may be addressed to editor@timesofindia.com

Editor's TAKE

FTA: Towards closer ties with New Zealand

The India-New Zealand FTA is less about immediate trade gains and more about strategic positioning, and reflects India's resolve to increase its global outreach

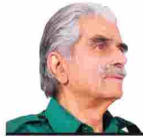
It is a Trump world where uncertainty reigns. Whether in trade or geopolitics, the US President can always spring a surprise, disrupting national economies and nations themselves. In this scenario, India has moved swiftly to diversify its trade ties and lessen its trade dependence on the United States. It is now exploring and committing itself to bilateral ties that insulate it from the vagaries of geopolitical headwinds. India has already established bilateral ties with the UAE and Australia, and is exploring further possibilities with many other countries. In the chain of these agreements comes the recently concluded India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement, which again signals a calibrated shift in New Delhi's economic diplomacy. The agreement was signed by Piyush Goyal and Todd McClay, and endorsed by Christopher Luxon as a 'once-in-a-generation' deal. The agreement may have a limited impact on India's trade, as Indo-New Zealand trade is not substantial, but it does show a direction and purpose.

The pact undoubtedly gives India new market access and certainty. New Zealand has agreed to give 100 per cent duty-free access to all Indian exports covering over 8,000 tariff lines, creating a rare opportunity for frictionless entry into a developed market. For Indian sectors such as textiles, leather, pharmaceuticals, and auto components, this is an immediate competitive advantage. While New Zealand's market size is modest, the value lies in predictability and the ability to scale niche exports. In today's world, increasingly marked by protectionism, this is a big deal. Equally important is the agreement's role in diversifying India's trade partnerships. The agreement enhances India's Indo-Pacific trade footprint. Though bilateral trade is currently limited, the target of doubling it to \$5 billion within five years is realistic. Beyond goods, the FTA's emphasis on services and mobility reflects the changing nature of global trade. The provision for visas for Indian professionals in the IT, healthcare, and engineering sectors is a notable gain. It aligns with India's strength as a services exporter and addresses long-standing demands for easier movement of skilled labour. For Indian youth and students, expanded post-study work opportunities in New Zealand open new avenues for global exposure and skill acquisition. The investment dimension of the pact is another significant pillar. New Zealand's commitment to invest up to \$20 billion in India over the next 15 years has the potential to catalyse growth in sectors such as technology, manufacturing, and food processing. The fast-track arrangement allowing Indian food processors to import New Zealand inputs duty-free for re-export is particularly strategic. It strengthens India's ambition to position itself as a global food processing hub while integrating it more deeply into international value chains.

Yet, the agreement is not without riders. India's cautious approach in excluding critical sectors such as dairy, sugar, and edible oils underscores the political economy of trade. If effectively implemented, it could serve as a template for future engagements where ambition is matched by caution, and openness is anchored in national priorities.

Nepal's 'Ghanti' govt rings in change

With sweeping arrests, bold administrative resets, and a charged geopolitical backdrop involving the United States, China, and India, Nepal stands at a crossroads where symbolism, disruption, and uncertainty converge



ASHOK K MEHTA

Lame Ahal in Kaski district of Pokhara was a traditional Nepali Congress-voting village; it did not surprise anyone when it voted en masse for the Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP). The sound of bells (ghanti, RSP's election symbol) has enchanted music-loving Nepalis. Last Saturday, more than three weeks after Balen Shah took oath as Prime Minister on March 27, to my question whether Lame Ahal was happy with the Balen government, veteran Yam Bahadur replied: "ekdam bilkul khushi chha".

Incidentally, Balen has not spoken a word in public; no meeting with the press; no address to the nation or the newly elected Parliament; no posts on X or other social media. His longest election rally speech was five minutes. He presides in silence, and it works for him, as an RSP PhD scholar at South Asia University, Delhi, told me. All he did was release a five-minute video clip, "jai Mahakali", the Gorkha war cry that went viral, establishing his skills as a renowned rapper. For Balen, style is more important than substance.

He has introduced several changes: the diplomatic code of conduct; meeting ambassadors en bloc or in batches, not individually. Former Chinese ambassador Hou Yanqi used to drop in at Sheetal Niwas (the President's residence) or Baluwatar (the Prime Minister's residence) without informing the Foreign Ministry. Balen will follow protocol: meet emissaries at the appropriate level without deviation. The test will be on 1 May, when the US super ambassador and presidential envoy to South and Central Asia, Sergio Cor, has sought a meeting with him, and only him.

Home Minister Sudhan Gurung (and one more minister), who has reportedly resigned (?), performed equally spectacularly: he arrested former Prime Minister KP Oli and Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak on March 28, indicating that corruption and misgovernment were his government's targets. Both have since been released on bail. Investigations were ordered into money laundering allegations against former Prime Ministers SB Deuba, Prachanda, and Oli, while former minister Deepak Khadka and industrialist Shankar Agarwal were arrested. The Deuba family is in Singapore/Hong Kong for medical treatment and has been declared fugitives. A commission will investigate the wealth of individuals, officials, and politicians since 1991. Many hope that the arrival of the Verkhovna Rada Commission, and the events of 9 September 2025, will also be separately investigated, as they implicate Shah and RSP President Rabi Lamichhane.

Primum inter pares, Lamichhane is the leader, elected to Parliament but currently on bail. He is hoping to be cleared of multiple cases in court on allegations of fraud and money laundering.



INDIA HAS NEVER WORKED WITH A NEW POLITICAL ENTITY LIKE THE RSP BUT NOR HAD IT DEALT WITH THE NATIONAL PEOPLE'S POWER IN SRI LANKA, WITH WHOM ITS RELATIONS ARE NOW AMONG THE BEST IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

As a former TV host, he is charismatic, eloquent, and ambitious, with a large following in the party. A clash between Balen and Rabi is likely. The government launched its 100-point reforms—many aspirational, but several already implemented, such as the five-day week, an overhaul of the bureaucracy, and the recall of ambassadors. Shankar Sharma, the cat-with-nine-lives envoy to New Delhi—previously recalled twice and reinstated—will finally say goodbye to diplomacy. The RSP is just five years old and has no experienced civil servants; so it will focus on youth in its selections. Although the focus of the government is internal and domestic, diplomacy has taken centre stage. The first caller in Kathmandu was US Assistant Secretary of State Paul Samir Kapur, who met Foreign Minister Shishir Khanal, Finance Minister Swarnim Wagie, Lamichhane, and Army Chief Gen Ashok Sigdel. He pre-empted any Indian diplomatic visitor, though Foreign Minister S Jaishankar—who was the first to land in Colombo after President Anura Dissanayake's landslide victory in 2024 — is not a frequent visitor to Kathmandu. He met Khanal during the Indian Ocean Conference in Mauritius this month.

Kapur was on a dual mission: to accelerate the utilisation of the USD 550 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Nepal Compact and the US State Partnership Programme (SPP). The MCC was cleared after strenuous debate in Nepal and is set to expire in August 2028. The SPP, which seeks military cooperation, was rejected in 2022. Kapur also urged Nepal to issue ID cards to Tibetan refugees, as around 20,000 Tibetans of various denominations are present across Nepal. Not to be outwitted by the US, Chinese Deputy Director General of Asian Affairs Cao Jing arrived in Kathmandu. The Nepalese are often wary of the bluntness of Chinese officials. She is said to have warned against the MCC and SPP, and against any tinkering with the Tibetan issue, a highly sensitive matter for Beijing. Cao also warned against any Nepalese official visit-

ing the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamasala for the inauguration on 28 May of Pema Tsering, re-elected Sikyong (Prime Minister) for another five years. The China-US geopolitical rivalry now supersedes India's primacy in Nepal's tri-polar context. Sources in Kathmandu indicate that Balen will visit Delhi either before or after the UNGA in September, but India will be his first foreign visit. Balen or Wagie have not indicated how the primary challenges—jobs and the economy—will be addressed. The economy was growing at 4.5 per cent, and both remittances and foreign exchange reserves were sound. Two million Nepalese work in the Gulf, and another 6 to 8 million in India and elsewhere. The Gulf war over the past two years has hit tourism and remittances, and the economy may slide despite new austerity programmes. Losses due to arson during last year's Gen 2 protests were colossal, running into billions of dollars.

Still, the investment climate is likely to improve now that a politically stable single-party government is in power after three decades. India, as the reputed first responder, has yet to show its cards. The RSP was considering closing the open border and attempting the northern route for trade through Tibet, despite most trade being routed through India. Nationalism has its place. Oil signed a slew of agreements to spite India following the economic blockade (2015). Kathmandu should have learnt its lesson about the North, as the Kodari-Kathmandu railway and North-South BRTI corridors remain largely aspirational.

Ordinary Nepalis frequently tell me that they will not survive if the India-Nepal border is closed. India has never worked with a new political entity like the RSP. But nor had it dealt with the National People's Power in Sri Lanka, with whom its relations are now among the best in the neighbourhood. The Ghanti is not eternal, as the vanquished can reincarnate. For now, while the US and China shadowbox in Nepal, India can bide its time.

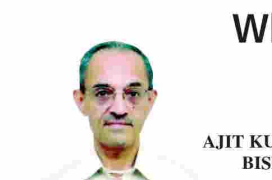
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PICTALK



A woman performs a ritual on the occasion of 'Mohini Ekadashi' at a temple in Bikaner. PHOTO: PTI



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

2ND OPINION

These are the basic facts. There is one God; there has been one, and there will continue to be one God eternally. The same is true about us: souls there are many of us. We are small, which was necessary for co-existence. Another necessity was to be given free will; otherwise, we would not have individuality. However, this free will has been limited to desire and decision. Souls can only desire whatever they choose, but physical acts are required to be given shape by either God or material nature. The example is of wanting to eat a certain fruit; one has to obtain it. This is provided by material nature. In the case of God, He simply makes it happen like a miracle through His 'ichha shakti' (divine willpower).

A soul has the freedom to choose either of them. Most people, knowingly or unknowingly, choose material

What has God planned for us?



is material consciousness—assuming oneself to be a material body. Due to this identification, the mind takes control, and this faculty given to us to connect with God is constantly trying to satisfy the senses. And the senses are never satisfied; such is their nature. The free will given to us is misunderstood as complete freedom, which was never intended to be. Wise persons see through all this and take shelter in God in baby steps. The moment one has such an intention, God is interested. Is He not the whole, and we but parts? (The Bhagavad Gita 15.7) God has praised four types of devotees—those who take His shelter. God is also ready to take our responsibility. He remains in His shelter, having begun on this path. He helps to control the mind by providing spiritual intelligence (10.10). God, and only God, has the power to change our fate and, most importantly, our nature, which is the cause of most of our present woes. God does not stop there; He grants supreme peace (18.62), which we all crave but never achieve on our own.

I can go on about God's 'kripa' (grace). He even liberates (18.66) us from the painful cycle of birth and death in material bodies. Thankfully, I have begun this journey, and I am enjoying the experience.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

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A BREAKTHROUGH IN THE FIGHT AGAINST MALARIA

A new drug has emerged, designed to overcome resistance signals, which is a great achievement in medical science. This was announced by the World Health Organisation, and it can be called a rare and consequential moment in global public health. It is noteworthy that such a finding carries the promise of shifting the battle against one of humanity's oldest and deadliest adversaries. The announcement of a breakthrough malaria drug by the World Health Organisation marks a rare and consequential moment in global public health—one that carries the promise of shifting the battle against one of humanity's oldest and deadliest adversaries. For decades, malaria has resisted eradication, not for lack of effort, but because of its extraordinary adaptability. The parasite's ability to evolve resistance to frontline treatments has repeatedly blunted progress, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia. The emergence of a new, effective drug—specifically one designed to overcome resistance signals—is more than incremental progress; it represents a strategic breakthrough. This is not merely a scientific victory, but a lifeline for health systems grappling with resurging caseloads. Malaria continues to claim hundreds of thousands of lives annually, with children under five bearing the brunt. If deployed effectively, this breakthrough could sharply reduce severe cases and fatalities.

YASH PAL RAJHAN | JALANDHAR

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

Heat crisis demands urgent adaptation

India's familiar summer heat has evolved into a far more dangerous and persistent crisis. What was once considered extreme—temperatures crossing 40°C—is now increasingly routine, while even 34-35°C in coastal regions feels oppressive due to rising humidity. Climate projections warn that a 2°C global temperature rise could triple heat exposure, with South Asia among the worst affected. The situation is aggravated by 'marine heatwaves', which reduce the cooling effect of sea breezes, trapping humidity along coastal belts. Inland regions such as Vidarbha face a different but equally severe challenge—dry heat, hot winds, and minimal moisture pushing temperatures to alarming heights. The consequences are severe: rising cases of heat exhaustion, cramps, and heatstroke; water scarcity; and surging electricity demand straining power grids. Overburdened grids, in turn, worsen air quality. India must urgently strengthen heat action plans, improve water management, and build climate resilience. Public awareness and infrastructure readiness will be critical in navigating what is fast becoming the country's new normal. India can no longer treat extreme heat as a seasonal inconvenience.

GANPATI BHATT | AKOLA

The spirit of pluralism in Bengal

Bengal's social fabric continues to reflect a deeply rooted commitment to secularism and shared humanity. Contrary to narratives of division, the region has historically demonstrated a unique coexistence—where communities actively participate in each other's traditions, from supporting religious festivities to sharing spaces and responsibilities in daily life. This ethos owes much to the legacy of the Bengal Renaissance, which prioritised rationality, inclusiveness, and human values over sectarian divisions. Instances of mutual respect—Muslims contributing to Durga Puja arrangements or Hindus supporting Ramadan practices—are not exceptions but reflections of a broader cultural mindset. Despite repeated political attempts to polarise society, Bengal's electorate has often resisted divisive agendas, reaffirming its commitment to pluralism. The 2021 elections served as a reminder that appeals to communal tension may not easily override this deeply embedded identity. Bengal's example underscores an important lesson: enduring social harmony is built not merely on tolerance, but on active participation and mutual respect across communities.

KAJAL CHATTERJEE | KOLKATA

When cricket mirrors a high-stakes sprint

The Indian Premier League (IPL) exemplifies cricket in its most dynamic and unpredictable form, resembling a high-stakes sprint rather than a prolonged contest. Each match unfolds like a race, where momentum shifts rapidly and a single over can determine the outcome. The recent dominant victory of Royal Challengers Bangalore over Delhi Capitals highlights this intensity. RCB surged ahead with precision and pace, leaving their opponents struggling to keep up. Such performances underline the importance of discipline, strategy, and composure in the shortest format of the game. Every IPL team is packed with world-class talent, yet success depends not just on skill but also on temperament. A dropped catch, a mistimed shot, or a poorly executed chase can prove decisive. Much like in a race, consistency and timing are critical. For fans, this unpredictability is the tournament's greatest appeal. The IPL is defined by fleeting fortunes and dramatic turnarounds, where reputations can be made or undone in a matter of overs. In this fast-paced arena, only those who adapt quickly and maintain focus can hope to emerge victorious.

P. PRASADA RAO | HYDRABAD



The sacred relics of Tathagata Buddha descend upon Ladakh

For the first time in India's history, the sacred relics of Tathagata Buddha leave their permanent repository to bless a land that has kept the Dharma alive across centuries of hardship, altitude, and devotion. This is a civilisation saluting itself



GAJENDRA SINGH SHEKHAWAT

There are moments in a nation's life when history does not merely repeat itself — it deepens. This Wednesday, as the sacred relics of Tathagata Buddha descend upon Ladakh for the first time in India on this scale of public veneration, and that the only answer to uncertainty is faith, the world is reaching not for the language of officialdom, but for something far older: reverence. For centuries, Ladakh has held the flame. Through brutal winters that freeze rivers solid, through geopolitical pressures that would test the sturdiest of souls, through the isolation of altitude and the remoteness of high passes — the people of Ladakh have kept the Dharma alive with a fidelity that humbles every institution and every government. It is entirely fitting, then, that India's first historic public exposition of the Tathagata relics does not take place in a climate-controlled museum in a metropolitan city. It takes place here, on the Roof of the World, where faith is the very architecture of daily life.

And consider where these relics come from. They originate from Piprahwa, in Uttar Pradesh — the site historically identified with ancient Kapilavastu, the very birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama. Bringing them to Ladakh is, in the most literal sense possible, a homecoming.

A first that carries the weight of ages

The Sacred Exposition of the Holy Relics of the Tathagata carries an official title that is also a declaration: "Peace in Times of Conflict." In a world convulsed by war, fracture, and rising hostility, these words challenge the premise that conflict is inevitable, that strength requires aggression, and that the only answer to uncertainty is force. The Buddha announced that challenge two and a half millennia ago. We bring his physical presence back to remind a watching world that the answer still holds.

The sacred relics of Gautama Buddha — preserved with the utmost sanctity — are travelling for the first time from their permanent place of keeping to be venerated on Indian soil at this scale. Under Z-category security, aboard a special aircraft, they arrive in Leh on April 29 and for fifteen days, from May 1 to 15, beginning with the auspicious occasion of the 2500th Vesak Buddha Purnima, they will be accessible to devotees, monks, scholars, and pilgrims from across the world.

The venues themselves speak volumes. The Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre, the Dharmachakra Centre at the historic Leh Palace, the teaching ground of Jiv-tse-la — the same sacred earth where His Holiness the Dalai Lama has delivered his teachings — will host this exposition. And the relics will remain in Leh alone. Between 11 and 12 May, they will travel to the remote Zaskar Valley, carrying the Buddha's grace to a community whose Buddhist traditions remain as deep as the gorges of their landscape.

The land that never let the flame go out

To understand why Ladakh is the right home for this occasion, one must understand what Ladakh is. It is not simply a dramatic landscape of monasteries and mountains, however beautiful that landscape may be. It is a living history of the Dharma. From the serene heights of Hemis Monastery — whose annual festival draws pilgrims from across the Himalayan world — to the ancient frescoes of Alchi, painted in the 10th century and still vivid with devotional genius; from the towering Maitreya Buddha of Diskit, which faces the Shyok River with a gaze of infinite compassion, to the layered wisdom of Thiksey, often compared to the great monasteries of Tibet — Ladakh has been, for over a thousand years, one of the most extraordinary centres of Buddhist philosophy, art, manuscript tradition, and living practice on the planet. These monasteries, and the monks who inhabit them, are the active transmitters of a tradition that has survived every geopolitical storm the Himalayan region has known. And they have done this work of preservation under conditions that would tax the imagination of most administrators: extreme cold, scarce resources, infrastructural isolation, and a geography that demands courage simply to reach. It is India's formal acknowledgement of what Ladakh has always been — not a peripheral territory at the edge of the map, but a beating spiritual heart at the centre of the nation's identity.

A vision rooted in civilisational depth

Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has consistently described Ladakh as a vibrant centre of Buddhist culture and spirituality. He has spoken often of the resilience and patri-



otism of the Ladakhi people — especially in difficult border conditions — linking their spiritual strength with national resolve and unity. He has made clear that development in Ladakh will go hand in hand with the preservation of its unique culture and environment. As the Prime Minister has emphasised: Ladakh is not only a land of immense strategic importance, but also a living centre of the Buddha's teachings. The visit of the holy relics is both a spiritual blessing and a recognition of Ladakh's centuries-old role in preserving Buddhist heritage, as well as the courage and dedication of its people in serving the nation. This vision — of a Ladakh that is simultaneously a frontier of national security and a citadel of civilisational wisdom — is the most coherent aspect of the place.



MAY THIS SACRED EXPOSITION REMIND EACH OF US — REGARDLESS OF FAITH, REGARDLESS OF WHERE WE STAND — THAT THE DEEPEST HUMAN ASPIRATION HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE SAME: TO LIVE WITHOUT CAUSING SUFFERING, TO ACT WITH WISDOM, AND TO LEAVE THE WORLD A LITTLE MORE AT PEACE THAN WE FOUND IT

The writer is the Union Minister for Culture and Tourism, Government of India

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Tehran was never the point & the map that still burns



WAIEL AWWARD

In moments of heightened crisis, great powers often fall prey to a familiar illusion: the belief that force can impose order on complexity. Today, as tensions between the United States and Iran continue to simmer, that illusion is once again shaping strategic thinking in ways that risk destabilising not only the Middle East, but the international system itself. Regardless of intention, the elimination of Iranian state capacity produces consequences that align with long-standing US strategic interests—BRI disruption, INSTC collapse, dollar hegemony reinforcement, Russia-

China exposure. These consequences are real whether Washington planned them or not. What we are witnessing is not the calculated aggression of a collapsing empire, nor a coherent grand strategy aimed at reshaping the global order through a single decisive war. It is something more unsettling: a world in transition, where power is diffuse, rivalries overlap, and traditional instruments of control are increasingly ill-suited to the complexity they face. The United States, the world's most formidable military and financial power, its global reach unmatched, its alliances entrenched. Yet power today no longer guarantees control. The post-Cold War moment of unchallenged primacy has given way to a far more contested landscape.

China has emerged as a systemic economic and technological competitor, while Russia continues to assert itself as a disruptive geopolitical force. In such an environment, the temptation to act decisively is understandable. But here lies the paradox: the ability to strike is not the same as the ability to shape outcomes. The capacity to destroy does not confer the power to rebuild or to control what follows. Iran embodies this paradox. It is not a conventional great power, yet it is far from weak. Its strength lies in networks, alliances, and asymmetric strategies that defy traditional military calculations. To imagine that it can be "obliterated" as a strategic actor is to misunderstand both the nature of the Iranian state and the dynamics of the region it inhabits. The Middle East is not a vacuum. It is a dense web of political, sectarian, and strategic relationships, where the collapse of one player reverberates across many others. It would radiate outwards—into Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Gulf—activating a complex ecosystem of state and non-state actors whose interests are deeply intertwined with Tehran's. The economic shock of global energy flows, would become a flashpoint. Even the perception of risk in this narrow corridor would send shockwaves through global markets, driving up energy prices, disrupting supply chains, and amplifying inflationary pressures worldwide. For much of the developing world, the cost of energy would strain already fragile economies, while disruptions in fertiliser and food supply chains could undermine agricultural stability. These are not abstract risks; they translate into real human hardship. Yet the most profound consequences may be strategic.

A large-scale confrontation with Iran would unfold within a broader geopolitical context. For China and Russia, such a conflict would present both opportunity and narrative: an opportunity to expand influence in a distracted global environment, and a narrative reinforcing perceptions of Western unilateralism and instability. Far from restoring American primacy, such a scenario could accelerate its erosion. This does not mean the world is heading for a direct great-power confrontation. Neither China nor Russia has any interest in entering a full-scale war with the United States over Iran. The costs would be prohibitive; the outcomes uncertain. But the absence of global war does not imply stability. What is emerging instead is the normalisation of what might be called "dirty wars" — prolonged, ambiguous conflicts fought through proxies, economic pressure, cyber operations, and information warfare. These conflicts blur the line between war and peace, erode norms, and create conditions for incremental escalation without clear thresholds. The Middle East has become a central arena for such dynamics. The wars in Iraq and Syria have already demonstrated the limits of military intervention in producing stable outcomes. To repeat this pattern on a larger scale would not signal strength. It would reveal strategic stagnation. This brings us to a critical question: is the United States still acting as though it is the sole superpower? In rhetoric, perhaps. In reality, increasingly less so. The constraints it faces—economic, political, and strategic—are real. Recognising them is not a sign of weakness, but of adaptation. The era in which dominance could be imposed through force alone has passed. What is required now is a recalibration—one that prioritises stability over spectacle, and long-term outcomes over short-term demonstrations of power. For Iran, this means acknowledging that its own strategies of influence and asymmetric warfare are not only for its adversaries, but for the region as a whole.

For the United States, it means recognising that the pursuit of absolute dominance in a multipolar world is not only unrealistic, but counterproductive. The alternative is not victory. It is entanglement. History offers a sobering lesson: great powers rarely collapse through decisive defeat. More often, they erode through overextension—trapped in conflicts that drain resources without delivering resolution. The real danger, therefore, is not a single catastrophic war, but a series of prolonged engagements that cumulatively weaken strategic position. We are entering an era defined not by decisive victories, but by persistent instability—where crises are continuous, resolutions elusive, and the line between competition and conflict increasingly blurry. Avoiding this trajectory requires restraint, diplomacy, and strategic clarity. It requires acknowledging a fundamental truth: the destruction of a civilisation is not a strategy. It is a failure of imagination. Iran, with its deep historical roots and complex societal fabric, cannot be reduced to a target. Nor can the Middle East be reshaped through force without consequence. The belief that such actions could pave the way for confronting other global powers is not only flawed; it is dangerously detached from the realities of interdependence that define today's world. The war on Iran is a structural intervention—

whether consciously Mackinderian or not—whose intended consequence is the disruption of the global order, and whose unintended consequence is the acceleration of the very axis consolidation it sought to prevent. It is not the opening move in a planned confrontation with China and Russia. It is the opening of a window of maximum vulnerability during which that confrontation becomes more likely-initiated than by Washington, but by Beijing. And that choice, like the currents that pass through the Strait of Hormuz, cannot be deflected indefinitely.



Jan Vishwas 2026 and the expanding drive for decriminalisation

NATHISHA CHANDHY, SIDDHARTH JHA AND ANKEETA MAHESHWARI

The Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2026 represents one of the most far-reaching attempts in recent years to rationalise India's regulatory framework. Covering 784 provisions across 79 Central Acts administered by 23 ministries, the Bill significantly expands the scope of the Union government's effort to reduce the criminalisation of regulatory non-compliance. Having been passed by the Rajya Sabha on April 2, 2026, it now awaits Presidential assent.

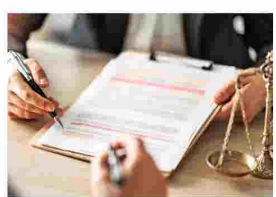
The legislation replaces the earlier Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2025, which was examined by a Select Committee of the Lok Sabha before being withdrawn in March 2026. In comparison, the 2026 Bill is substantially wider in scope. While the 2025 version proposed the decriminalisation of provisions across 17 Acts administered by 10 ministries, the current Bill adds 62 more Central Acts and expands the number of provisions examined within the previously covered statutes.

At its core, the Jan Vishwas exercise seeks to apply the principle of proportionality in punishment. The underlying premise is that not all instances of non-compliance warrant criminal prosecution or the threat of imprisonment. By recalibrating penalties for regulatory offences, the legislation attempts to strike a balance

between ensuring compliance and reducing the burdens associated with criminal enforcement. The Bill introduces graded penalties and timelines for non-compliance. First, many offences are reclassified from criminal offences to civil contraventions, typically by replacing imprisonment with monetary penalties. This shift removes the need for criminal prosecution in routine compliance matters, thereby easing pressure on the judicial system while reducing the risk of incarceration for relatively minor violations. Second, the Bill introduces graded penalties and compliance opportunities before punitive action is triggered. Third, offences that are considered redundant or outdated have been omitted altogether. Fourth, several offences have been made compoundable, allowing violations to be settled through the payment of prescribed sums rather than through criminal proceedings. Finally, in certain cases, monetary penalties have been enhanced and timelines introduced for their payment in order to retain a deterrent effect.

According to estimates released by the Press Information Bureau, the 2026 Bill proposes to reclassify 432 criminal offences as civil offences. It also compounds or reduces jail terms for 17 offences and removes imprisonment and/or fines entirely for 244 offences. In scale and ambition, the exercise marks a significant effort to modernise India's regulatory architecture.

The breadth of the Bill is reflected in the wide range of sectors it touches. The legislation proposes amendments to laws governing industry, mining, coal, power, petroleum and natural gas,



finance, transport and infrastructure, textiles, food safety and healthcare, as well as shipping and ports.

One notable development is the inclusion of several sectoral legislations that were previously outside the scope of the reform. In an earlier analysis published in Scroll.in, "With fines instead of jail terms, new bill aims to simplify legal compliance", we had noted that key legislations regulating sectors such as mining had remained largely untouched in the earlier iteration of the Bill. The 2026 version addresses this gap by proposing amendments to seven laws governing coal and non-coal mining, as well as the petroleum and natural gas sectors.

Under the mining framework regulating offshore and onshore extraction, breaches of licence conditions that previously attracted criminal penalties are proposed to be treated as civil violations, albeit accompanied by significant-

ly higher monetary penalties. At the same time, criminal liability is retained for more serious misconduct such as illegal mining, or for an attempt to differentiate between routine compliance lapses and more serious violations.

The Bill also undertakes significant rationalisation in the transport sector. Amendments have been proposed to ten legislations governing shipping, ports and motorways. For instance, under the Inland Vessels Act, 2021, 20 of the 32 offences have been decriminalised. Across these statutes, offences have either been removed, or reclassified as civil contraventions.

Beyond sectoral regulation, the Jan Vishwas exercise also seeks to make laws more citizen-centric by easing certain everyday compliance requirements. Amendments have been proposed to nearly 45 provisions of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988.

Similarly, amendments to the Railways Act, 1989 introduce a conditional decriminalisation framework. Offenders are first given the opportunity to settle violations by paying a prescribed penalty. Criminal consequences, including imprisonment or fines, arise only if the penalty order is not complied with. Offences such as travelling without a valid ticket, unauthorised occupation of berths, and hawking goods without authorisation fall within this framework.

Changes proposed to the Metro Railways (Operation and Maintenance) Act, 2002 follow a similar approach. Activities such as causing nuisance while intoxicated, conducting demonstrations, unauthorised sale of goods within metro premises, or defacing public notices are pro-

posed to be treated as civil violations attracting monetary penalties. In cases where imprisonment is warranted, extreme punishments such as life imprisonment have been rationalised.

While the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2026 is an ambitious and necessary reform, its scale raises important questions. The framework guiding which offences are decriminalised remains largely unclear, risking an ad hoc approach driven by administrative discretion rather than consistent principles.

This inconsistency is also visible in the design of penalties. While some statutes include clear timelines and consequences for delay, others do not, weakening the overall coherence of the reform.

Equally, assessing success remains a challenge. Goals such as improving the 'ease of doing business' and 'ease of living' require measurable benchmarks. Without these, it will be difficult to evaluate impact or determine the need for course correction.

Ultimately, the success of the Jan Vishwas initiative will depend not just on the number of provisions amended, but on the clarity of its guiding principles and the rigour with which its outcomes are implemented and assessed.

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Where it is a duty to worship the sun, it is pretty sure to be a crime to examine the laws of heat

-JOHN MORLEY

Woods & Shoulds

Forest fires are getting worse in India. It's time to get serious about decarbonisation

Sunday and Monday were infernally hot. Indian cities took the top 95 positions for day temperatures. And the hills promised no respite. They were hot, too, and burning. Reports of forest fires from Uttarakhand and Tamil Nadu made Page 1 yesterday. Nothing unusual there – it's India's annual 12-week wildfire season after all. But satellite images showed 13,771 large fires across Indian forests by Monday, which is more than the average for past 15 summers. And it fits into a global trend of worsening wildfire seasons.

Across the world, forest fires are starting earlier and lasting longer, for three main reasons. One, rising temperatures, especially at night; two, less rain; three, early melting of snow. In India, the snow factor only applies to northern mountains, but the other two are experienced everywhere. For example, while our attention is riveted to fires in scenic Kumaon and Nilgiris, Gujarat and Bihar have had the most forest fires in the past four weeks.

Now, forest fires are "normal". They occurred before humans – friction caused by wind in dry weather, and lightning, caused massive fires. What's abnormal about today's fires is the warmer climate we have created, which makes starting and sustaining a fire easier. Studies show forest fires now burn twice as much tree cover as they did 20 years ago. And they add even more carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, making Earth toastier. While burning of fossil fuels releases 37bn tonnes of CO₂ annually, forest fires can add another 8bn tonnes, or 20% more. Plus, loss of trees reduces capacity to pull CO₂ out of the air. In 2024, the world lost 13.5mn hectares of forest cover – more than the area of Greece.

Long story short, to save forests, the world needs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions fast. That means, burning less fossil fuels. Easier said than done when temperatures and incomes are rising. AACs account for about 7% of India's power demand, when fewer than 10% of Indians use them. What will happen as AC and car ownership shoot up in the world's largest population? It depends on our will to decarbonise. On Saturday, when India's energy demand made a new record, solar energy met 22% of it. We have enough installed capacity to raise this to 50% or even 60%. But the planet won't cool in a day. We still have to fight forest fires with planning, community-based forest management, and remote sensing. There's no substitute for boots on the ground.

Docs Who Won't Listen

Medical boards have become a hostile barrier to women's reproductive rights

On paper, Indian women have a sympathetic law to access abortion. In practice, it is a permission slip that the medical establishment frequently refuses to sign, often persuading courts to also follow its lead. But on Friday, Supreme Court really called out such overreach, by AIIMS no less. The bench of Justices Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan underlined that neither the absence of foetal abnormality nor the passage of time, negate a pregnant woman's right to terminate her pregnancy. These are, actually, arguments used to deny women's autonomy, as commonly as wrongly.

But if doctors can use such arguments to block a woman's exercise of autonomy, it's because the law doesn't empower her to speak an abortion simply on the basis of deciding what's best for her. While one medical practitioner must support her decision for a pregnancy up to 20 weeks, two are needed between 20-24 weeks, and beyond this, she must be supported by a specialised medical board. As in the above case, this support is often denied on the basis of foetal viability, a legal concept imported wholesale from American anti-abortion jurisprudence. But this is only one of the many faces of medical stonewalling. A 27-year-old married mother of two pleading mental health, a 20-year-old female NEET aspirant pleading career, a 15-year-old rape survivor... The only thing common to all the women who are being denied access to abortion, is that they are women, Indian women.

Of course, she will fight on. Because she can't just surrender control of her own body, inseparable from her mind. Even if that means a strange situation, where the courthouse, not the clinic, seems to have become the primary venue for reproductive health. The only way to escape this abnormal condition is to properly hand over the right to abortion to women. Right now, it very much vests with doctors instead.

Questionable democracy

How much govt do we need to have, to govern us properly?

Jug Suraiya



Democracy is always a question mark, often an exclamation point, but never a full stop because democracy's work is never done. Democracy constantly reinvents itself, and India's democracy, the largest in the world, is working overtime to reinvent itself, in an exercise that has raised more question marks than there are quills on an agitated porcupine.

The question that our democracy is asking itself is whether it is democratic enough in the size of the govt to implement its day-to-day working, the govt that the electorate votes into office.

As the size of our electorate has increased, to reflect this increase, should the size of our govt also increase proportionately? The exercise, called delimitation, is proposing to establish what the limits of democracy are, or ought to be. Does a numerically bigger govt mean more democracy, or less? Is democracy subject to the laws of mathematics, or simple arithmetic?

It might well seem so. A polity of a million people with just one person to govern the whole lot of them would not be democracy, but a monarchy or dictatorship. However, a polity of one million people in which all the one million deem themselves to be rulers, would stretch the definition of democracy as a govt of the people, by the people, and for the people, to make it indistinguishable from anarchy, in which everyone's a ruler and no one is ruled.

Like Goldilocks, democracy needs to find a chair that is not too small, not too big, but just the right size to seat itself in. This is easier said than done. Unlike Goldilocks, democracy requires not a chair but a multiplicity of chairs, which make up the sitting room, called Parliament. Is the current size of our Parliament democratic enough for democracy, or does the calculus of democracy require more?

Yes it does, say proponents of delimitation. No, say those who think delimitation is de limit. With electoral scales hanging in the balance in four states and a Union territory, delimitation adds another question to the endless question marks of democracy.

What Bengal's Saying Today

Anti-incumbency against Trinamool is high, but BJP'll still find it tough. Four reasons: disconnect with Bengali 'culture', immigration isn't a big issue, anger over SIR, GOI blamed for 'discontinuing' rural jobs scheme

Neeraj Kaushal



Mamata Banerjee's record as chief minister of Bengal has been a mixed bag. After 15 years at the helm, her party faces strong anti-incumbency. Yet, for the BJP, the principal opposition party in the state, the task of unseating her govt remains an uphill battle. Here's why.

Illegal, who? First, BJP's primary goals for the state do not reflect the concerns of people of Bengal. Its two topmost campaign promises are to tighten border security, and curb illegal border crossings from Bangladesh. These may have resonated with Hindu nationalists across the country in the national elections but are not major concerns of Bengali voters in the state assembly election.

That is an important insight gained from statewide field visits. Voters I interviewed reported no direct contact with illegal migrants. Many had never met an illegal migrant. One young man in Murshidabad said that he had met Hindu migrants from Bangladesh but no "ghuspetiyas" (Amrit Shah's contemptuous phrase for Muslim immigrants who've crossed over illegally). Statisticians will tell you that a few anecdotes like these do not constitute conclusive proof. True, but the lack of public alarm one found on a field trip suggests BJP faces an uphill task.

Infiltration of Bangladeshi Muslims may be a serious concern in Bellur, but Bengali voters are not shaking with fear that infiltration from Bangladesh will change the state's demography. They simply want good jobs and a vibrant economy that delivers these jobs, an issue on which neither party has devoted much time in their campaigns.

SIRed & shaken Second, the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, and cancellation of 90L voters, have generated anxiety and resentment among large sections of the electorate. Routine revision of voters' list is essential to exclude duplicates, the dead, and missing individuals. Yet, the exercise in West Bengal has created existential fear among voters and Election

Commission has lost all credibility with voters, both Hindu and Muslim.

Migrant workers from the state are returning to vote to ensure their names remain on the rolls – they fear a failure to vote may become an excuse to deny them citizenship. Many politicians across the spectrum doubt if the SIR issue will all determine the election. However, BJP hopes Muslim voters will get divided between TMC, Congress and Left Front. But the fears stoked by the SIR issue may consolidate Muslim votes behind TMC.

If BJP were to win in Bengal, "They will not let you eat fish, meat or even eggs. You will not be able to speak in Bengali. If you do, they will call you Bangladeshi," she warned in her campaign speeches.

BJP has struggled to put up a serious defence against Mamata's allegations. Having passed a series of regulatory directives on meat shops and restaurants in BJP-run Delhi, UP and Bihar, BJP is in a dilemma as to how to deny TMC's allegations.

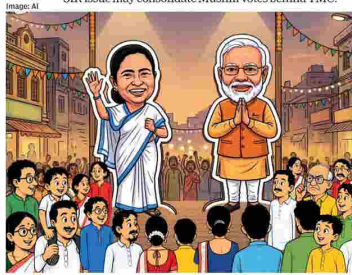
The easiest response is to laugh them off, as Himanta Biswa Sarma, Assam CM and an active campaigner for BJP in north Bengal, did. In a campaign speech, he invited Mamata to a meat-eating contest and challenged that he can eat two kilos more of meat than the TMC chief. Some in the audience laughed, but others sneered at the shallowness of his tirade.

Jobs, jobs, jobs Finally, Mamata's campaign slogan "bodol'noy, bodla'chai" (not change, but revenge) has resonated with voters deprived of benefits under centrally sponsored schemes such as NREGS and PM Awas Yojana that Centre has cancelled in Bengal.

Since March 2022, Bengal has not received funds for NREG, following Centre's allegation of widespread corruption, financial irregularities, and non-compliance with central directives. While these allegations may not be entirely untrue, similar irregularities did not lead to cancellation of funds in other states. The cancellation in Bengal was, thus, seen as reeking of political vendetta.

NREG provided a constitutional guarantee of 100 days of employment a year to one person per family. But when Centre stopped releasing NREG funds, over 1.2cr holders of jobs cards lost jobs. Studies show that this has led to large-scale migration from rural to urban areas, as well as to other states. Families that were approved to receive funds under PM Awas Yojana have not received the funds. Voters who have lost the approved funds for PM Awas Yojana, or have lost jobs assured under NREG, are angry.

Anger is a stronger emotion than hope for change. And that is what will determine the outcome of the assembly election.



That non-Bengali challenge Third, Hindi-speaking politicians from outside the state have led the BJP campaign, reinforcing perceptions that the party is an outside force more than homegrown. Compounding these perceptions is the party's failure to project a credible Bengali chief ministerial candidate.

BJP claims the party strategy has long been not to name a CM-to-be in state elections. Yet, it adds to BJP's difficulties in projecting itself as a Bengali party.

Mamata has also taken advantage of BJP's inability to bond with Bengali voters. She has made the election a battle to save Bengali identity. In her speeches, she points at the attitudes and practices of local BJP netas in the Hindi-belt as a marker for what would happen

POLLS 2026

Bengal, TN, Assam, Kerala

With Thorium, India Will Be In Its Element

Washington isn't interested in being a guarantor of anything, including energy supplies. New Delhi's strategic response must centre around the one energy source it has in abundance

Swarnadeep Homroy



Prof of Finance, Unit of Economics, Netherlands

War in West Asia has, once again, exposed the fragility of India's energy security. Nearly 30% of its crude oil is imported, and close to half originates in the Gulf. The standoff in Strait of Hormuz has rippled through the economy, compounded by rising oil prices, inflation, scorching heat, and temperatures. As the crisis drags on, structural lessons are coming into focus: West's use of energy security as a tool of statecraft has entered a new phase where political alliances are largely redundant.

Since the Russia-Ukraine war, India has managed this vulnerability with considerable pragmatism, buying large volumes of discounted Russian crude that Western countries chose not to import directly. By 2024, Russia had become India's largest oil supplier.

This was celebrated as strategic autonomy. In reality, it operated within a system whose rules are still largely shaped by Western institutions. Washington tolerated these purchases for pragmatic reasons. The arrangement keeps Russian crude flowing into global markets, preventing a damaging oil price spike.

Rules of the trade remain governed by Western shipping, insurance, and financial networks, preserving American leverage over every barrel. India's access to Russian oil does not reflect geopolitical freedom, but participation in a managed energy system whose architecture it cannot yet shape.

When Washington imposed tariffs on Indian exports, partly related to the continued purchases of Russian crude, New Delhi had to adjust its import mix, accepting costlier energy inputs. The use of multiple policy instruments to control global energy flows, is now an unmistakable American priority.

India is not the first country to face this recalibration. For decades, cheap Russian pipeline gas underwrote Europe's industrial competitiveness, particularly Germany's. When that supply collapsed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, American oil filled the gap, but at a structural cost. By 2025, US had become Europe's

dominant supplier. In July of that year, EU signed a \$750bn energy purchase agreement, stabilising supplies, but tying the continent's energy future to Washington more tightly than at any point in history.

The dependence extended beyond fuel. Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, channelled hundreds of billions of dollars in subsidies to clean energy manufacturing, on the condition that production take place in US. Volkswagen, Siemens, and BASF began shifting investment across the Atlantic, while thyssenkrupp closed European facilities. What began as an energy emergency had become an industrial migration.

In Washington, there is bipartisan consensus to

emerged under the pressure of crisis. India's deal emerged under the pressure of tariffs. The circumstances differ, but in both cases, they lead to a greater dependence on US. This dependence is manageable only as long as American commitments remain credible. But Iran war has exposed the fragility of American security guarantees. Much as Britain's standing as a global power collapsed after the Suez crisis, the credibility of American security guarantees is likely to be reassessed.

The current energy crisis has led us into this emerging order – one in which energy and industrial policies are no longer separable from foreign policy, and strategic supply chains cannot be left entirely to global markets. India's tradition of strategic multilateralism, may prove to be exactly the capability the next phase of globalisation demands. But political multilateralism needs to be paired with an accelerated push towards energy sovereignty.

While the world's attention was fixated on Hormuz, and diplomatic manoeuvring in Islamabad, India's thorium programme is approaching a developmental milestone on April 6. With the world's largest deposits in India, thorium offers something no Gulf relationship or trade deal can: domestic energy at scale, and immunity to geopolitical disruption. Renewable energy generation has also expanded rapidly, and the opening up of the nuclear sector to private participation may expand nuclear power in coming decades.

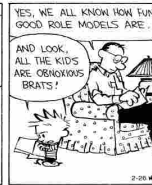
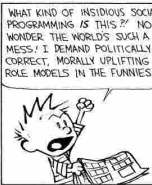
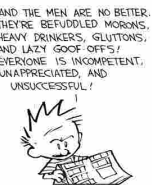
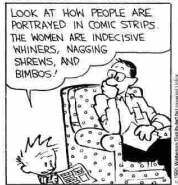
But breeder and thorium systems are capital-intensive, slow to commercialise. They won't deliver near-term power at a cost that competes easily with renewables, gas, conventional reactors. In the interim, India must navigate the multi-polar geopolitics of energy.

This demands a foreign policy that is more institutionalised and less reactive. India's energy relationships have historically been managed episodically, rather than by a long-term strategy to diversify sources and build leverage.

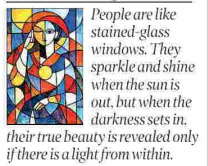
India does have a head start: its multilateral traditions, diplomatic reach across competing blocs, and now a credible path to domestic energy at scale. But converting that position into a durable advantage will require stronger institutions to private class willing to think in decades, rather than electoral cycles.



Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



People are like stained-glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Changing Gears: Move At What Suits You Best

Rajashree Birla

Recently one has been reading a lot about student shootings. A student running amok, gunning down innocent lives mindlessly and then fleeing on his own. Largely overseas. In India, at many institutes of technology, you hear of students committing suicide. One feels so concerned. The highly competitive cutthroat environment is a blame factor, along with problems of the mind among many. Parents can help stem the situation to an extent.

Children are the greatest gift of God and undeniably the greatest blessing for all parents. True that parenting today is extremely challenging, with both parents busy with their jobs. The sheer competitiveness that you see among children and more so in parents is alarming. Somewhere, the fabric of our society needs to be retextured. Instead of always being in the fastest forward gear, move at what suits you best.

There is need for greater emotional bonding between parents and children, on working with a warm heart, a cool head, a strong sense of values and a firm hand on discipline. Parents are the most important teachers, who should never succumb to a culture of indulgence. Not long ago, when small affordable cars started dotting the roads of Mumbai, a dear friend gifted her granddaughter one of those vehicles. To her utter surprise, the teenager said she couldn't drive the car. Why? Because children are the greatest gift of God and undeniably the greatest blessing for all parents. True that parenting today is extremely challenging, with both parents busy with their jobs. The sheer competitiveness that you see among children and more so in parents is alarming. Somewhere, the fabric of our society needs to be retextured. Instead of always being in the fastest forward gear, move at what suits you best.

deeds are our monuments and every turn in life's journey. Recent Khalil Gibran's seminal book, *The Prophet*: "Your children are not your children... You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls. For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow". My husband, Adityaji, and I had read *The Prophet* many moons ago side by side. Both of us then made a pact that this piece of sage advice would always be on our radar as we raise our children. We believed that parenting meant nurturing, giving unconditional love and support, imbuing values and giving them wings, of course, a good education. We felt that if these were in place, children would grow up to be good,

responsible human beings. Let me give you a shining example that all will relate to easily. The example of God of Indian faith, Sachin Tendulkar. His natural talent was discovered by his father when Sachin was seven years old. He was groomed by his coach, Ramakant Achrekar. Sachin's brother would always go with Sachin. It is of family structure and teacher support that, by Sachin's own admission, provided the bedrock of his cricketer career.

The point that one wishes to drive home is that if we mould children right from the start to give of their very best, and then to think of success as incidental, have no aggression in thought or deed, pursue their path and have a mind of their own with discipline as a process of learning and growing, enjoying each day as it comes, life would be different. No aberrations as shootings or suicides. The writer is chairperson, Aditya Birla Centre for Community Initiatives and Rural Development



THE SPEAKING TREE

Opinion

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29, 2026

Trade travails

FTA drive may help, but policymakers shouldn't lose sight of India's reducing global competitiveness

INDIA HAS JUST clinched yet another free trade agreement (FTA), this time with New Zealand. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on the occasion that after the soon-to-be-signed deals with the European Union and the US, the country would have entered into as many as nine bilateral trade agreements covering 38 advanced economies in six years. These countries together account for nearly two-thirds of global trade, and 65-70% of global GDP. The FTAs and the post-2021 focus on deals with developed countries draws on the belief that no country has ever become developed without actively engaging with the rest of the world. With such a flurry of FTAs, India is rapidly expanding trade via the preferential route, as opposed to the regular most-favoured nation stream, which is under a cloud owing to the US's blatant assault on rule-based international trade. Over 60% of India's imports could flow through the preferential route in a couple of years, up from less than a quarter now.

The grim reality, however, is that what sets the context for these FTAs is India's dismal export performance. At \$442 billion, India's merchandise exports in FY26 were lower than the high of \$450.5 billion registered in FY23. Outward goods shipments barely grew in the three years through FY26. That the slump was not singularly due to subdued world trade is clear from the fact that the current US dollar value of world merchandise trade, as measured by exports, was \$26.26 trillion in 2025, up 7% on-year. Goods trade volume expanded 4.6% in 2025, exceeding world GDP growth of 2.9%. Not only could India not match the global average, it also witnessed a virtual export contraction through the last four years.

Export values have shrunk more sharply in traditional labour-intensive sectors—gems and jewellery shipments declined for four years in a row through FY26, with an average annual fall of 7.8%; ready-made garment exports fell for three straight years through FY26, with an average annual contraction of 7.3%. What India appears to have done well in recent years is electronics exports with an average annual growth of 3.2% since FY22, but the import content is quite large in this segment. In the decade through FY25, India's services exports grew by an average annual rate of 10.3%, but the growth slowed to 7.9% in FY26, which is slightly below the global average. India's share in global services exports is around 4.3% now, much higher than below 2% two decades ago. But further acceleration hinges on graduating into high-value services.

A fast-growing economy like ours should typically gain from transacting with the external world. Instead, India's foreign trade is currently detracting from its gross value added. With the World Trade Organization predicting that global merchandise trade volume growth could drop to 1.9% in 2026 due to the West Asia conflict, the short-term prospects aren't any brighter. The point is that the structural weakness of the economy is as much to blame for the subdued trend in the country's foreign trade as the global headwinds. A look at the granular data will reveal that the country's export competitiveness has actually declined in recent years. To a certain extent, exporters have managed to offset this with quick market diversification. However, for India to benefit from the China Plus One supply chain strategy, rising labour costs must be offset by overall productivity gains. There is also an urgent need to redouble efforts to control logistics costs.

CONSOLIDATING TWO REGULATORY regimes into one is the easy part. The harder task is to do so without quietly expanding the reach of either. The International Financial Services Centres Authority's (IFSCA) draft Prohibition of Market Abuse in Securities Markets Regulations, 2026, released for public comments on March 6, attempts consolidation. It proposes to replace the SEBI (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations, 2015, and the SEBI (Prohibition of Fraudulent and Unfair Trade Practices Relating to Securities Market) Regulations, 2003, (PFUTP regulations) as they apply in the IFSC, folding insider trading and market fraud into a single instrument.

Presently, in the IFSC, the PIT regulations govern the use of unpublished price-sensitive information (UPS)—information pertaining to a listed entity that is not generally available but which, if made available, would materially affect the price of that entity's securities. Persons who in the preceding six months have been associated with a company in a capacity that would allow them access to UPS are considered "connected persons". Both connected persons and persons who actually possess UPS are considered "insiders".

Insiders are prohibited from communicating, procuring, providing, or allowing access to any UPS, except in furtherance of legitimate purposes, performance of duties, or discharge of legal obligations. They are also prohibited from trading while in possession of UPS save in a narrow range of specified cases. Listed entities, intermediaries, and fiduciaries are required to formulate their own codes of conduct under the PIT regulations. This framework has been largely contained in the draft regulations, though the term "material non-public information" (MNPI) is used instead of UPS.

The draft regulations, however, do not prescribe minimum standards for the code of conduct, unlike the PIT regula-



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Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh

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IFSCA DRAFT RULES

INSIDER TRADING & MARKET FRAUD IN ONE INSTRUMENT IS FINE, BUT MARKET ABUSE REGULATION LIVES IN ITS EDGES

Consolidate, don't overreach

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing Partner, Finesc Law Advisors



tions, leaving such standards to be specified later by the IFSCA. This is significant as under the PIT regulations, the code of conduct applies to designated persons (DPS)—those designated by the organisation based on their actual or potential access to UPS. This typically includes promoters, executive directors, and senior personnel. DPS are subject to higher compliance requirements than other insiders, including obtaining pre-clearance of trades from the compliance officer.

Under the draft regulations, unless the same is reintroduced in the code of conduct standards specified by the IFSCA, there may be a move away from the DP framework altogether.

Under the PIT regulations, disclosures (on a continuing basis) are required from promoters, members of the promoter group, directors, designated persons, and their immediate relatives where trades exceed ₹1 lakh in a calendar quarter, with onward disclosure by the company to the stock exchange. Under the draft regulations, the threshold is set at \$25 million and the obligation is extended to all insiders, making such disclosures mandatory rather than discretionary. This raises concerns, as a strict interpretation would require any person dealing in listed securities to assess whether they qualify as an insider even without MNPI. If implemented, this should be accompanied by an obligation on listed entities to identify and notify insiders of their responsibilities.

Separately, the PIT regulations enable an informant to voluntarily disclose information pertaining to insider trading violations to SEBI. Such an informant is protected from retaliation and victimisation, and is eligible for a reward based on the usefulness of the information. This informant mechanism no longer appears in the draft regulations. However, it ought to be revamped, strengthened, and extended across the IFSCA's regulatory framework rather than discarded as it has often led to successful enforcement proceedings.

The PFUTP regulations prohibit any person from engaging in four categories of acts in connection with securities—dealing in a fraudulent manner; employing manipulative or deceptive devices in contravention of securities laws; employing any device, scheme, or artifice to defraud; and engaging in any act, practice, or course of business that operates or would operate as fraud or deceit. This prohibition is continued in the draft regulations.

The PFUTP regulations list some practices as manipulative or fraudulent, largely covering common-sense prohibitions that are retained in the draft regulations. However, some additions raise concern. For instance, the draft treats "cornering of securities to gain control with a view to establish artificial demand or price" as fraudulent. Given that "artificial" is undefined, this could risk misapplication to legitimate large or algorithmic trading sit-

uations based on bona fide market views. Similarly, the draft treats "short sell securities in the hope of driving the price down" as fraudulent. However, short selling reflects a legitimate market view and contributes to price discovery. This and similar provisions risk oversteering the market abuse framework into areas better addressed through risk controls. While market integrity is important, not every market impact should be deemed fraudulent. Given the seriousness of such a charge, it must be defined narrowly and not capture legitimate trading practices.

The draft regulations also set out defences to charges of market manipulation and insider trading, broadly in two categories. First, a person may show they made reasonable inquiries and relied on credible information, which is a fair protection for bona fide conduct. But this defence should ideally be limited to fraudulent or manipulative practices and not extend to insider trading. Second, a person may argue that their actions were part of legitimate activities such as underwriting, market making, or price stabilisation. While appropriate, these should preferably be excluded from the definition of offences itself, rather than treated as defences to be proved.

The draft regulations are a welcome step. Consolidating insider trading and market fraud into one instrument is overdue, and much of what the draft proposes is sound. But market abuse regulation lives in its edges, in how widely the net is cast and how narrowly the defences are drawn. Cornering and short selling are not frauds because a regulator says so, and the DP framework is not a detail to be left to later rule-making. The IFSCA should revisit these before the draft is finalised. A consolidated regime is worth having. A consolidated regime that overreaches is not.

Views are personal

Co-authored with Ankur Singh Chauran and Ritshabh Jain, Associates, Finesc Law Advisors

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EU test: Converting access to market share

OpenAI needs jury's help as it sheds baggage

IN ATTEMPTING TO find a jury in the case of Musk v. Altman, US District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers chose to widen the pool of potential candidates for selection. That figures: To many Californians, being asked to side with either Elon Musk or Sam Altman is like deciding between getting a slap in the face or a knee to the groin.

But decide they must, and their decision will have profound consequences for OpenAI and the broader artificial intelligence landscape. Altman is accused of illegally converting OpenAI from non-profit to for-profit. Musk is demanding that the structure be reverted, that Altman and OpenAI President Greg Brockman be removed as executive officers and that the company pay him \$134 billion in damages—funds he said he would donate to the reformed non-profit.

The stakes for OpenAI are existential at worst and a serious burden at best as it seeks to go public. In preparation, the company has taken speed to the next level—embarking on a culling of "side quests" like the video creator Sora, ending some science research and even putting on hold its plans for an erotic version of ChatGPT. All this comes as the competitive landscape for AI tools intensifies and OpenAI's early lead due to ChatGPT risks being further chipped away. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Tuesday that OpenAI has missed internal targets for user and revenue growth.

A day earlier, it was able to loosen the shackles of its deal with Microsoft that had long turned sour. OpenAI can now work with other cloud-computing firms to get the power it needs to keep expanding and gain much-needed enterprise customers. The deal between Microsoft and OpenAI, which had been seen as a significant boon for both firms just a couple of years ago, had risked turning ugly: Microsoft had considered suing at one point, according to a report.

But while these baggage-shedding moves improve OpenAI's IPO prospects, they will hardly matter if the ChatGPT maker comes worse off in this nasty spat with Musk. *Bloomberg Intelligence* puts the chances of OpenAI losing at 60%. If the jury sides with Musk, it will, at the very least, greatly slow down OpenAI's progress towards the public markets, even if the company can eventually win on appeal. If that fails, it's hard to see how a non-profit OpenAI would be able to attract the necessary funding to continue its current massive loss-making operations.

Both Altman and Brockman were in attendance for jury selection on Monday. We're expecting to see them again on the stand, along with other cast members from the OpenAI soap opera that has played out over the past few years. Former Altman colleagues like Mira Murati and Ilya Sutskever—who left in the wake of the failed ousting of Altman in late 2023—are expected to appear. On the eve of jury selection, OpenAI published some updated "principles" on making sure the technology it makes is democratised and does not further concentrate power in the hands of a few technology companies. Despite being valued at \$85.2 billion, OpenAI can attempt to convince jurors that it upstages the likes of Amazon, Alphabet, and Meta Platforms—valued in the trillions—it is a relative minnow, an independent AI company to root for.

That would be an extremely tough sell to a California jury were it not for the fact Altman's opponent is Musk. Core to Altman's defence will be questioning Musk's true motive: Is he looking out for the good of humanity and AI or seeking to protect his own effort, xAI, which is trailing OpenAI and other AI players in both sophistication and market share? "This lawsuit has always been a baseless and jealous bid to derail a competitor," OpenAI posted on X this week.

That derailing has arguably already had the desired effect. Musk can claim to be a winner even if he ultimately loses the case. Slowly OpenAI down, complicating its chances to raise more capital, is a victory for him. SpaceX, which is now the parent of xAI, is almost certain to go public before OpenAI and enjoy a boost from investors eager to buy into new AI stocks. That makes this case little more than a business expense for Musk: a few days in court where yet more damaging internal drama adds to a rival will become public. For Altman and his company, the costs could be far, far greater.



NEERAJ BANSAL

Partner and Head-India Global, KPMG in India

THE INDIA-EU FREE trade agreement (FTA) lands at a time when global trade is being redrawn by geopolitics, supply chain shifts, and a push for resilience. This is more than just another tariff deal. It is a strategic bet to plug India into advanced value chains. The agreement opens access to a market of nearly two billion consumers and about \$24 trillion in economic output. The scale is unprecedented. The question is how Indian firms can translate access into share.

From access to competitiveness

India's share in EU imports remains around 1-3%. That is its real baseline. The FTA addresses access preferential entry across roughly 97% of EU tariff lines covering nearly 99% of trade value. While this strengthens India's position, we need to continue working on enhancing our competitiveness by effectively evolving our domestic capabilities.

For labour-intensive sectors like textiles, leather, gems and jewellery, and marine products, tariff removal offers immediate price advantage. Sustaining momentum will require aligning with the evolving expectations of the EU market. Access opened the door. What happens next depends on how India walks through it. The FTA, thus, is less about incremental export gains and more about correcting a structural gap in India's presence in one of the world's most sophisticated markets.

From tariffs to value chains

The real shift lies beyond tariff cuts.

The agreement enables Indian firms to integrate into European value chains, where scale, quality, and reliability matter more than cost alone.

The opportunity pools are large. Chemicals alone represent a \$500 billion import market in the EU, while textiles and apparel account for over \$260 billion. While market entry is guaranteed, market retention will depend on meeting evolving demand and moving up the value chain. This is where targeted action can make a difference. Investing in product innovation, building partnerships with European firms, and developing sector-specific clusters can help Indian companies anchor themselves.

Services add a second engine. Access to 144 EU services sub-sectors, combined with a mobility framework, strengthens India's position in business, technology, and professional services. This dual play across goods and services gives the FTAs strategic depth.

Imports have the ability to shape competitiveness

The FTA is not a one-way export story. Phased duty reductions on advanced machinery, medical equipment, and aircraft parts will lower input costs and accelerate technology adoption.

This matters. Competitiveness in global trade is increasingly driven by the

quality of inputs and integration with global supply chains. Lower-cost access to European technology can help Indian manufacturing move up the value curve.

A trade deal with strategic layers

What sets this agreement apart is its non-trade architecture. Cooperation spans security, defence, clean energy, critical technologies, and intellectual property.

Technology partnerships in areas such as AI and semiconductors, alongside climate collaboration, indicate this is designed as a long-term economic partnership. Regulatory alignment and stronger IP protection further improve investor confidence and reduce friction.

This is closer to a strategic compact than a traditional FTA.

Compliance will differentiate outcomes

If tariffs were the barrier of the past, regulation will define the future. EU frameworks such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and deforestation-linked rules will directly shape export viability. This shift is not just about meeting standards but about embedding them in early product design and sourcing decisions.

Execution will determine outcomes. Rules of origin, quality standards, certification systems, and supply chain traceability are no longer compliance checkboxes but market-entry conditions. For Indian exporters, the shift is clear: from cost arbitrage to standards-led competitiveness.

Bridging readiness to real scale

Policy access must now translate into commercial scale. This requires investment in compliance systems, sustainability practices, and workforce skills.

What becomes critical now is building shared infrastructure—common testing facilities, digital traceability platforms, and sector-led compliance frameworks—to reduce the burden on individual firms. MSMEs, in particular, will need support to align with EU standards while maintaining cost competitiveness. Targeted financing, capacity-building programmes, and industry-government coordination can help accelerate this transition. These steps can help ensure complete utilisation of tariff liberalisation benefits.

A strategic inflection point

The India-EU FTA is more than a trade agreement. It's a platform to reposition India within global value chains and deepen engagement with advanced economies.

While that scale is guaranteed, we must continue enhancing our competitiveness. The next step is to ensure the Indian industry moves fast enough, on standards, on technology, and on execution to match the opportunity this agreement creates.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Manufacturing push

Apropos of "Make-in-India mirage" (FE, April 28), the call for greater domestic manufacturing cannot succeed by exhortation alone. India's industrial share in GDP has stagnated because deep supply-side constraints remain unresolved. Logistics bottlenecks, fragmented transport networks, and weak supplier ecosystems limit capacity, while high-tech sectors like semi-

conductors demand far more than slogans. Private investment will not flow unless infrastructure, skills, and policy coordination create confidence. Import substitution without capability-building risks repeating past failures. The real challenge is to transform ambition into resilience by strengthening foundations, not chasing targets. Manufacturing must be built on efficiency, innovation, and trust in systems. —Babu Krishna, Bangalore

Beyond encouragement

To truly realise the vision of robust domestic manufacturing, policy support must go beyond encouragement. It requires consistent reforms in infrastructure, ease of doing business, skill development, and affordable capital. We are competing with China and Vietnam, which not only have cost benefits over Indian firms but also streamlined processes. We need to

lower costs of production by reducing logistics and energy costs and ease compliance burdens. Most MSMEs struggle to adopt automation and innovation at scale. Sustained efforts in R&D will bring us up at par with global standards. And the government and Indian Inc have to work together to address deeprooted challenges. —Bal Govind, Noida

Write to us at fletters@expressindia.com

Saying goodbye to pacifism

SANTHOSH MATHEW

A nation that once renounced war now stands at the edge of rewriting its identity. Japan, shaped by the ashes of World War II, based its global reputation on peace, restraint, and constitutional idealism. Today, that foundation is shifting. The winds of change blowing through Tokyo signal more than a policy adjustment. They point to a historic turning point that could redefine Asia's security landscape.

Japan's Parliament, the Diet, has moved closer to approving changes to its pacifist Constitution. Both chambers - the House of Councillors and the House of Representatives - support the move. Public sentiment tells a different story. Surveys conducted by Kyodo News reveal that nearly 80 per cent of Japanese citizens oppose amending the Constitution. A deep divide has emerged between the political leadership and the people.

At the centre of this debate stands Article 9, a clause born out of unimaginable destruction. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced Japan into a moral reckoning. The Constitution that followed rejected war as a sovereign right and ruled out the maintenance of military forces for combat. Article 9 became a symbol of hope in a war-torn world.

Japan's strategic environment has transformed rapidly. The rise of China as a global power has altered regional dynamics. Maritime disputes in the South China Sea continue to intensify. North Korea keeps the region on edge with missile developments. These realities shape the arguments of those calling for constitutional revision.

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and her allies present a clear case. They argue that Japan must build



stronger defense capabilities to protect its sovereignty and contribute to regional stability. Their vision includes transforming Japan's Self-Defense Forces into a more conventional military. The language of deterrence now replaces the language of restraint.

A stronger Japanese military presence could trigger an arms race across East and Southeast Asia. Joint military exercises involving Japan, the United States, and the Philippines near Luzon highlight a growing security alignment. The Indo-Pacific region begins to resemble a high-stakes arena where alliances deepen and rivalries sharpen. The phrase "roller coaster relations" captures the uncertainty shaping the region.

Economic factors add another layer to this transformation. Japan once dominated the global economy. In 1994, it accounted for 17.8 per cent of global GDP. That share now stands near 3.4 per cent. China, in contrast, has surged to nearly 19 per cent. This dramatic shift fuels concerns about national decline and global influence.

Inside Japan, structural challenges continue to mount. The country faces an aging population and a declining birth rate of around 1.2. Public debt exceeds 200 per cent of GDP. Industries struggle to maintain growth. These pressures shape the national mood. Increased defense spending, now nearing 2 per cent of GDP, places additional strain on public finances. Budget cuts in healthcare, education, and welfare have sparked protests across the country.

The alliance with the United States plays a decisive role in Japan's strategic thinking. Washington views a stronger Japan as vital to maintaining balance in the Indo-Pacific. Military cooperation between the two nations continues to expand. American bases across Japan, including those in Okinawa, form a critical part of this partnership. This relationship shapes Japan's evolving defense posture.

A more capable Japanese military supports broader efforts to counterbalance China's growing influence. The Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States depends on

reliable regional partners. Japan fits that role with its technological strength and strategic location. The devastation caused by nuclear warfare left scars that have not faded. More than 300,000 people lost their lives in the atomic bombings. Survivors, known as Hibakusha, endured decades of suffering due to radiation exposure. Their stories continue to serve as powerful reminders of war's human cost. The global movement for nuclear disarmament drew inspiration from Japan's experience.

Thinkers such as Bertrand Russell and scientists like J. Robert Oppenheimer reflected deeply on the consequences of atomic weapons. Oppenheimer's recollection of a verse from the Bhagavad Gita during the first nuclear test captured the enormity of that moment.

The decision to allow arms exports marks a significant policy shift. Advanced military equipment, including warships, fighter jets, drones, and missiles, will now be supplied to partner nations. Seventeen countries stand to benefit from these exports in the initial phase.

This move reflects Japan's willingness to play a more active role in global security. Countries aligned with Japan welcome its new approach. The Quad grouping - comprising the United States, India, Australia, and Japan - views this shift as strengthening regional stability. China and North Korea interpret it as a sign of containment and respond with caution.

Southeast Asia emerges as a potential flashpoint. Territorial disputes, maritime tensions, and military build-ups converge in this region. Japan's growing involvement could influence the balance of power. The next theatre of war may well take shape in these contested waters. One path preserves the spirit of Article 9 and the moral authority it represents. The other embraces a more assertive role in global security. Both paths carry risks and opportunities.

The choices made in Tokyo will resonate far beyond its borders. The idea of a "frozen peace" no longer holds. The calm that defined East Asia for decades has shifted. Strategic competition intensifies. Military preparedness gains importance. Diplomatic engagement continues, though under increasing strain. The end of Article 9 will mark more than a constitutional change. It will signal the transformation of Japan from a pacifist state into a proactive security player.

This transition will reshape alliances, redefine regional dynamics, and influence global stability. A nation that once chose peace above all now prepares to navigate a world where power and security dominate the conversation. The story of Japan enters a new chapter - one filled with uncertainty, ambition, and far-reaching consequences.

(The writer is Professor, Centre for South Asian Studies, Pondicherry Central University.)

100 Years Ago

OCCASIONAL NOTE

The best that can be said of the coal dispute is that everyone is determinedly optimistic. The Commission's report is not one that can be swallowed easily by all parties and at the moment owners and miners are far from agreeing. The main divergence is about the basis of wages settlement. The miners want a national agreement, the owners district settlements. Unfortunately the reticence which Mr. Baldwin's influence was able to secure at first is now being abandoned. Mr. A. J. Cook in particular is giving his tongue looser rein than he has allowed it for some weeks and has resumed the language of declared hostilities. No doubt the meeting of the Miners' International at Brussels has had something to do with this; its expression of solidarity with the British miners has necessarily had a warming effect in certain quarters. But there is every ground for hope that a strike will be avoided, especially as the subsidy will certainly not be terminated at a stroke. The report has done the great service of showing that the trade can be saved only by real reforms, not by time-honoured bickering.

News Items

AMERICAN TOURISTS

UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCE AT AGRA

Delhi, April. A party of 240 American tourists arrived here from Agra this morning. Interviewed by a Press representative, one of them related an unpleasant experience of their stay at Agra where, owing to plague raging in an epidemic form, he said they could get no better conveyance than ekkas and bullock carts. They hurriedly came to Delhi, but the touch of heat rendered some of them indisposed. With the exception of about fifty persons who will be joined by another batch of 200, the rest of the party leave for Bombay this evening.

SEQUEL TO RIOTS

RECRUITMENT OF MOSLEM CONSTABLES

The Statesman understands that one of the decisions arrived at as a result of the recent communal riots is the recruitment of more Mohammedan constables and officers. A small batch have already been engaged, and further appointments will be made as soon as men of suitable physique are obtained.

LANCASHIRE-SPINNERS

FORMATION OF NEW SELLING ORGANIZATION

London, April. An important move is being made supported by a hundred spinning companies of Lancashire, for the formation of a new selling organization. The new organization, which will not be antagonistic to the Master Cotton Spinners' Federation, will seek the cooperation of banks to prevent weak selling - Reuter's Special Service.

RIOTERS IN COURTS

SEVENTEEN ACCUSED FINED BY SPECIAL MAGISTRATE

MR. H. G. S. Bivar, Indian Civil Service, who has been specially deputed to Calcutta to hear the cases arising out of the recent riots in Calcutta, sat for the first time yesterday in the court of the Third Presidency Magistrate at Bankshall Street. The court was packed with a heterogeneous mass of policemen and pleaders, rioters and witnesses, and other interested persons, and it was almost impossible to follow the procedure. Mr. Bivar got through something like seventeen cases. Hindus and Mohammedans were charged with being in possession of property for which they could not account, and after much cross-examining and more strenuous denials, all of them were fined sums ranging from Rs. 10 to Rs. 25.

INDIAN NATIONAL PARTY

Bombay, April. At a meeting of the Indian National Party to-night, it was resolved to form a committee for the city of Bombay with Sir Dinshaw Petit, Messrs. Jinnah, Natharajin, Subedar, Gamadia, and Chagala as members and Sir Chimanlal Setalavad as chairman. The committee was charged with the work of framing rules for the local organization. It was resolved to have two classes of members paying Rs. 10 and Re. 1 per year. The following gentlemen were elected secretaries: Messrs. J. B. Petit, Fuzail Ibrahim Rahimtulla, D. S. Yonde, D. G. Delvi and Mr. Jammadas Dwarakadas. Mr. Ratansi Dharamsey Morarji was appointed treasurer.

China's pivot from goods to global credit

MIRTYUNJAY SHARMA

For decades, the story of China's rise was told through the movement of containers, ships loaded with electronics, machinery, and textiles leaving its ports for markets across the world. Today, however, a quieter but more consequential shift is underway as China increasingly exports not just goods, but credit. This transition from a manufacturing-powered export engine to one driven by capital flows marks a structural evolution in Beijing's economic strategy, with the yuan now following the same path once blazed by plastic and steel.

China's export-led growth model remains a titan, with 2025 closing on a record \$1.2 trillion trade surplus. Yet beneath this surface, the domestic heart is beating slower. By early 2026, Chinese banks were extending nearly 7.2 trillion yuan in new monthly aggregate financing, yet year-on-year credit growth has touched historic lows. This reflects a fundamental liquidity paradox: while banks are flush with funds, domestic appetite for borrowing has stalled. After decades of real estate fever, the mortgage era has cooled into a period of cautious deleveraging, and corporations have grown hesitant to commit to fresh capital expenditure.



To manage this domestic saturation, Beijing has begun weaponizing its massive mountain of foreign exchange reserves, which climbed to \$3.4 trillion by early 2026. Primarily held in U.S. dollars and liquid global assets, these reserves are being recycled into global credit. By offering aggressively priced, dollar-denominated loans, Chinese lenders are undercutting Western competitors in a global loan market estimated at \$9.5 trillion. They are no longer just selling products; they are selling the financing required to buy them, effectively turning their foreign

reserves into a high-leverage tool for geopolitical influence.

This outward expansion is visible in the strategic Port-Railway-Mine model, which co-locates credit with physical infrastructure. By the start of 2026, Chinese entities had financed approximately 168 ports across 90 countries, representing a \$2.4 billion investment reaching from Haifa in Israel to Newcastle in Australia. A vivid example of this shift is the Port of Chancay in Peru. Funded by a \$3.5 billion infusion of Chinese credit, it is designed to be the gateway from South America to Asia. While

it promises to slash shipping times, it has also become a lightning rod for local resistance, serving as a microcosm of the 2026 reality: Chinese credit arrives faster and with fewer procedural hurdles than traditional multilateral loans, but it carries a political gravity that can stir domestic unrest and environmental concerns.

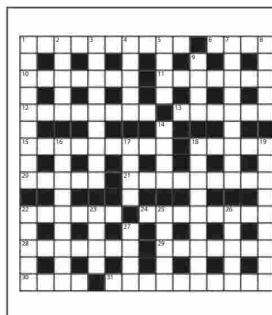
For India, this transformation represents a significant strategic challenge in its own backyard. China's pivot toward credit export directly competes with New Delhi's Neighbourhood First policy. While India has extended over \$15 billion

in Lines of Credit to neighbours like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, it often struggles to match the sheer speed and volume of Chinese capital. In the Maldives and Sri Lanka, the implementation gap is palpable; Chinese projects often move from contract to construction with a velocity that Indian bureaucratic processes find difficult to replicate.

However, the reliance on Chinese funding has also created debt-trap anxieties in India's periphery, offering New Delhi an opening to reposition itself as a transparent Economic Counselor. India's response is increasingly focused on helping neighbours restructure unsustainable debts while promoting high-impact community projects that contrast with China's focus on mega-infrastructure. As Chinese banks evolve into global prize-makers, the next phase of regional stability will depend on India's ability to out-implement its rival rather than just out-argue it. Ultimately, the next chapter of global economic history will be written not in shipping logs, but in the ledgers of cross-border capital flows, a transformation that policymakers from New Delhi to Washington must watch with localized precision.

(The writer is a BJP leader and an author.)

Crossword | No. 293447



Yesterday's Solution

DOWN
1. Having special leave to pick up consignment of milk perhaps (10)
6/30. Mopsy bunch completely swamping host in virtual meeting (4,4)
10. Substances used in test run on key worker (7)
11. Men's fake news for all to see after Michigan vote (7)
12. Close to Johnson, hire misfits in government, standing firm (8)
13. Spill the beans - many pupils have not been here much this year! (6)
15. Order: wear valid mask (4,1,4)

ACROSS
18. Play Little Richard classic (5)
20. Unknown heads of test and trace member of ruling party backed - lousy! (5)
21. Loser, full of ego, short of 50%, used to celebrate victory (9)
22. Plant container outside Four Seasons finally serves as turning point (6)
24. One handling stock finding glimmer of hope in new mRNA vaccine cutting odds (8)
28. Recount North America's speed of virus transmission (7)

29. Suggests Matt, in the main, is heading in the wrong direction (7)
30. See 6
31. Supporting pubs in lockdown? (6,4)
DOWN
1. How the US voted encompasses Donald's number one taboo (9)
2. Accomplish rupture with British withdrawal (5)
3. Johnson's deal was so half-baked! (6-3)
4. Observe Harding, latterly in the ascendant, prosper (5,2)
5. Award ceremony insiders mass

virtually in the end (4)
7. Part of EU (north) splintered (3,6)
8. Saying a team must keep two metres apart (5)
9. Families heading for Christmas on computer network (4)
14. Supermarket covering a special distancing (4)
16. Drug variant developed with involvement of international labs, primarily (9)
17. Brew teas - what one does to help, when out? (5)
18. Legally resident, Cummings not in?

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

DECCAN Chronicle

29 APRIL 2026

WB lesson: In future, EC can't keep real voters out

The voting in the second phase of election to the West Bengal Assembly on Wednesday will mark itself as one of the darkest moments in India's electoral history as it keeps out a large number of people from the process for no fault of theirs. The episode becomes all the more unpardonable as it happened on the watch of the Supreme Court of India and the Election Commission of India, institutions created to protect the constitutional, fundamental and democratic rights of the people.

The electoral roll for West Bengal had 7.66 crore names before the EC went into the special intensive revision (SIR) in November last year. The process has legitimacy in that it seeks to clean up the voter lists, the fundamental document for the conduct of elections, by ensuring that the names of all and only eligible voters appear in it. The EC published the first draft roll on December 16 with 7.08 crore voters; the final roll published on February 28 this year had 6.44 crore names. The final list left out about 60 lakh people for "logical discrepancies". This number was brought down to 27.10 lakh after the mammoth work done by the EC with active help of the Supreme Court that drafted in the officers of the subordinate judiciary in West Bengal and neighbouring states to do some of it. The appellate tribunals have until now cleared less than 2,000 of the more than 27 lakh appeals pending before it for inclusion in the voters' list.

In short, more than 27 lakh people who make up about four per cent of the total electorate in the state will have no right to vote in this election for the Election Commission failed to complete a task it had taken upon itself. The EC is the constitutionally mandated body to conduct elections to both Parliament and the state legislatures as well as the legislative assemblies on the principle of adult suffrage. It has been vested with extensive powers to ensure the sanctity of the process, which also includes the preparation of the electoral rolls.

The Election Commission has, however, itself, the people of West Bengal, the Constitution and the very idea of electoral democracy by not ensuring that every single eligible voter was part of the democratic process to elect the government in the state. Those at the helm of the EC have forfeited their right to continue in office when tributes were made to watch helplessly as a government is being formed in their state with no mandate from them. A small swing in the vote percentage can be decisive in an Indian election; and four per cent is an unacceptably high figure.

In a larger sense, the Constitution is an article of faith between the State and the citizen about some of the solemn rights the latter would enjoy. They may be fundamental rights or constitutional rights; but they are inviolable. The Supreme Court of India is mandated to step in if and when the State uses its might to trample on those rights, be they belong even to a single person. Unfortunately, the apex court has also failed to step in when tributes by silent when large numbers of people were kept out of the democratic process. The Indian people and Parliament will have to look into these very serious lapses on the part of the constitutional bodies in upsetting the foundational principles of this country sooner or later. The earlier they do it, the better for Indian democracy.

Trump must tone down rhetoric

Inexcusable as it is, political violence has no place in a democracy. But, in these fractious times in which the US presidency has sprouted more dramatic moments than all of Shakespeare's plays on the nobility combined, it is always on the cards that the president will be the target of a shot at the US President Donald Trump. It is, however, the conspiracy theorists who feed more readily off such events as failed assassinations that have come to be associated with one of the most protected men on the planet. As if to stress the point, "staged" became a trending topic soon after Cole Thomas Allen failed in charging the final security gate to the ballroom of the Washington Hilton.

Making "false flag" accusations being common enough, a former CIA officer pointed out that the secret service first secured vice-president J.D. Vance even as Melania Trump dived for cover and the President himself was said to be looking around at the chaos post the gunshots fired. It demands American political culture to go to such extremes as to suggest anyone would play with their lives and those of the people closest to them in family and government in order to make an impact, win an election or gain public sympathy though Thomas Matthew Crooks' sniper attempt at Mr Trump which missed by a centimetre helped him seal the presidential run in November 2024. And yet it can't be ignored that, however depraved Mr Trump may seem to his opponents, he hardly deserved the barbs thrown at him or his family. The late-night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel may have crossed many red lines in his continuous diatribes against Mr Trump but, even by his standards, his gallows humour of calling Melania Trump an "expectant widow" was far out far to be called civilised. No wonder then that the US President is calling for his sacking again by the network that hosts his show. Hate may have no limits, but it is the least expectation of people in public life or its fringes that they must be civil, no matter the provocation. The problem is that Mr Trump does not believe in the virtues of engagement bind him to civilised discourse. After all, he is on record with expletives while raving at Iran and threatening to obliterate a whole civilisation. It is worth noting now that Mr Trump himself is calling for a cooling of rhetoric and unity after the shooting incident.

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AAP-BJP duel: Chadha no knight in shining armour



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

Vice-President C.P. Radhakrishnan, Rajya Sabha Chairman, has given the legal stamp to the Raghu Chadha-led split in the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Upper House when he accepted the merger of the seven-member group into the BJP. It does not mean that the legal questions that arise in this connection are over. Of the seven, six MPs are from Punjab, and their terms end in 2028. It is the AAP's overwhelming majority in the Punjab Assembly that has put these six members in the Rajya Sabha. The members of the Upper House are elected by the members of the Assembly. It is the 92 AAP members of the Punjab Assembly who had elected the six AAP Rajya Sabha members.

The seventh, Swati Malviya, got elected from the Delhi Legislative Assembly. The courts may have to consider the issue if it comes before them whether the Rajya Sabha members who are elected by fellow party members of the Assembly can break free from the party as easily as members of the Lok Sabha when the voters are not members of a party. The argument will be made that members of the State Assembly vote in the election for Rajya Sabha members as members of the party.

Except for Ms Malviya, whose term ends in 2030, the terms of other six will end in 2028, which also marks the end of the term of the Punjab Assembly. Even if the six had remained with the AAP, they may not have been re-elected because it is unlikely that the AAP will retain the 92 seats that it has in the outgoing Assembly. The BJP, of course, cannot hope to ever manage the kind of victory that the AAP had pulled off in Punjab. It might seem to dream that if AAP could do it in Punjab, perhaps it is not beyond the BJP's scope as well. But the BJP is a marked party, of the urban Hindu in the state. It cannot ever win over the Sikh-Jat farmers in the state, much less the Dalits spread across the Deras.

The Congress has its base among the Sikh-Jat farmers as well. This constituency is not the sole monopoly of the Akal Dal. The BJP has not been able to pick out of its self-circumscribed Hindu base. The window of opportunity for these six, therefore, for two years. Two years is of course a long time in politics. The question, which is necessarily speculative, is whether the BJP will accept them as its own because the list of BJP faithful is long enough. Yes, the BJP does accommodate "outsiders" depending on their clout on other grounds, which includes the financial and social status. In the long term, the seven had risked their political careers, and they seem to believe it is worth it. The Chadha-led defection in the Rajya Sabha is not just an accident. There is a reason behind it. The small move, Mr Chadha might want to emerge as the face of the Punjab BJP, but it is a reasonable and realistic proposition right now.

Mr Chadha has indeed emerged as the leader of the six. Ms Malviya had already made up her mind about the BJP after her bitter fallout with the 92 seats that it has in the outgoing Assembly. The BJP, of course, cannot hope to ever manage the kind of victory that the AAP had pulled off in Punjab. It might seem to dream that if AAP could do it in Punjab, perhaps it is not beyond the BJP's scope as well. But the BJP is a marked party, of the urban Hindu in the state. It cannot ever win over the Sikh-Jat farmers in the state, much less the Dalits spread across the Deras. The Congress has its base among the Sikh-Jat farmers as well. This constituency is not the sole monopoly of the Akal Dal. The BJP has not been able to pick out of its self-circumscribed Hindu base. The window of opportunity for these six, therefore, for two years. Two years is of course a long time in politics. The question, which is necessarily speculative, is whether the BJP will accept them as its own because the list of BJP faithful is long enough. Yes, the BJP does accommodate "outsiders" depending on their clout on other grounds, which includes the financial and social status. In the long term, the seven had risked their political careers, and they seem to believe it is worth it. The Chadha-led defection in the Rajya Sabha is not just an accident. There is a reason behind it. The small move, Mr Chadha might want to emerge as the face of the Punjab BJP, but it is a reasonable and realistic proposition right now. Mr Chadha has indeed emerged as the leader of the six. Ms Malviya had already made up her mind about the BJP after her bitter fallout with

It doesn't seem the defection of seven Rajya Sabha members will break the AAP, or even weaken it. Mr Kejriwal will fight back with a doggedness that can frustrate BJP leaders.

AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal, Mr Chadha, by leading the six Rajya Sabha members, has shown that he can be useful to the BJP in hounding out the AAP further.

Through intimidations and inducements, the BJP may be dreaming of the largest numbers of the 92 AAP legislators in Punjab, and Chadha could be the man who would facilitate the defection. Mr Kejriwal and his AAP lieutenants are going to throw something like a cordon sanitaire around the AAP legislators. Mr Kejriwal, for all his faults as an obsessively focused leader, is far ahead in the political race, and Mr Chadha might find himself outpaced and outflanked.

The BJP would like to keep itself in the wings. The plan that brought Eknath Shinde out of the Shiv Sena led by Uddhav Thackeray and how in the end the BJP materialised is the kind of plan that the BJP would like to execute in Punjab. Unlike Mr Shinde, Mr Chadha was not a grassroots man, and he may find it difficult to go through the process which will split the wings in Punjab. It is possible that the BJP would not even attempt to topple the Bhagwant Singh Mann government in Punjab. It senses that the situation does not favour it much. The BJP will then have to content itself with the additional seven Rajya Sabha members. The AAP government in Punjab was the most unexpected turn. Arvind Kejriwal had apparently enough leadership skills to take advantage of the

windfall, and the AAP government has lasted the term. Elections are due next February.

The BJP-led Centre's onslaught on the AAP through the liquor scam cases against Mr Kejriwal and two top co-leagues, former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia and former Delhi Cabinet minister Sitendra Jain, who were jailed for inordinately long periods, did not break the party. It had, however, lost the Delhi Assembly elections to the BJP in February last year. Delhi and Punjab are the two places where the AAP has put down roots, as it were, more so in Delhi than in Punjab. Mr Kejriwal now faces the challenge of defending the AAP terrain in Punjab and in Delhi.

It doesn't seem the defection of seven Rajya Sabha members would break the AAP, or even weaken it. Mr Kejriwal will fight back with a doggedness that can frustrate BJP leaders. The AAP and BJP will fight each other till the bitter end as in many ways they share the same ideological orientation of nationalism and cultural rootedness. Both parties don't think of politics in terms of policies and programmes. For them it goes deeper: it's a matter of personal identity.

For them, it is not mere civic engagement, where elections are won and lost. Mr Kejriwal and Prime Minister Narendra Modi hold up the political duel with a sense of commitment, which verges on the moral. For them, politics is a civil war. The fight between the two turns into sibling rivalry. The AAP enjoys the endorsement of the RSS. That makes the BJP's fight against the AAP so much more difficult. Raghu Chadha is not the knight-in-shining armour in the battle. That honour goes to Mr Kejriwal.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

LETTERS

500 CR FOR AU

Visakhapatnam once again is in the news across the nation for Andhra University centenary celebrations which went on a grand way (*Naidu announces 500 cr for AU, April 28*). It is great on the part of Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu who announced 500 crore for the transformation of AU to a premier global brand. The CM's aspiration to keep AU in the rank of top five in India and break into the top 100 globally is welcome.

Panchakarla Govardhana Rao
Krishna

TRIBAL SECURITY

The editorial rightly points to the alarming situation where armed groups operate freely, creating a sense of insecurity for separate communities (*Resin in tribal security groups first to bring Manipur peace, April 28*). Such a pattern of violence undermines the rule of law and cannot be accepted in a civil society. The government must act decisively to disarm these groups, restore law and order, and ensure impartial enforcement of justice. Confidence-building measures and inclusive dialogue are equally necessary to bring lasting peace to the region.

S.M. Subhani
Mangalagiri

AI RESHAPES

AI is certainly shaking up roles and bringing about a shift in skill demands (*AI reshapes, not shrinks Indian IT, April 28*). This signals a need to gear up rather than back out. Students aiming for software careers must step up, branch out into AI, data science, and problem-solving, and keep up with continuous learning. Merely relying on routine coding will not hold up in the long run. The government and IT sector must come forward to roll out reskilling programmes and set up strong ties with industry-academia links. Companies, too, should take on the responsibility to build up employee capabilities and carry through fair placement. To cope with the global job crisis, all stakeholders must work together, think ahead, and adapt quickly. AI should be seen not as a threat to shut down opportunities, but as a tool to open up new avenues.

Raju Kolluru
Kakinada

Email your letters to info@deccanmail.com, editor@deccanmail.com.



Bhopinder Singh

Amid tussle with America's first Pope, Trump lays claim to divinity

Christianity is the largest religion in the world, and within that, Roman Catholics are the largest single denomination, at over 1.4 billion globally. An estimated 23 per cent of the population of the United States is Catholic (70.75 million). Spiritually, the Pope is the highest authority for Catholics who are believed to be the direct successor of Saint Peter, the first leader of the Church appointed by Jesus Christ. The Pope is revered as the supreme earthly authority on all matters of faith and morals under specific conditions (such as papal infallibility). Naturally, this leads the Pope to engage on a multitude of issues, including political, though from a strictly moral and religious perspective, and not from a partisan angularity. This lens of Catholic morality can often provide the papal perspective on either side of the political fence, depending on the issue itself — such as opposition to abortion aligns with the right-wing persuasions, whereas concerns on the environment and climate issues aligns it to the left-wing persuasions. Therefore, it is very usual for the Pope on comment on global issues of moral concern like poverty, migration, refugees, social inequities, human rights, or even war and peace. But the overarching rationale for the Pope to comment on such issues has always been rooted in Catholic spirituality and not on electoral considerations. Practising politicians across the world realise the

value of religious identity to "connect" and beseech votes in the name of religion. Catholicism is no different, even in the Philippines. Duterte in the Philippines, Andrej Duda in Poland, Lula da Silva in Brazil, to even John F. Kennedy and Joe Biden (the only two Catholic US Presidents) have signalled Catholic values to appeal to the electorate. However, the Catholic Church has not endorsed any candidate or party, centrally or institutionally. Like many other Americans, US President's Donald Trump is also a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), who was baptised and raised in the Presbyterian Church. Politically astute, President Trump has defined his identity as a "non-denominational" Christian and therefore seeks to cut across the intra-faith divide. Mr Trump has framed his political positions in such a way that it appeals to conservative Catholic values when it comes to gender policy, religious institution rights, court appointment of conservative judges, and, most sharply, on abortion. His hard positions ensured that he even pipped a Catholic, Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential elections, with 52 per cent vote share among overall Catholic voters, with 55 per cent of White Catholics preferring Mr Trump. Though Mr Trump finally lost the 2020 elections, his successful campaign in 2024 saw the Catholic preference increase to 58 per cent, with White Catholics soaring even higher to 60-65 per cent. When Pope Leo XIV (born, Robert Francis Prevost)

became the first American pontiff to be elected by the College of the Cardinals in 2025, President Trump expressed such an honour as "a great privilege" for the United States. However, the amoral and rather fickle Mr Trump has had a consistent history of frequent breakups with former friends and allies, especially if they take a principled position that is contrary to that of Mr Trump. From allies like NATO (or even India sometimes), to former aides like Mike Pence, John Bolton, Rex Tillerson, James Mattis, etc, anyone can be thrown "under the bus" if they disagree with Mr Trump. Now, the proverbial bandwagon is Pope Leo XIV, who had earlier commented that there was a "delusion of omniscience" fuelling the US-Israel war with Iran. This elicited a stinging reaction directed from Mr Trump to that of Mr Trump. From allies like NATO (or even India sometimes), to former aides like Mike Pence, John Bolton, Rex Tillerson, James Mattis, etc, anyone can be thrown "under the bus" if they disagree with Mr Trump. Now, the proverbial bandwagon is Pope Leo XIV, who had earlier commented that there was a "delusion of omniscience" fuelling the US-Israel war with Iran. This elicited a stinging reaction directed from Mr Trump to that of Mr Trump. From allies like NATO (or even India sometimes), to former aides like Mike Pence, John Bolton, Rex Tillerson, James Mattis, etc, anyone can be thrown "under the bus" if they disagree with Mr Trump.

no one is spared, not even the presumptive "own". It is a wake-up call for the likes of Italy's far-right Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, who had been a staunch supporter of Trump-style politics, till now. Her deputy prime minister has weighed-in with: "If anyone is working hard on the issue of peace and conflict resolution, it's Pope Leo. Attacking the Pope, a symbol of peace and a spiritual guide for billions of Catholics, doesn't seem like a useful or intelligent thing to do." But as the currency of manufactured hate is so powerful, that nobody has spared the ambition of a unhinged authoritarian like Mr Trump is often forgotten, till the fire reaches the doorsteps of those cheering the inferno. Many former aides, friends, and allies of Mr Trump are now struggling to explain the deterioration in their relations with the President. Within America, the writing is on the wall as Mr Trump suffers the highest disapproval ratings and the trend is worsening with the unending Iran war. Pope Leo has contextualised the fake religiosity of politicians like Donald Trump by referencing an Old Testament passage from Isaiah: "Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen — your hands are full of blood." Hence, religion outwits the politics of convenience.

The writer is a retired lieutenant-general and a former lieutenant-governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

quick BITES

INDICATORS % Sensex 76,886.91 -0.54 Nifty 50 23,995.70 -0.40 S&P 500* 7,143.11 -0.43 Dollar (₹) 94.55 -0.37 Pound Sterling (₹) 127.55 -0.05 Euro (₹) 110.55 -0.02 Gold (10gm)* (₹) 149,135,2586 -1.70 Brent crude (\$/bbl)* 111.21 2.75 IN 10-Yr bond yield* 6.980 0.53 US 10-Yr T-bill yield* 4.388 0.032

ideaForge inks pact with Japan's AI company

Drome tech firm ideaForge Technology has inked a pact with Japanese AI-tech company Digital Media Professionals (DMP) to develop next-generation AI drones. It helps ideaForge gain access to Japanese market, it said. The partnership is focused ideaForge will provide the DMP integration to its unmanned aerial vehicle platforms and DMP will be market partner for ideaForge's drone solutions portfolio in Japan.



Brigade acquires 5.72 acre in Hyd via auction

Brigade Enterprises has acquired 5.72 acre in Hyderabad through auction for about ₹250 crore to build housing project. The purchase at Osman Nagar was at a price of ₹44 crore per acre, excluding registration charges. Amar Mysore, executive director, Brigade Enterprises said, "Hyderabad emerged as one of the most dynamic real estate markets in the country and this land parcel is a strategic fit."

Bondada posts profit after tax of ₹63 cr in Q4

Bondada Engineering said its Q4 profit after tax stood at ₹63 crore, compared to ₹56 crore in the same quarter last year, registering a 13 per cent growth. It reported revenue of ₹914 crore, as against ₹714 crore previous year, a 28 per cent year-on-year growth. "The financial performance for FY26 reflects strong order book conversion, and financial management," said Dr. Bondada Raghavendra Rao, company CMD.

Bagmane Prime public offer to open on May 5

Blackstone-backed Bagmane Prime Office REIT is poised to hit the capital markets with its ₹3,405 crore initial public offering (IPO), scheduled to open on May 5 and conclude on May 7. The anchor investor bidding is scheduled for May 4. The proposed IPO comprises a fresh issue of units aggregating up to ₹2,350 crore and an offer-for-sale (OFS) of units worth up to ₹1,015 crore by selling unitholder.

IPO

Crude surge drags markets, PSU banks lead losses

Costlier crude oil begins to dent demand outlook across sectors

RAVI RAMJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, APRIL 28

Surging crude oil futures above \$110 per barrel weighed on market sentiment on Monday, dragging both equities and the rupee lower. The Sensex fell 416.72 points, or 0.54 per cent, to close at 76,886.91, led by sharp declines in banking, oil and IT stocks. However, auto and gas and capital goods stocks bucked the trend and posted gains.

The Nifty 50 slipped below the 24,000 mark to end at 23,995.70, down 97 points, or 0.40 per cent. Broader markets showed relative resilience, with the BSE mid-cap index down just 0.07 per cent while the small cap index closing marginally higher by 0.03 per cent.

Foreign portfolio investors were net sellers of equities worth ₹2,103.74 crore, while domestic institutional investors provided support, buying shares worth ₹1,712 crore. Shipping disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, coupled with Iran's conditions for reopening the channel, kept oil markets volatile. Brent crude for June delivery traded between \$107.82 and \$112.70 per barrel, impacting oil-sensitive sectors such as auto and aviation. "Domestic manufacturing has begun to bear the brunt of costlier and tighter supplies of petroleum products and natural gas," said Crisil.

"After a morning rally, the market faced resistance near the 50-day simple moving average at 24,200/77,500 and corrected sharply. From the day's high, the market shed over 200/700 points," said Shrikant Chouhan, head, equity research, Kotak Securities. PSU banks were the worst hit. Nifty PSU Bank index declining 2.15 per cent. The RBI on Monday declined pleas for more time to transition to the expected credit loss-based provisioning. New system will be implemented from April next year.

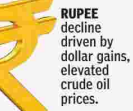
IIP growth slips to 5-mth low of 4.1%

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO NEW DELHI, APRIL 28

India's industrial production growth slowed to a five-month low of 4.1 per cent in March, weighed down by weak performance in manufacturing and electricity output amid the West Asia crisis. February saw 5.2 per cent

VOLATILE PHASE

- NIFTY-50 falls to 23,995.7, down 97 pts.
• FPIs sell equities worth ₹2,103.74 cr while DIIIs buy equities worth ₹1,712 cr.
• Brent oil futures for June delivery traded in range of \$107.82 per barrel to \$112.70 per barrel.
• Higher energy prices begin to impact industrial output.
• PSU Banks correct with Nifty PSU Bank index falling 2.15%.



RUPEE decline driven by dollar gains, elevated crude oil prices.

- Aramco's LPG exports halted, sending prices higher and buyers scrambling for replacement supply.
• UAE to deploy new production capacity has brought it into conflict with regional rival Saudi Arabia at OPEC meetings.



DOMESTIC manufacturing has begun to bear the brunt of costlier and tighter supplies of petroleum products and natural gas. — CRISIL RATINGS

AIRLINES ON VERGE OF STOPPING OPS ON FUEL COSTS, SAYS FIA

New Delhi, April 28: Aviation stocks declined on Tuesday amid surging oil prices due to the West Asia turmoil, with Air India, IndiGo and SpiceJet telling the government that the country's airline industry is under extreme stress and on the verge of "stopping operations".

Shares of SpiceJet tanked 4.96 per cent to settle at ₹14 on the BSE. InterGlobe Aviation's stock declined 2.57 per cent to ₹4,445.1. Air India, IndiGo and SpiceJet sought revision in ATP pricing and financial support. The West Asia turmoil has pushed up oil prices and airspace restrictions have increased airlines' operating costs. Federation of Indian Airlines has written to the civil aviation ministry, seeking same fuel pricing mechanism uniformly across domestic and international operations. — PTI

Rupee slides to 94.56 vs dollar

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, APRIL 28

The Indian spot rupee extended its recent losses, ending 53 paise lower at 94.68 against the US dollar. The decline was primarily driven by global dollar strength and elevated crude oil prices, which weighed on sentiment. Traders noted additional pressures on the rupee, including month-end dollar demand. SBI was reportedly buying dollars at lower levels and selling near 94.5. There was also possible front-running related to Sun Pharma's \$11.75 billion overseas acquisition, which added to the currency's weakness. "The rupee, along with its Asian peers, continues to face downward pressure as rising crude oil prices and risk-averse sentiment dominate the market," said Dilip Parmar, research analyst at HDFC Securities.

Aramco suspends LPG shipments

Dhahran, April 28: Saudi Aramco is set to suspend liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) shipments through May after damage to its main export facility in late February disrupted supplies, said people familiar with the matter.

The state-owned producer recently informed buyers that shipments from its Juaymah LPG facility would remain suspended next month. The sources declined to be identified as the information is not public. Aramco declined to comment. Exports from the Juaymah facility have been halted since a support structure collapsed, pushing prices higher and forcing buyers to seek alternative supplies. Aramco has told some buyers that repair work at Juaymah has yet to be completed, the sources said. As a result, shipments are unlikely to resume in May even if the Strait of Hormuz reopens. — Bloomberg

El Nino, high crude may drag growth pace to 5.8%

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, APRIL 28

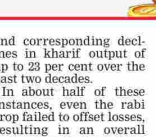
The gross domestic product (GDP) growth could slip to 5.8 per cent this year, while CPI inflation may rise to 4.8 per cent if crude oil prices hover around \$105 per barrel amid the West Asia crisis. The threat of El Nino and a below-normal monsoon could further weigh on growth and stoke inflation.

The government may also need to spend an additional ₹30,000-35,000 crore on fertiliser subsidies to support the farm sector, said Aditi Nayyar, chief economist at Ica. Iera has already lowered its FY27 GDP growth forecast to 6.5 per cent and raised its inflation projection to 4.5 per cent, assuming crude prices average \$85 per barrel and retail fuel prices remain unchanged. If crude rise to around \$105 per barrel, growth could slow further to 5.8 per cent, with inflation climbing to 4.8 per cent. India's southwest monsoon is likely to be below normal this year, with the India Meteorological Department (IMD) projecting rainfall at 92 per cent of the long period average (LPA).

Historical El Nino has led to rainfall deficits of one per cent to 22 per cent

CAUTIOUS OUTLOOK

- Threat of El Nino, below-normal monsoon can further weigh on growth and stoke inflation.
• If crude rise to \$105 per barrel, growth can slow further to 5.8%, with inflation climbing to 4.8%.
• Fertiliser availability remains adequate for now, but supply disruptions could emerge if crisis persists.



and corresponding declines in kharif output of up to 23 per cent over the past two decades. In about half of these instances, even the rabi crop failed to offset losses, resulting in an overall contraction in agricultural output. However, higher reservoir levels compared to last year and historical averages may offer some cushion, particularly if early monsoon rainfall is weak. Adequate rainfall in August is essential for crop development, while excessive rain in September can be counter-productive. Farmers may also adapt by shifting to less water-intensive crops. The unfolding West Asia

crisis adds another layer of uncertainty. Fertiliser availability remains adequate for now, but supply disruptions could emerge if the crisis persists, especially as imports typically pick up ahead of the kharif sowing season. A weak monsoon could dampen rural demand, affecting sectors such as automobiles, tractors, construction, cement, steel and FMCG. Power, air conditioners, refrigerators and beverages may benefit from higher temperatures. The government has taken initial steps to contain inflation by moderating excise duties on fuel, avoiding an immediate rise in pump prices.

India, China trade gap hits \$112 bn

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, APRIL 28

India's imports from China touched \$131.6 bn in FY26, with about 66 per cent valued at \$82.4 bn, concentrated in four sectors: electronics, machinery, computers and organic chemicals. China accounts for 43 per cent of India's electronics imports, 40 per cent of machinery and computer imports, and 44 per cent of organic chemicals. These are critical inputs that feed directly into India's manufacturing ecosystem, said the minister raised concerns over compliance costs, testing requirements and challenges faced by MSMEs. Sectors such as engineering goods, electronics, pharma, chemicals, gems and jewellery and agri-based products have sustained export momentum despite disruptions. The minister assured facilitation and targeted interventions to reduce entry barriers and improve EoDB.

pharma, electronics and clean energy vulnerable to such shifts, whether geopolitical or commercial. At the same time, India's exports to China remain limited, making the relationship one-sided," Ajay Srivastava, GTRI founder, said. India needs to build domestic capacity in key sectors and diversify supply chains. Limiting dependence on any single country to below 30 per cent of imports in critical sectors is key, GTRI said. India's exports to China stay below FY2021 levels at \$19.5 bn, while imports have more than doubled to \$131.6 bn. Trade deficit grew 155 per cent to \$112 bn over five years. About 98.5 per cent of imports from China are industrial goods, with electronics, machinery, computers and organic chemicals accounting for \$82.6 bn.

USE TRADE DEALS TO BOOST EXPORTS, JOBS, SAYS GOYAL

FC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, APRIL 28

Commerce minister Piyush Goyal on Tuesday urged exporters and industry bodies to leverage India's trade pacts to expand market access, boost exports and create employment. Meanwhile, industry representatives who met the minister raised concerns over compliance costs, testing requirements and challenges faced by MSMEs. Sectors such as engineering goods, electronics, pharma, chemicals, gems and jewellery and agri-based products have sustained export momentum despite disruptions. The minister assured facilitation and targeted interventions to reduce entry barriers and improve EoDB.

Maruti sells 24.2 L cars in FY26, posts ₹14,679-cr annual profit

New Delhi, April 28: Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) on Tuesday said its total vehicle sales in FY26 were at a record 24.2 lakh units against 22.34 lakh units in FY25.

The automaker also reported consolidated net profit grew 1.24 per cent to ₹14,679.5 crore for fiscal year 2025-26 against ₹14,500.2 crore in previous fiscal. Total revenue from operations in FY26 was ₹1,83,316 crore compared to ₹1,52,913 crore in FY25, it added. Domestic sales in FY26 stood at 19.74 lakh units compared to 19.01 lakh units in FY25, while exports were at 4.47 lakh units against 3.32 lakh units a year ago, it added. "This Maruti Suzuki has earmarked a capex of ₹1,400 crore for FY27, as it gears up to add capacity to meet growing demand, having re-achieved 100 per cent capacity utilisation at its existing facilities, MSI chairman R. C. Bhargava said. — PTI

Inflationary trend may hit credit demand: Shriram Fin

Shriram Finance reported a 41 per cent rise in consolidated net profit to ₹3,020.9 cr in the fourth quarter of FY26, sustaining steady growth and profitability. MD and CEO Parag Sharma told Falaknaaz Syed that a potential fuel price increase and lower rural income and slow credit demand. Excerpts: Credit growth guidance Initially, we estimated credit growth of 18 per cent in the coming quarters. However, given the possibility of a fuel price hike due to the West Asia conflict, the resulting inflationary trend, and the risk of lower rural income and slow credit demand. However, we do not expect any significant impact on asset quality. Cash deployment We disburse close to ₹50,000 cr in a quarter, and we have received ₹40,000 cr in equity. We expect this capital to be largely utilised over the next four to five months. The funds will be used for growth and to retire some debt. Interest rates If inflation remains a concern, repo rate hikes by the RBI are possible. Currently, our cost of liabilities stands at around 8.59 per cent. New products We are not introducing new products but are increasing our focus on financing new commercial vehicles.

OpenAI falls short on sales, user growth targets

San Francisco, April 28: OpenAI recently failed to meet its own goals for new user acquisition and sales, fueling internal concerns that the company may struggle to support its spending on AI infrastructure, according to a news report. The company fell short of several key metrics, including user growth and revenue targets in 2026 after rival Anthropic gained ground in coding and enterprise markets, the report said. Its ChatGPT chatbot also didn't hit the company's target of one billion weekly active users by the end of 2025, it said. Chief financial officer Sarah Friar in conversations with other company leaders, has expressed concerns that if OpenAI doesn't increase sales fast enough, it may not be able to afford its future computing needs, it said. There are growing worries among investors that artificial intelligence (AI)

developers and big tech firms are spending too much on data centers and chips for AI, with an uncertain payoff. OpenAI alone has committed to spend more than \$1.4 trillion on artificial intelligence infrastructure. To finance those bets, OpenAI and Anthropic have increasingly tapped an overlapping group of venture funds and tech companies. — Bloomberg

DIGITAL ASSISTANT Company trains artificial intelligence model on large databases of proteins Eli Lilly signs deal with AI start-up

Indianapolis, April 28: Eli Lilly & Co. has signed a deal with the AI start-up Profluent worth up to \$2.25 billion to find new ways to edit DNA, the company's latest bet that artificial intelligence (AI) can transform drugmaking.

Under the collaboration, announced Tuesday, Lilly will have the exclusive rights to new medicines that Profluent develops and will pay up to \$2.25 billion if the drugs hit certain milestones. Typically it takes about a decade and costs over \$1 billion to develop a new drug. About 90 per cent of candidates fail before making it to the finish line. The pharmaceutical industry is pouring billions of dollars into the idea that AI can make the process of finding new drugs faster, cheaper and more successful. No AI-designed drug has won US approval, but many have entered clinical trials. Profluent, whose investors include Jeff Bezos, says it can use AI to design more powerful versions of Crispr, the Nobel Prize-

winning gene editing tool. The AI firm wants to treat diseases by inserting large stretches of DNA into a specific location. "Traditional approaches to drug discovery can't do that," said Profluent chief executive Ali Madani. While current gene-editing tools typically fix small errors in DNA, Profluent aims to make drugs that rewrite entire passages of

Lilly will pay up to \$2.25 bn if drugs hit certain milestones. Pharma industry pouring billions of dollars into AI to make the process of finding new drugs faster. No AI-designed drug won the US approval, but many entered clinical trials.

genetic instructions, opening door to treating more conditions. "This has huge implications for genetic medicines," Madani said. Profluent has trained its AI model on large databases of proteins. Profluent's scientists prompt the AI model with a disease to target, and the technology designs a drug that might treat it. Lilly is working to build a pipeline of future medicines to power its next era. Part of this is increasing its bet on AI. — Bloomberg

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Ladakh outreach

UT gets new districts, but key issues in limbo

LADAKH has got five new districts ahead of Union Home Minister Amit Shah's visit to the Union Territory. The expansion from two districts — Leh and Kargil — to seven is a significant step that was overdue in the vast but sparsely populated region. Remote areas like Nubra, Zaskar and Changthang have been facing problems in accessing basic public services. Smaller administrative units can bring the authorities closer to the people and facilitate quicker delivery of welfare schemes. The prompt appointment of deputy commissioners and police chiefs signals an encouraging intent to ensure governance without delay.

However, this restructuring alone will not satisfy local residents. Ladakh's challenges are not merely bureaucratic; they are deeply political, economic and environmental. Local groups, including the Leh Apex Body and Kargil Democratic Alliance, continue to demand statehood and constitutional safeguards under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. They have sought direct, "decision-level" talks with Shah later this week, describing the scheduled May 22 sub-committee meeting as "inadequate" for resolving the region's long-pending issues. Ladakhi activist Sonam Wangchuk, who was released last month by the Union government after a nearly six-month-long detention, is also keen that a constructive dialogue should be held during Shah's visit.

The Centre has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to Ladakh's development, even though it has remained non-committal on the key demands of statehood and inclusion under the Sixth Schedule. Reforms such as easing regulations in the tourism sector and boosting employment opportunities are part of a vigorous economic push. The optimism surrounding the latest administrative exercise will be justified if it leads to inclusive growth, better governance and meaningful political engagement. However, the government cannot afford to miss the big picture — the strategic importance of Ladakh makes it critical to maintain peace and strengthen law and order. The violent protests in September 2025 were an eye-opener. The aspirations of the Ladakhi people must be fulfilled in a time-bound manner.

NZ trade deal

Positive way forward, address concerns too

MERCHANDISE trade between India and New Zealand stood at a modest \$1.3 billion in 2024-25. India's share in the island country's total import market of \$47.5 billion last year was just 2 per cent. Billed as historic, the free trade agreement (FTA) aims for a dramatic, long-term shift. The push to diversify exports to a high-income market also opens doors for a larger Indian footprint in the Asia-Pacific region. The positives are many. There are concerns too. The deal, once ratified, will cut or remove tariffs on 95 per cent of exports to India. Conversely, since 58 per cent of New Zealand's tariff lines are already duty-free, its efforts to fully open up the field for Indian exporters provides an opportunity, but the gains could be limited in a competitive environment. The risks of a trade deficit in the face of rising imports call for domestic reforms that incentivise innovation and good practices.

Forestry and horticulture exporters from New Zealand could gain a foothold in a market that values scale and reliability. Among fruit growers in Himachal Pradesh as well as Jammu and Kashmir, already reeling under extreme weather patterns, the prospect of cheaper apples or kiwi fruit on sale poses another challenge. New Delhi's quota and time limits may not be enough to assuage apprehensions. A focus on improved crop produce, storage and supply chain strategies is essential. No sweeping liberalisation for milk powder or mass dairy exports comes as a relief, though how it plays out is uncertain.

Access across 118 services sectors in New Zealand is an encouraging sign. For Indian students and professionals, more visa pathways and post-study work rights are a huge plus. Even as the possibility of uneven benefits looms, doubling trade by 2031 could just be the momentum the partnership needs.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, THURSDAY, APRIL 29, 1926

Towards unity

THERE is much sound sense in Dr Annie Besant's statement to an Associated Press interviewer that the Ahmedabad agreement is a step that ought to lead to a reunion of all parties within the Congress. That agreement has undoubtedly shown that there is no real or fundamental difference among them. For sometime, it has been increasingly clear that the only substantial difference between the Swarajists on the one hand and the Liberals, Independents and Responsive Cooperators on the other is in regard to the working of the Reforms generally and the acceptance of office under the reformed Constitution in particular. This difference has now had the bottom knocked out of it by the Swarajists accepting the position that the response of the government to the national demand shall be deemed adequate in those provinces in which the government is willing to concede sufficient power, responsibility and initiative to the ministers. This may or may not mean that the Swarajists themselves will accept office. It certainly means that they will give up their obstructionist tactics in such provinces: that is to say, will allow others to take office if they are prepared to come to an understanding with them, even if they are not prepared to accept office themselves. This, coupled with the decision of the recent non-Swarajist Conference at Bombay, for all practical purposes, to accept the Congress creed — a decision which we now know is due principally to Pandit Malaviya's strenuous advocacy — has undoubtedly paved the way for a reunion of all the progressive parties on the Congress platform.

A manoeuvre passed off as a merger

Raghav Chadha has followed in the footsteps of former Haryana CM Bhajan Lal

SANJAY HEGDE
SENIOR ADVOCATE, SUPREME COURT

THE announcement by Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MP Raghav Chadha that he and six of his Rajya Sabha colleagues had "merged" with the BJP was a clever piece of political theatre. By invoking paragraph 4 of the Tenth Schedule, the seceding members sought to dress up what was plainly a defection in the constitutional vocabulary of merger. The architecture of the Tenth Schedule, however, was designed precisely to prevent such mischief.

The phrase "Aya Ram, Gaya Ram" entered our political lexicon in 1967, when Gaya Lal of Haryana crossed the floor three in a fortnight. Between 1967 and 1971, several state governments fell as legislators traded loyalties for office. The malaise was only beginning. After Indira Gandhi's return to power in January 1980, Bhajan Lal, then Chief Minister of Haryana at the head of a Janata Party government, accomplished a more audacious feat. He marched virtually his entire legislature party across the floor and delivered it to the Congress, retaining his chair as CM. The Janata regime in Haryana ceased to exist not by election or by no-confidence vote, but by the simple expedient of mass migration. It was probably the Bhajan Lal precedent, more than any other, that gave the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1985 the political impetus to bring the Fifty-Second Amendment and with it the Tenth Schedule.

Paragraph 2 of the Tenth Schedule sets the rule. A legislator who voluntarily gives up the membership of his original party stands disqualified. The Supreme Court, in the Hanish Rawat case, did not mince words: defection is a "constitutional sin." Merger, under paragraph 4, is the carefully circumscribed exception. It is not a



DEFLECTION: The Rajya Sabha risks becoming the chamber of arithmetical absorption.

loophole: it is an escape valve, narrowly drawn for genuine consolidation of political force, not for manufactured ones.

Paragraph 4 has two sub-paragraphs that must be read together. Sub-paragraph (1) protects a member only if his "original political party" merges with another party. Sub-paragraph (2) prescribes the test for when such a merger is deemed to have taken place: not less than two-thirds of the members of the legislature party must have agreed to it.

The two clauses are not alternatives. The first identifies the actor — the original political party. The second prescribes a condition for the merger to be an effective shield against disqualification. Reading them disjunctively would invert the constitutional scheme. It would allow the tail to wag the dog. A handful of legislators in one House could, by an act of internal arithmetic, claim to have absorbed their own party into another. That is not a merger. That is a hijacking.

The Constitution Bench, in *Subhash Desai v. Principal Secretary, Governor of Maharashtra* (2023), arising from the Shiv Sena split, settled the larger principle. The political party and the legislature party are not interchangeable. The legislature party is a creature of the political party. The "umbilical cord" which connects a member of the House to the political party cannot be severed by the legislators acting on their own. The Court

A merger that produces consequences for both Houses cannot be effected by counting heads in only one.

went further and addressed paragraph 4 directly: the Tenth Schedule would become "unworkable" if "political party" were read as "legislature party." The merger must originate in the political party. Two-thirds support of the legislature party is not the merger; it is the condition that gives the legislators protection against disqualification.

Applied to the facts at hand, this analysis is fatal to the AAP defectors' case. There has been no announcement by AAP through its national convener or national executive, that the party has merged with the BJP. The party continues to govern Punjab. Its national leadership has publicly disowned the seven. What has happened is that seven of the 10 Rajya Sabha members have, on their own, announced a merger. The original political party has not merged at all. The cord has been cut from one end only and there are loose ends to trip on.

Even if the legislature party were permitted to drive a merger, the issue arises: what is the legislature party of a national political party at the Union level? It cannot sensibly be confined to one chamber. Where the original political party functions across both Houses, the two-thirds requirement must be measured against the entirety of the parliamentary party — Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha taken together. A merger that produces consequences for both Houses cannot be effected by counting heads in only one. To hold otherwise would mean that a party with a thin presence in one House could be "merged" by the smaller group, leaving the larger group bereft of parentage. Thus, mere two-thirds in one House will not do.

The Bombay High Court (Goa Bench), in the *Girish Chodankar* matter, took a different view, holding the two sub-paragraphs disjunctive. The reasoning rested on the apprehension that a contrary reading would render the Schedule unworkable. The high court overlooked the express provision in paragraph 4 itself: legislators who disagree with a merger announced by their political party are entitled to function as a separate group. The Special Leave Petition against the Goa decision is pending in the Supreme Court. The verdict in the *Subhash Desai* case, delivered after the Goa ruling, has substantially undermined its foundations. A correction is overdue. Chadha now stands in the illus-

trious shoes of a modern-day Bhajan Lal. The technique is the same: a wholesale movement of legislators from one party to another, dressed up as a corporate act, leaving the original party an emptied shell on the floor of the House. What Bhajan Lal did to the Janata Party in Haryana in 1980, Chadha has purported to do to AAP in the Rajya Sabha in 2026. The difference is that Bhajan Lal acted before the Tenth Schedule existed. Chadha has acted 41 years after the Constitution put the device beyond reach. The cap may fit, but the rules of the game have changed.

The consequences of treating this manoeuvre as a valid merger would not be confined to AAP. The arithmetic of the Upper House would change overnight. The Rajya Sabha has long been the chamber where the ruling alliance has had to negotiate, persuade and on occasion concede. Bills that the Lok Sabha passed by sheer numbers have, in the Council of States, been referred to Select Committees, amended or quietly allowed to lapse.

The BJP's inability to muster an outright majority in the Rajya Sabha has been one of the few remaining checks on a government otherwise dominant in the Lok Sabha. The absorption of seven additional members would tip the balance.

Legislation on personal laws, federal questions, electoral arrangements and the regulation of civil society — matters that have hitherto required cross-party negotiation — would now ride an easy passage. The Rajya Sabha was conceived by the framers as the chamber of sober second thought. It risks becoming the chamber of arithmetical absorption.

The remedy lies, in the first instance, with the Vice-President of India, the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, before whom the inevitable disqualification petition is filed. It lies, ultimately, with the Supreme Court. A political party is more than the sum of its legislators. A merger is an act of the party, not of its members in one House. The two-thirds requirement is a safeguard against capture, not a licence for it. Bhajan Lal's ghost ought not to reincarnate, least of all in the chamber of the States.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

One man's opportunism is another man's statesmanship. — Milton Friedman

The wise course of reconciliation

ABHYAM SHARMA

MY office CCTV screen showed a woman entering the waiting lounge with her child. Soon, her husband arrived too. "Do you recognise this couple?" I asked my father. While he took time to identify them, the turbulence their conjugal life had witnessed flashed before my eyes. Five years ago, they had approached me regarding their divorce petition. The couple, accompanied by their family members, had caused a commotion in my office. Allegations and counter-allegations had come thick and fast as both sides refused to budge.

After the families calmed down a bit, I called the warring husband and wife for a one-on-one meeting. I sensed that all was not lost. I asked them to list their grievances and complaints against each other in writing. "Go alone to the nearby Nature Park and come back with your submissions in sealed envelopes," I told them.

As they rose from their seats, their families questioned me about my move. "Judge Sahib will open the envelopes and grant an initial separation," I said. Both left, but did not return even after four to five hours. Eventually, I learned that instead of visiting the park, they had gone to a theatre and watched a movie together. About a year later, I received a box of sweets from them when they became proud parents.

Now, back in my office, they said, "She is our adorable daughter. We have named her Khushi." It had come to seek help for her admission in a school. Elated at their happy life, I offered them tea and gave chocolates to the baby. Handing over the girl's birth certificate and the school brochure to me, they left the office after touching my father's feet.

Later, he asked me, "Why did you not charge a fee? Is this the way to do your legal practice?" I replied, "Had I not prioritised the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) strategy over the traditional legal way, bad blood would never have ended. A sense of closure is more important than any party's victory or defeat. In family matters, ADR is the best solution."

Acknowledging that I had adopted the right course, he told my mother, "Our son is a legal practitioner, but he prefers reconciliation to litigation."

The writer is an advocate based in Pathankot

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Increased automation harmful

Refer to 'The incredible Internet of Things'; the article aptly explains how the Internet of Things (IoT) and AI are shifting human-controlled life towards precursing, machine-led automation. Though seemingly alarmist, it serves as a timely warning in this fast-changing, technology-driven age. Moreover, the present situation reflects remarkable technological progress alongside a growing gap in regulation. However, until safety concerns are fully addressed, high-risk operations should be kept in abeyance. Since IoT and AI are human creations, systems must be designed, regulated and controlled securely before increased automation turns into catastrophe.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

Selective data interpretation

Refer to 'Debunking the destitute Bangladesh myth'; archaic stereotypes about this small nation persist despite compelling evidence of advancement in purchasing power, public health and social indicators. Such realities underscore that economic assessments are far more nuanced than commonly presumed. Simultaneously, comparisons with India must account for disparities in scale, diversity and structural complexities. Selective interpretation of data can prove misleading when divorced from context. The emphasis should be on a balanced appraisal and on deriving insights from each other's developmental trajectories.

EKAASH BHARDWAJ, KAPURTHALA

Relook at theaterisation

Refer to 'Theaterisation the right way'; the IAF has made its apprehensions known that this step may further divide the already depleted fleet of the IAF. Furthermore, if and when theatre commands come up, the three Service Chiefs will reportedly have no operational role, but only logistical and administrative functions. The theatre commanders will call the shots. Talking about jointness, were the armed forces disjointed when we fought and won the 1971 war?

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

Data security a challenge

Refer to 'Myths alarm'; Anthropic's AI model reflects a serious dual-use dilemma — strengthening financial defences while posing systemic risks if misused. Restricting access through a vetted partner framework such as Project Glasswing is a prudent safeguard. The Finance Ministry's advice for banks to collaborate closely with CERT-In is timely. Concerns over data security and alignment risks warrant caution. A coordinated regulatory approach across the US, UK and India, along with controlled deployment by Anthropic, is essential to safeguard global financial stability.

VIJAY KUMAR KATIHAL, PANCHKULA

SIT of no help in corruption probe

Our country abounds in corrupt politicians. Whenever any minister, MLA or senior officer is caught in a corruption case, immediately an SIT (special investigation team) is constituted to placate the public and pave the way to rule without interruption. With the passage of time, people forget and new innings start. Has embezzled money ever been recovered from the accused? Nothing comes out of SITs; it is wastage of taxpayers' money and precious time too. In other countries, such VIPs are fined, besides misappropriated money being recovered from them.

BANSI RAM, GARHSANKAR

Ode to The Tribune

Here are a few lines I have penned as an ode to The Tribune: O Tribune, you're not just a newspaper. You're Punjab's pulse in print. You have stood tall since 1881, when the British ruled and truth was a sin. I met you in college, 1967; young eyes, empty mind. Classroom gave me degree. You gave me *diha*, logic, life... You're not just news. You're *miti*. You're the diary of a region. Gazette for *sarkar*, Encyclopaedia for *janta*.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Time to enforce carrying capacity of Char Dham



DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

AS the mercury rises in most parts of the country, particularly north-west India, all roads lead to the hills in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Besides popular tourist destinations like Shimla, Kulu, Manali, Nainital, Mussoorie and Dharamsala, people also flock to religious destinations in the hills.

The summer season coincides with the annual pilgrimage to the Char Dham — Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri. In view of the ecological disasters in recent decades — extreme weather events, devastating floods, landslides, subsidence — serious concerns have been raised about the environmental impact of unbridled tourism in the hilly areas. Many expert panels and petitions in courts have called for measures to prevent disasters in the hills.

Several popular destinations, particularly the Char Dham, are located inside the higher Himalayas. The region consisting of narrow valleys and glacial basins is geologically young and tectonically active. The presence

of the Main Central Thrust — an active tectonic zone where immense geological forces are still at work — is critical. The rocks and slopes are prone to landslides when under stress from rainfall or seismic activity.

Major shrines are closely linked to glacier-fed river systems, making them highly sensitive to climatic variations. Alpine meadows, high-altitude lakes and fragile vegetation zones have low resilience to disturbance. Therefore, traditionally, the region has had low human activity. But the seasonal influx of humans disturbs the ecosystem, putting additional pressure on land, water and infrastructure, besides causing pollution due to the large number of cars and buses, and inadequate waste disposal systems.

The threat to the Himalayan ecology due to growing human activity (tourism, construction activity, large projects, etc.) has now been well recognised among policymakers due to the pressure from courts and environmental groups, but little action is seen on the ground. For instance, several directives of the Supreme Court, high courts and the National Green Tribunal have talked about adopting the carrying capacity approach.

State governments and local administrations initiate some measures as directed by the court and then retract. In the past five years, the Uttarakhand government has been issuing directives to



INSUFFICIENT: The government has been issuing directives to limit the number of daily visitors to Char Dham.

limit the number of daily visitors to Char Dham, but it eventually kept withdrawing them. In 2021, the number of daily visitors was capped at 1000 for Badrinath, 800 for Kedarnath, 600 for Gangotri and 400 for Yamunotri. This was done due to pandemic considerations and not carrying capacity concerns.

After the Joshimath subsidence episode, a quota was fixed for visitors to Kedarnath and Badrinath. It was subsequently increased and eventually withdrawn. This year too, the Chief Minister has announced that there would be no cap on visitors, and a publicity campaign has been launched to attract visitors from all over the country. The only requirement is mandatory online pre-registration.

Such a policy response flies in the face of scientific evi-

dence about the carrying capacity of the hill ecosystems. A 2025 study published by scientists from Veer Chandra Singh Garhwal Uttarakhand University of Horticulture and Forestry and GB Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment worked out the carrying capacity for the Char Dham based on three key geological indices — elevation, slope, and vegetation cover. An analysis of the snow-covered area of glaciers (Chombari Bamak, Bhagirath Kharak, Gangotri and Yamunotri glaciers) in and around the four shrines showed that all have retreated substantially during 2002-2020.

The highest retreat was seen in the Gangotri glacier (22.36 m per year), followed by Yamunotri (20 m per year), Badrinath (17.32 m per year) and Kedarnath (14.14 m per

year). Analysis of the climate data (1990-2020) indicated a significant increasing trend in the temperature in all the sites for three seasons — pre-monsoon, monsoon and post-monsoon.

Biodiversity is also threatened as the Dham are situated inside or on the periphery of protected areas — Badrinath temple lies near the Nanda Devi National Park, Kedarnath in the Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary, Gangotri in the Gangotri National Park, while Yamunotri is in the vicinity of Govind Pashu Vihar National Park and Sanctuary.

Based on the analysis, the researchers arrived at the sustainable daily limit of visitors for the four Dham — Badrinath (between 11,833 and 15,778), Kedarnath (9,833-13,111), Gangotri (6,133-8,178) and Yamunotri (4,620-6,160). In addition, they have suggested other measures like the regulation of vehicles and waste recycling. The methodology developed by this group may be applied to calculate the carrying capacity of other sites and towns in the hills, according to the study. Similar studies have been done elsewhere too. Shimla, according to some assessments, has already exceeded its carrying capacity.

The courts have done their bit in prodding state governments to wake up. In June 2024, the Supreme Court directed that all 13 Himalayan states and Union Territories should assess their carrying capacity in a scientific manner

so that appropriate action can be taken. The environment ministry later informed the court that it had circulated guidelines for assessing the carrying capacity of hill stations, including cities and eco-sensitive zones, in 2020 itself.

So far, state governments have been taking a piecemeal approach to this question by appointing expert committees or taking cosmetic measures like installing air monitoring equipment. Instead, hill states need to develop comprehensive, evidence-based guidelines and policies to address the problem.

The cost of inaction would be huge, as already demonstrated in a series of disasters in the hills from the Kedarnath floods to the Joshimath subsidence. While climate change and geological fragility are important causative factors for extreme weather events, cloudbursts and landslides, etc., their impact gets accentuated due to human-induced factors like tourism beyond carrying capacity, unplanned urbanisation, deforestation and large projects. They are all interconnected, too.

Policymakers and politicians must realise that climate action plans, sustainability goals and disaster risk reduction all need to work in cohesion. The focus of all planning and action should be preservation of the environment, sustainability and local livelihoods, and not encouragement of uncontrolled commercial and other forms of tourism.

State governments have been adopting a piecemeal approach by appointing expert committees or taking cosmetic measures.

Trinco story travels a long way



MAJ GEN ASHOK K MEHTA (RETD)
FORMER FOUNDING MEMBER, DEFENCE PLANNING STAFF

THE Gulf War has at least had one positive effect — the creation of larger strategic oil reserves. One of the most significant measures is the Trincomalee (Trinco) Oil Tank Farms project in Sri Lanka.

Languisht since 1987, the development of the Trinco Energy Hub is now on the anvil, to be connected with multi-purpose pipelines and power grids between the two countries. In a smart diplomatic move, New Delhi sent Vice-President CP Radhakrishnan, who also happens to be Tamilian, to Sri Lanka recently, in what was the first bilateral visit by any Vice-President to Sri Lanka.

The Radhakrishnan call was significant for three reasons: it focused on transforming Trinco as an energy hub; it helped revive the "Tamil question"; and it embedded India's strategic stature as first responder in the neighbourhood. Like the landslide political victory of the Rashtriya Swatantra Party in Nepal, Sri Lanka's left-wing National People's Power (NPP) party stormed to power in 2024.

In its election manifesto NPP had said: Trinco oil tank farms will be renovated with support of a friendly foreign country. President

Anum Kumara Dissanayake, a former Marxist from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party, which in the 1980s had opposed the 1987 India-Sri Lanka Accord, has recognised Delhi's preeminence in the region and highlighted its Neighbourhood First policy.

Last month, with Radhakrishnan and Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri flanking him, Sri Lanka Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath called the Trinco project a permanent solution to the developing energy crisis in the Indian subcontinent, whilst referring to the ongoing war in the Persian Gulf. Misri, earlier Deputy High Commissioner in Colombo, briefed the media in Colombo on several bilateral matters, including the Trinco Energy Hub.

Languisht since 1987, the Trinco Energy Hub will be connected with multi-purpose pipelines and power grids between Sri Lanka and India.

It will be instructive to recall the strategic importance of Trinco Harbour and Pertas penned by former Sri Lanka Admiral Ravi Wijegunaratne, who noted that the Dutch, French and British colonial powers contested Trincomalee because it was the gateway to the Bay of Bengal. British Admiral Lord Nelson described Trinco as "the finest and deepest harbour in the world".

For Sri Lanka, Trincomalee is a 'national asset'. In the past, several trade unions and political parties have protested energy cooperation with India, seeing it as a ceding of sovereignty. That's why, despite several agreements and MoUs, none could fructify.

In 2003, Indian Oil Corporation signed a 35-year lease to develop 15 oil tanks, with an annual payment of \$100,000. Radhakrishnan discussed the renovation of oil tanks and laying of a multi-purpose oil transfer pipeline between Kamikal/Chennai and Trincomalee. A solar power project is also under construction at Sampore in Trinco. The iron is hot for the Trinco Energy hub to be finally executed.

Traditionally, Sri Lankan leaders used to say: "We look to India for our security and China for economic growth". After the 2022 economic meltdown and debt crisis, the tables have been turned, especially after India provided the \$4 billion financial lifeline.

Still, the Trinco Energy Hub is breaking news. Colombo's *Daily Mirror*, a premier newspaper, described it as follows on April 22: "It is no longer a matter of strategic vision but how urgently it can be executed". What a long way the Trinco story has travelled.

Chullahs in, clean cooking out



PRABHAT SHARMA & SURESH R IYER
THE ENERGY AND RESOURCES INSTITUTE

ACROSS Indian cities, long queues outside LPG distribution centres are becoming a daily reality. Inside homes, the steady blue flame of clean cooking is flickering, replaced in some cases by smoky chullahs burning firewood, charcoal and dung cakes. What appears to be a temporary supply disruption is, in fact, a deeper crisis. This shift has reignited concerns over air pollution and public health, particularly among vulnerable populations.

The current situation also exposes a critical vulnerability: the fragility of behavioural gains. Over the past decade, India has made remarkable progress in expanding access to clean cooking fuels through large-scale initiatives. Once households revert to traditional fuels, they may not easily transition back, risking a long-term setback in clean cooking adoption.

This crisis, therefore, must be seen as a wake-up call, an opportunity to rethink and strengthen India's clean cooking ecosystem.

One promising alternative that has gained attention is ethanol. Produced domestically from agricultural feedstock, ethanol offers several advantages: it reduces

dependence on imports, requires relatively lower processing, and burns more cleanly than traditional biomass.

However, ethanol is not a standalone solution. Scaling up its use for cooking would require significant agricultural inputs, raising concerns about land use, food security and water conservation. Infrastructure for safe storage, distribution, and household use would need substantial investment. Ethanol can complement India's clean cooking mix, but it cannot replace LPG at scale without careful planning and trade-offs.

Other alternatives, such as electric cooking, biogas, and solar-based solutions, also hold potential. Decentralised biogas systems can provide sustainable solutions in rural settings, while solar technologies can serve as supplementary options. However, these solutions require investment, infrastructure and behavioural change factors that cannot be addressed overnight.

India must urgently adopt a multi-pronged strategy to build resilience in its cooking energy systems. First, diversifying LPG import sources and strengthening strategic reserves can help mitigate supply disruptions. Second, enhancing domestic production capacity and improving supply chain efficiency are critical to ensuring consistent availability. Third, targeted subsidies and financial support must be maintained to protect vulnerable households from price shocks.

Equally important is accelerating the transition to alternative clean cooking solutions. Public awareness campaigns should reinforce the health and environmental benefits of clean cooking, discouraging a return to biomass even during periods of crisis.

The LPG shortage is not merely a logistical challenge; it is a stress test for India's energy security and public health commitments. It highlights the risks of over-reliance on a single fuel and the urgent need for diversification. If India fails to act decisively, the current crisis could mark a dangerous step backward in the country's journey toward clean air, healthier lives, and sustainable energy for all.

Ethanol can complement India's clean cooking mix, but it cannot replace LPG at scale without careful planning and trade-offs.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- Large strong box (5)
- Be fulfilled (4,4)
- Corrupt illicit gain (5)
- Share equally (2,6)
- Reduce sharply (5)
- Record of ship's voyage (3)
- An abrasion (6)
- Unregarded (6)
- Light-hearted (3)
- Make suitable (5)
- Become insufficient (3,5)
- A silken fabric (5)
- An untested victory (8)
- Fit of depression (5)

DOWN

- Undeserved misfortune (4,4)
- Blamey (4,4)
- Highly ornamented (6)
- US Lone Star state (5)
- Weighty (5)
- Crowded together (5)
- Section of relay race (3)
- Make fun of (3)
- An unexpected benefit (8)
- Take unawares (8)
- Of the same opinion (6)
- Roam in search of prey (5)
- Sharply divergent course (5)
- Loud yell of jubilation (5)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Addis Ababa, 6 Itch, 10 Motto, 11 Misgiving, 12 Distaste, 13 Totem, 15 Pleased, 17 Heathen, 19 Interim, 21 Intense, 22 Haunt, 24 Distrust, 27 Insinuate, 28 Alone, 29 Site, 30 Ready money.

Down: 1 Acme, 2 Detriment, 3 Short, 4 Bemused, 5 Beseech, 7 Taint, 8 High-minded, 9 Distract, 14 Split hairs, 16 Scrutiny, 18 Hands down, 20 Mediate, 21 Instruct, 23 Upset, 25 Rearm, 26 Bevy.

SU DO KU

9 5 8 6 2 3

1 2 1 4 6 5

4 3 6 2 4 5 8

7 3 6 2 4 5 8

2 7 6

6 8 3 7 4 7

3 7 2 1 8 9

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

APRIL 29, 2026, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1948
- Vaisakh Shaka 9
- Vaisakh Purnimite 16
- Hijri 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 13, up to 7:52 pm
- Harshana Yoga up to 8:52 pm
- Hast Nakshatra up to 12:17 am
- Moon in Virgo sign

FORECAST

CITY	WEDNESDAY 05:42 HRS	
	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	35	23
New Delhi	38	27
Amritsar	36	23
Bathinda	38	24
Jalandhar	36	23
Ludhiana	38	23
Bhiani	40	27
Hisar	40	27
Sirsa	40	26
Dharamsala	32	19
Manali	—	—
Shimla	25	19
Srinagar	24	10
Jammu	38	24
Kargil	18	05
Leh	17	04
Dehradun	35	20
Mussoorie	25	16

THE ASIAN AGE

29 APRIL 2026

WB lesson: In future, EC can't keep real voters out

The voting in the second phase of election to the West Bengal Assembly on Wednesday will mark itself as one of the darkest moments in India's electoral history as it keeps out a large number of people from the process for no fault of theirs. The episode becomes all the more unparadigmatic as it happened on the watch of the Supreme Court of India and the Election Commission of India, institutions created to protect the constitutional, fundamental and democratic rights of the people.

The electoral roll for West Bengal had 7.66 crore names before the EC went into the special intensive revision (SIR) in November last year. The process has legitimacy in that it seeks to clean up the voter lists, the fundamental document for the conduct of elections, by ensuring that the names of all and only eligible voters appear in it. The EC published the first draft roll on December 16 with 7.08 crore voters; the final roll published on February 23 this year had 6.44 crore names. The final list left out about 60 lakh people for "logical discrepancies". This number was brought down to 27.10 lakh after the mammoth work done by the EC with active help of the Supreme Court that drafted in the officers of the subordinate judiciary in West Bengal and neighbouring states to do some of it. The appellate tribunals have until now cleared less than 2,000 of the more than 27 lakh appeals pending before it for inclusion in the voter lists.

In short, more than 27 lakh people who make up about four per cent of the total electorate in the state will have no right to vote in this election for the Election Commission failed to complete a task it had taken upon itself. The EC is the constitutionally mandated body to conduct elections to both Houses of Parliament as well as the state legislative assemblies on the principle of adult suffrage. It has been vested with extensive powers to ensure the sanctity of the process, which also includes the preparation of the electoral rolls.

The Election Commission has failed itself, the people of West Bengal, the Constitution and the very idea of electoral democracy by not ensuring that every single eligible voter was part of the democratic process to elect the government in the state. Those at the helm of the EC have forfeited their right to continue in office when lakhs of citizens were made to watch helplessly as governance is being run with no mandate from them. A small swing in the vote percentages can be decisive in an Indian election; and four per cent is an unacceptably high figure.

In a larger sense, the Constitution is an article of faith between the State and the citizen about some of the solemn rights the latter would enjoy. They may be fundamental rights or constitutional rights; but they are inviolable. The Supreme Court of India is mandated to step in if and when the State uses its might to trample on those rights, be they belong even to a single person. Unfortunately, the apex court has also failed to discharge its duties by being silent when large numbers of people were kept out of the democratic process.

The Indian people and Parliament will have to look into these very serious lapses on the part of the constitutional bodies in upsetting the foundational principles of this country sooner or later. The earlier they do it, the better for Indian democracy.

Trump must tone down rhetoric

Inexcusable as it is, political violence has no place in a democracy. But, in these fractious times in which the US presidency has produced more dramatic moments than all of Shakespeare's plays on the nobility combined, it was always on the cards that someone would be ideologically motivated to take a shot at the US President Donald Trump.

It is, however, the conspiracy theorists who feed morbidly off such events as failed assassinations that have come to be associated with one of the most protected men on the planet. As to stress the point, "staged" became a trending topic soon after Cole Thomas Allen failed in charging the final security gate to the ballroom of the Washington Hilton.

Making false flag accusations being common enough, a former CIA officer pointed out that the secret service first secured vice-president J.D. Vance even as Melania Trump dived for cover and the President himself was said to be looking around at the chaos post the gunshots fired.

It demeans American political culture to go to such extremes as to suggest anyone would play with their lives and those of the people closest to them in family and government in order to make an impact, win an election or gain public sympathy though Thomas Matthew Crooks' sniper attempt at Mr Trump which missed by a centimetre helped him seal the presidential run in November 2024. And yet it cannot be ignored that, however depraved Mr Trump may seem to his opponents, he hardly deserved the barbs thrown at him or his family.

The late-night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel may have crossed many red lines in his continuous diatribes against Mr Trump but, even by his standards, his gallows humour calling Melania Trump an "expectant widow" was too far out to be called civilised. No wonder then that the US President is calling for his sacking again by the network that hosts his show.

Hate may have no limits, but it is the least expectation in public life or its fringes that they must be civil, no matter the provocation. The problem is that Mr Trump does not believe any rules of engagement bind him to civilised discourse. After all, he is on record with epithets while ranting at Iran and Iran's ambassador to which he is well entitled. It is worth noting now that Mr Trump himself is calling for a cooling of rhetoric and unity after the shooting incident.



AAP-BJP duel: Chadha no knight in shining armour



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

Vice-President C.P. Radhakrishnan, Rajya Sabha Chairman and the AAP has given the legal stamp to the Raghav Chadha-led split in the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Upper House when he accepted the merger of the seven-member group into the BJP. It does not mean that the legal questions that arise in this connection are over. Of the seven, six MPs are from Punjab, and their terms end in 2028. It is the AAP's overwhelming majority in the Punjab Assembly that has put these six members in the Rajya Sabha. The members of the Upper House are elected by the members of the Assembly. It is the 92 AAP members of the Punjab Assembly who had elected the six Rajya Sabha members. The seventh, Swati Malhiwal, got elected from the Delhi Legislative Assembly.

The courts may have to consider the issue if it comes before them whether the Rajya Sabha members who are elected by fellow party members of the Assembly can break free from the party as easily as members of the Lok Sabha where the voters are not members of a party. The argument will be made that members of the State Assembly vote in the election for the Rajya Sabha members as members of the Assembly and not as members of the party.

Except for Ms Malhiwal, whose term ends in 2028, the terms of other six will end in 2028, which also marks the end of the term of the Punjab Assembly. Even if the six had remained with the AAP, they may not have been re-elected because it is unlikely that the AAP will retain

the 92 seats that it has in the outgoing Assembly. The BJP, of course, cannot hope to ever manage the kind of victory that the AAP had pulled off in Punjab. It might seem that the BJP has started to dream that if AAP could do it in Punjab, perhaps it is not beyond the BJP's scope as well. But the BJP is a marked party of the urban Hindus in the state. It cannot ever win over the Sikh-Jat farmers in the state much less the Dalits spread across the Deras.

The Congress has its base among the Sikh-Jat farmers as well. This constituency is not the sole monopoly of the BJP. The question, which is necessarily speculative, is whether the BJP will accept them as its own before the list of BJP faithful is long enough. Yes, the BJP does accommodate "outsiders" depending on their clout on other grounds, which includes their financial and social status. In the long term, the seven might want to emerge as the face of the Punjab BJP, but it is a reasonably unrealistic proposition right now.

Mr Chadha has indeed emerged as the leader of the six. Ms Malhiwal had already made up her mind about the BJP after her bitter fallout with the AAP supreme Arvind Kejriwal. Mr Chadha, by leading the six Rajya Sabha members, has shown that he can be useful to the BJP in helping out the AAP further. Through intimidations and inducements, the BJP may be dreaming of getting a large number of the 92 AAP legislators in Punjab, and Chadha could be the man who would facilitate the large-scale defection. Mr Kejriwal and his AAP lieutenants are going to throw something like a "don't snitch" campaign around the AAP legislators. Mr Kejriwal, for all his faults as an obsessively focused leader, is not above such tactics. Both parties don't think the same ideological orientation of nationalism and cultural rootedness. The BJP would like to keep itself in the wings. The plan that brought Eknath Shinde out of the Shiv Sena led by Uddhav Thackeray and how in the end he was marginalised is the kind of plan that the BJP would like to execute in Punjab. Unlike Mr Shinde, Mr Chadha is not a grassroots man, and he may find it difficult to connect through the process which will split the AAP in Punjab. It is possible that the two wings will even attempt to topple the Bhagwant Singh Mann government if it senses that the situation does not favour it much. The BJP will then have to content itself with the additional seven Rajya Sabha members. The AAP government in Punjab was the most unexpected turn. Arvind Kejriwal had displayed enough leadership skills to take advantage of the

LETTERS DON'T MALIGN JU

Funded and nurtured by the likes of Aurobindo Ghosh and Rabindranath Tagore, Jadavpur University was a centre of resistance against the British rule. The students of JU continue to carry forward the legacy of academic excellence and the commitment to raising their voice in support of democracy and social justice. Rather than staying home in safety, they took the trouble to regularly cook and distribute food among stranded, starving local people during the Covid-19 lockdown. JU has always been a high-ranking university. In the NIRF Ranking 2025, JU ranked ninth among universities, 18th overall and first among state public universities. Branding those students as anti-nationals shows signs of an autocratic mindset, intolerant of peaceful agitation and dissent.

Sujit De Kolkata

CREDIBLE NO MORE

THE IDEA of elections as a democratic festival appears increasingly distant when contrasted with earlier practices. In Phulpur, Prabhudatt Brahmachari campaigned in silence, relying on written communication and symbolic presence. In the same constituency, Nehru, despite being a national campaigner, actively campaigned for himself. Such restraint reflected a politics grounded in credibility rather than visibility. Today's elections, driven by relentless spectacle, mark a shift from participatory ethos to power-centric contestation, raising concerns about the erosion of democratic culture.

Harsh Pawaria Kolkata

A TRUE SCANDAL

AS ONE OF INDIA'S most reputed IT companies, Tata Consultancy Services has long been regarded as a symbol of professionalism, integrity and ethical business practices. However, the allegations emerging from its Nashik operations have raised serious questions about corporate governance and accountability. Such incidents not only tarnish the image of a globally respected organisation but also risk eroding public trust in the broader corporate sector. It is imperative that a thorough and transparent investigation be conducted. Swift and decisive action must be taken against those found guilty, while also ensuring that innocent employees are not adversely affected or unfairly targeted in the process.

Juliel D' Cruz Mumbai

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Bhopinder Singh

Amid tussle with America's first Pope, Trump lays claim to divinity!

Christianity is the largest religion in the world, and within that, Roman Catholics are the largest single denomination, at over 1.4 billion globally. An estimated 10 per cent of the population of the United States is Catholic (70-75 million). Spiritually, the Pope is the highest authority for Catholics who are believed to be the direct successor of Saint Peter, the first leader of the Church appointed by Jesus Christ. The Pope is revered as the supreme earthly authority on all matters of faith and morals under specific conditions (such as papal infallibility). Naturally, this leads the Pope to engage on a multitude of issues, including political, though from a strictly moral and religious perspective, and not on a partisan angularity. This lens of Catholic morality can often pitch the papal perspective on either side of the political fence, depending on the issue itself — such as opposition to abortion aligns with the right-wing persuasions, whereas concerns about the environment and climate issues aligns it with the left-wing persuasions. Therefore, it is very usual for the Pope to comment on global issues of moral concern like poverty, migration, refugees, social inequities, human rights, or even war and peace. But the overarching rationale for the Pope to comment on such issues has always been rooted in Catholic spirituality and not on electoral considerations. Practising politicians across the world realise the

value of religious identity to "connect" and beseech votes in the name of religion. Catholicism is no different, and from Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Andrzej Duda in Poland, Luis da Silva in Brazil, even John F. Kennedy and Joe Biden (the only two Catholic US Presidents) have signalled Catholic values to appeal to the electorate. However, the Catholic Church has not endorsed any candidate or party, centrally or institutionally. Like many other Americans, US President's Donald Trump is also a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), who was baptised and raised in the Presbyterian Church. Politically astute, President Trump has defined his identity as a "non-denominational" Christian and therefore seeks to cut across the intra-faith divide. Mr Trump has framed his political positions in such a way that it appeals to a conservative Catholic values when it comes to gender policy, religious institutions rights, court appointment of conservative judges, and, most sharply, on abortion. His hard positions ensured that he over-pipped a Catholic Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential elections, with 52 per cent vote share amongst overall Catholic voters, with 55-60 per cent of White Catholics preferring Mr Trump. Though Mr Trump finally lost the 2020 elections, his successful campaign in 2024 saw the overall Catholic preference increase to 55 per cent, with White Catholics voting even higher to 60-65 per cent. When Pope Leo XIV (born, Robert Francis Prevost)

became the first American pontiff to be elected by the College of the Cardinals in 2025, President Trump declared it was "such an honour" and a "great honour for the United States". However, the moral and rather fickle Mr Trump has had a consistent history of abrupt breakups with former friends and allies, especially if they take a principled position that is contrary to that of Mr Trump. From allies like Narendra (or even India sometimes), to former aides like Mike Pence, John Bolton, Rex Tillerson, James Mattis, etc., anyone can be thrown "under the bus" if they disagree with Mr Trump. The latest to join the bandwagon is Pope Leo XIV, who had earlier commented that there was "an delusion of omnipotence" fueling the US-Israel war with Iran. This elicited a stinging reaction from Mr Trump, who insisted that he was "not a fan of Pope Leo", and that he thought that the Pontiff was "not doing a good job". Mr Trump's petty and thinned-skinned railing on social media continued with "Pope Leo is WEAK on Crime, and terrible for Foreign Policy". It was incredibly followed by a come-back picture of himself as a Jesus-like figure curing a man! Basically, Mr Trump has not just rubbished the Pope, but also took on himself the portraits and imagery of even-higher divinity and authority! Now the proverbial chickens are coming home to roost, as many die-hard supporters of Mr Trump's theatrics, bravado, and hate-mongering wake up to the reality that in Mr Trump's world of "othering",

no one is spared, not even the presumptive "own". It is a wake-up call for the likes of Mr Trump's far-right Prime Minister, Giorgio Meloni, who had been a staunch supporter of Trump-style politics, till now. Her deputy prime minister has weighed-in with: "If anyone is working hard on the issue of peace and conflict resolution, it's Pope Leo. Attacking the Pope, a symbol of peace and a spiritual guide for billions of Catholics, doesn't seem like a useful or intelligent thing to do." But as the currency of manufactured hate is so powerful, the reality that no one is spared the ambition of an unhinged authoritarian like Mr Trump is often forgotten, till the fire reaches the doorsteps of those cheering the inferno. Many former aides, friends, and allies of Mr Trump are now struggling to explain the deterioration in their relations with the President. Within America, the writing is on the wall as Mr Trump suffers the highest disapproval ratings and the trend is worsening with the unending Iran war. Pope Leo has contextualised the fake religiosity of politicians like Donald Trump by referencing an Old Testament passage from Isaiah: "Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen — your hands are full of blood". Hence, religion outlives the politics of convenience. The writer is a retired Lieutenant-general and a former lieutenant-governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry

quick BITES

INDICATORS	%
Sensex	76,886.91 -0.54
Nifty 50	23,995.70 -0.40
S&P 500*	7,143.11 -0.43
Dollar (₹)	94.55 -0.37
Pound Sterling (₹)	127.55 -0.05
Euro (₹)	110.55 -0.02
Gold (10gm)*	₹ 149,135.2,586 -1.72
Brent crude (\$/bbl)	111.21 2.75
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.980 0.53
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.368 0.032

* As of 8:30 PM IST

ideaForge inks pact with Japan's AI company

Drones tech firm ideaForge Technology has inked a pact with Japanese AI-tech company Digital Media Professionals (DMP) to develop next-generation AI drones. The pact, ideaForge gain access to Japanese market, it said. The partnership is focused ideaForge will provide the DIT integration to its unmanned aerial vehicle platforms and DMP will be market partner for ideaForge's drone solutions portfolio in Japan.



Brigade acquires 5.72 acre in Hyd via auction

Brigade Enterprises has acquired 5.72 acre in Hyderabad through auction for about ₹250 crore to build housing project. The purchase at Osmar Nagar was at a price of ₹44 crore per acre, excluding registration costs. Amr Mysore, executive director, Brigade Enterprises said, "Hyderabad emerged as one of the most dynamic real estate markets in the country and this land parcel is a strategic fit."

Bondada posts profit after tax of ₹63 cr in Q4

Bondada Engineering said its Q4 profit after tax stood at ₹63 crore, compared to ₹56 crore in the same quarter last year, registering a 13 per cent growth. It reported revenue of ₹194 crore, as against ₹174 crore previous year, a 28 per cent year-on-year growth. "The financial performance for FY26 reflects strong order book conversion, and financial management," said Dr. Bondada Ravahendra Rao, company CMD.

Bagmane Prime public offer to open on May 5

Blackstone-backed Bagmane Prime Office REIT is poised to hit the capital markets with its ₹3,405 crore initial public offering (IPO), scheduled to open on May 5 and conclude on May 7. The anchor investor bidding is scheduled for May 4. The proposed IPO comprises a fresh issue of units aggregating up to ₹2,390 crore and an offer-for-sale (OFS) of units worth up to ₹1,015 crore by selling unitholder.

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Crude surge drags nifty, PS banks lead losses

Costlier crude oil begins to dent demand outlook across sectors

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, APRIL 28

Surging crude oil futures above \$110 per barrel weighed on market sentiment on Monday, dragging both equities and the rupee lower. The Sensex fell 416.72 points, or 0.54 per cent, to close at 76,886.91, led by sharp declines in banking, auto and IT stocks. However, oil & gas and capital goods stocks bucked the trend and posted gains.

The Nifty 50 slipped below the 24,000 mark to end at 23,995.70, down 97 points, or 0.40 per cent. Broader markets showed relative resilience, with the BSE mid-cap index down just 0.07 per cent and the small-cap index closing marginally higher by 0.03 per cent.

Foreign portfolio investors were net sellers of equities worth ₹2,103.74 crore, while domestic institutional investors provided support, buying shares worth ₹1,712 crore. Shipping disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, coupled with Iran's conditions for reopening the channel, kept oil markets volatile. Brent crude for June delivery traded between \$107.82 and \$112.70 per barrel, impacting oil-sensitive sectors such as auto and aviation.

"Domestic manufacturing has begun to bear the brunt of costlier and tighter supplies of petroleum products and natural gas," said Crisil. "After a morning rally, the market faced resistance near the 50-day simple moving average at 24,200/77,500 and corrected sharply. From the day's high, the market shed over 200/700 points," said Shrikant Chouhan, head, research, Kotak Securities.

PSU banks were the worst hit, Nifty PSU Bank index fell 1.5 per cent. The RBI on Monday declined pleas for more time to transition to the expected credit loss provisioning. New system will be implemented from April next year.

VOLATILE PHASE

- NIFTY-50 falls to 23,995.70, down 97 pts.
- FPIs sell equities worth ₹2,103.74 cr while DIIs buy equities worth ₹1,712 cr.
- Aramco's LPG exports halted, shipping disruptions weigh on ATF pricing and financial support.
- UAE to deploy new production capacity has brought it into conflict with regional rival Saudi Arabia at OPEC meetings.
- Higher energy prices begin to impact industrial output.
- PSU Banks correct with Nifty PSU Bank index falling 2.15%.



RUPEE decline driven by dollar gains, elevated crude oil prices.



DOMESTIC manufacturing has begun to bear the brunt of costlier and tighter supplies of petroleum products and natural gas. — CRISIL RATINGS

Rupee slides to 94.56 vs dollar

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, APRIL 28

The Indian spot rupee extended its recent losses, ending 53 paise lower at 94.68 against the US dollar. The decline was primarily driven by global dollar strength and elevated crude oil prices, which weighed on sentiment. Traders noted additional pressures on the rupee, including month-end dollar demand. SBI was reportedly buying dollars at lower levels and selling near 94.5. There was also possible front-running related to Sun Pharma's \$11.75 billion overseas acquisition, which added to the currency's weakness. "The rupee, along with its Asian peers, continues to face downward pressure as rising crude oil prices and risk-averse sentiment dominate the market," said Dilip Parmar, research analyst at HDFC Securities.

Aramco suspends LPG shipments

Dhahran, April 28: Saudi Aramco is set to suspend liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) shipments that may affect damage to its main export facility in late February disrupted supplies, said people familiar with the matter. The state-owned producer recently informed buyers that shipments from its Juaymah LPG facility would remain suspended next month. The sources declined to be identified as the information is not public. Aramco declined to comment. Exports from the Juaymah facility have been halted since a support structure collapsed, forcing buyers to seek alternative supplies. Aramco has told some buyers that repair work at Juaymah has yet to be completed, the sources said. As a result, shipments are unlikely to resume in May even if the Strait of Hormuz reopens. — Bloomberg

El Nino, high crude may drag growth pace to 5.8%

SANGEETHA G.
CHENNAI, APRIL 28

The gross domestic product (GDP) growth could slip to 5.8 per cent this year, while CPI inflation may rise to 4.8 per cent if crude oil prices hover around \$105 per barrel amid the West Asia crisis. The threat of El Nino and a below-normal monsoon could further weigh on growth and stoke inflation.

The government may also need to spend an additional ₹30,000-35,000 crore on fertilizer subsidies to support the farm sector, said Aditi Nayar, chief economist at Iera. Iera has already lowered its FY27 GDP growth forecast to 6.5 per cent and raised its inflation projection to 4.5 per cent, assuming crude prices average \$85 per barrel and retail fuel prices remain unchanged.

If crude rise to around \$105 per barrel, growth could slow further to 5.8 per cent, with inflation climbing to 4.8 per cent. India's southwest monsoon is likely to be below normal this year, with the India Meteorological Department (IMD) projecting rainfall at 92 per cent of the long period average (LPA). Historically, El Nino has led to rainfall deficits of one per cent to 22 per cent

CAUTIOUS OUTLOOK

- Threat of El Nino, below-normal monsoon can further weigh on growth and stoke inflation.
- If crude rise to \$105 per barrel, growth can slow further to 5.8%, with inflation climbing to 4.8%.
- Fertiliser availability remains adequate for now, but supply disruptions could emerge if crisis persists.



and corresponding declines in kharif output of up to 23 per cent over the past two decades. In about half of these instances, even the rabi crop failed to offset losses, resulting in an overall contraction in agricultural output.

However, higher reservoir levels compared to last year and historical averages may offer some cushion, particularly if early monsoon rainfall is weak. Adequate rainfall in August is essential for crop development, while excessive rain in September can be counter-productive. Farmers may also adapt by shifting to less water-intensive crops. The unfolding West Asia

crisis adds another layer of uncertainty. Fertiliser availability remains adequate for now, but supply disruptions could emerge if crisis persists, especially as imports typically pick up ahead of the kharif sowing season. A weak monsoon could dampen rural demand, affecting sectors such as automobiles, tractors, construction, cement, steel and FMCG. Power, air conditioners, refrigerators and beverages may benefit from higher temperatures. The government has taken initial steps to contain inflation by moderating excise duties on fuel, avoiding an immediate rise in pump prices.

India, China trade gap hits \$112 bn

SANGEETHA G.
CHENNAI, APRIL 28

India's imports from China touched \$116.6 bn in FY26, with about 66 per cent, valued at \$82.6 bn, concentrated in four sectors: electronics, machinery, computers and organic chemicals.

China accounts for 43 per cent of India's electronics imports, 40 per cent of machinery and computer imports, and 44 per cent of organic chemicals. These are critical inputs that feed directly into India's manufacturing ecosystem, said GTRI. Trade Research Initiative (GTRI).

Indian industry relies heavily on China for electronic components, EV batteries, solar modules, APIs and specialty chemicals. These are difficult to replace at scale. "Dependency on a single supplier for critical inputs leaves

pharma, electronics and clean energy vulnerable to disruptions, whether geopolitical or commercial. At the same time, India's exports to China remain limited, making the relationship one-sided," Ajay Srivastava, GTRI said.

India needs to build do-mestic capacity in key sectors to diversify supply chains. Limiting dependency on any single country to below 30 per cent imports in critical sectors is key, GTRI said. India's exports to China stand below FY2021 levels of \$105.5 bn, while imports have more than doubled to \$131.6 bn. Trade deficit grew 155 per cent to \$112 bn over five years. About 98.5 per cent of imports from China are industrial goods, with electronics, machinery, computers and organic chemicals accounting for \$82.6 bn.

Maruti sells 24.2 L cars in FY26, posts ₹14,679-cr annual profit

New Delhi, April 28: Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) on Tuesday said its total vehicle sales in FY26 were at a record 24.22 lakh units against 22.34 lakh units in FY25.

The automaker also reported consolidated net profit grew 1.24 per cent to ₹14,679.5 crore for FY26, as it gears up to add capacity to meet rising demand, having reached 100 per cent capacity utilisation at its existing facilities, MSI chairman R. C. Bhargava said. — PTI

added. Domestic sales in FY26 stood at 19.74 lakh units compared to 19.01 lakh units in FY25, while exports were at 4.47 lakh units against 3.32 lakh units a year ago, it added. Maruti Suzuki has earmarked a capex of ₹14,000 crore for FY27, as it gears up to add capacity to meet rising demand, having reached 100 per cent capacity utilisation at its existing facilities, MSI chairman R. C. Bhargava said. — PTI

IIP growth slips to 5-mth low of 4.1%

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
NEW DELHI, APRIL 28

India's industrial production growth slowed to a five-month low of 4.1 per cent in March, weighed down by weak performance in manufacturing, power and electricity output amid the West Asia crisis. February saw 6.2 per cent

growth, National Statistics Office (NSO) said. Factory output, measured by the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), expanded by 3.9 per cent in March. It indicates higher input costs and supply chain disruptions are beginning to impact production mar-

gins and demand. Manufacturing output growth remained subdued at 4.3 per cent in March compared with four per cent in the year-ago month. Power generation rose 0.8 per cent, sharply lower than the 7.5 per cent expansion seen a year ear-

lier. Mining output growth improved to 5.5 per cent from 1.2 per cent a year ago. The non-core segment of industrial output rose by a robust 7.8 per cent, shrugging off the anticipated adverse impact of the West Asia crisis, said Aditi Nayar, chief economist, Iera.

Inflationary trend may hit credit demand: Shriram Fin

Shriram Finance reported a 41 per cent rise in consolidated net profit to ₹3,020.9 cr in the fourth quarter of FY26, sustaining steady growth and profitability. MD and CEO Parag Sharma told **Falaknaaz Syed** that a potential fuel price increase and lower rainfall could impact the rural economy and slow credit demand. Excerpts:

Credit growth guidance Initially, we estimated credit growth of 13 per cent in the coming quarters. However, given the possibility of a fuel price hike due to the West Asia conflict, the resulting inflationary trend, and the risk of lower rainfall, we believe growth of around 15-18 per cent is still achievable. Deposit growth, currently at 14-15 per cent, may moderate to 11-12 per cent. We expect to maintain a net interest margin of 8.5-8.6 per cent.

Cash deployment We disburse close to ₹60,000 cr in a quarter and we have received ₹40,000 cr in equity. We expect this capital to be largely utilised over the next four to five months. The funds will be used for debt and to retire some debt.

Interest rates If inflation remains a concern, repo rate hikes by the RBI are possible. Currently, our cost of liabilities stands at around 8.59 per cent.

New products We are not introducing new products but are increasing our focus on financing new commercial vehicles.

OpenAI falls short on sales, user growth targets

San Francisco, April 28: OpenAI recently failed to meet its own goals for new user acquisition and sales, facing internal concerns that company may struggle to support its spending on AI infrastructure, according to a news report. The company fell short of several monthly sales targets in 2026 after rival Anthropic gained ground in coding and enterprise markets, the report said. Its ChatGPT chatbot also

didn't hit the company's target of one billion weekly active users by the end of 2025, it said. Chief financial officer Sarah Friar, in conversations with other company leaders, has expressed concerns that if OpenAI doesn't increase sales fast enough, it may not be able to afford its future computing needs, it said. There are growing worries among investors that artificial intelligence (AI)

developers and big tech firms are spending too much on data centers and chips for AI, with an uncertain payoff. OpenAI alone has previously said it's committed to spend more than \$1.4 trillion on artificial intelligence infrastructure. To finance those bets, OpenAI and Anthropic have increasingly tapped an overlapping group of venture funds and tech companies. — Bloomberg

DIGITAL ASSIST Company trains artificial intelligence model on large databases of proteins

Eli Lilly signs deal with AI start-up

Indianapolis, April 28: Eli Lilly & Co. has signed a deal with the AI start-up Profluent worth up to \$2.25 billion to find new ways to edit DNA, the company's latest bet that artificial intelligence (AI) can transform drugmaking. Under the collaboration, announced Tuesday, Lilly will have the exclusive rights to new medicines that Profluent develops and will pay up to \$2.25 billion if the drugs hit certain milestones. Typically, it takes over \$1

billion to develop a new drug. About 90 per cent of candidates fail before making it to the finish line. The pharmaceutical industry is pouring billions of dollars into the idea that AI can make the process of finding new drugs faster, cheaper and more successful. No AI-designed drug has won US approval, but many have entered clinical trials. Profluent, whose investors include Jeff Bezos, says it can use AI to design more powerful versions of Crispr, the Nobel Prize-

winning gene editing tool that said Profluent chief executive Pro AI Madani. While current gene editing tools typically fix small errors in DNA, Profluent aims to make drugs that rewrite entire passages of

genetic instructions, opening door to treating more conditions. "This has huge implications for genetic medicines," Madani said. Profluent has trained its AI model on large databases of proteins. Profluent's scientists prompt the AI model with a disease to target, and the technology designs a drug that might treat it. Lilly is working to build a pipeline of future medicines to power its next era. Part of this is increasing its bet on AI. — Bloomberg

• Lilly will pay up to \$2.25 bn if drugs hit certain milestones.

• Pharma industry pouring billions of dollars into idea that AI can make the process of finding new drugs faster.

• No AI-designed drug won the US approval, but many entered clinical trials.

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



مَقَامَكَ حَيْثُ أَقَمْتَ نَفْسَكَ. لَا حَيْثُ
أَقَامَكَ النَّاسُ. فَالْجَائِسُ لَا تُعَدُّ وَلَا تُؤْتَى
(مصطفى صادق الرافعي)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Your place is where you put yourself, not where other people put you. For people neither judge fairly nor weigh justly.

Mustafa Sadeq Al-Rafii
(Egyptian poet)

Opinion

Israel's European shield is crumbling

RAMZY BAROUD

The EU is the "chief of all cowards," Amnesty International declared in a searing statement issued last week. This condemnation came the day before the European bloc failed to sever ties with Israel at a Foreign Affairs Council meeting in Luxembourg. There, despite months of legal warnings, the EU once again prioritized procedural safety over the urgency of human life.

The efforts to press the EU to finally take a moral position were led by a coalition of Spain, Ireland and Slovenia, later joined by Belgium. They argued that the EU-Israel Association Agreement — the legal framework governing their trade relationship — is predicated on "respect for human rights."

Maintaining this agreement while the extreme violations in the Occupied Territories continue renders the EU's founding treaties meaningless.

Such a decision, even if belated, would have done immeasurable good. It would have restored a measure of the EU's

shattered credibility and enlivened the discussion on international law. More importantly, it would have initiated a series of concrete measures to hold Israel accountable and provided Palestinians with a tangible sense of hope.

None of that occurred, however, thanks to the lobbying of Germany and Italy. These nations acted as a diplomatic firewall, shielding Israel from consequences.

The German position remains consistent with Berlin's hard-line defense of Israel — a stance that has persisted even throughout the genocide in Gaza. The country that should be the world's greatest advocate against mass extermination has repeatedly shielded Israel at the International Court of Justice and other global institutions.

Therefore, it was no surprise that Germany's leadership dismissed the proposal to suspend trade with Israel as "inappropriate." Along with Italy, it insisted that the EU must remain in a "constructive dialogue" with Tel Aviv — a phrase that has become a euphemism for complicity. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin



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Netanyahu likely felt a great deal of relief following the vote. The Israeli economy is currently struggling under the staggering burden of its continued wars, with the budget deficit ballooning as defense spending skyrockets. The EU is Israel's largest trading partner, with total trade in goods worth more than €42 billion (\$49 billion) in 2024.

The association agreement provides a vital economic lifeline through preferential market access and high-tech integration. Its suspension would trigger a devastating financial shock.

But the fact that Germany and Italy managed to sustain the treaty for now does not negate the rupture that is already underway.

This is not being led by governments but by European societies. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Europe's relationship with Israel is destined for pivotal change. The historical divide between Israel's unconditional supporters, like Germany, and more sympathetic nations, like Ireland, is collapsing as the political pendulum swings toward Palestine.

The hard-liner camp received its most significant blow with the political shift in Hungary. With the rise of Peter Magyar, who vowed following his election this month that Budapest would respect the International Criminal Court warrant for Netanyahu's arrest, Israel has lost its most reliable "veto man" in Brussels — Viktor Orban.

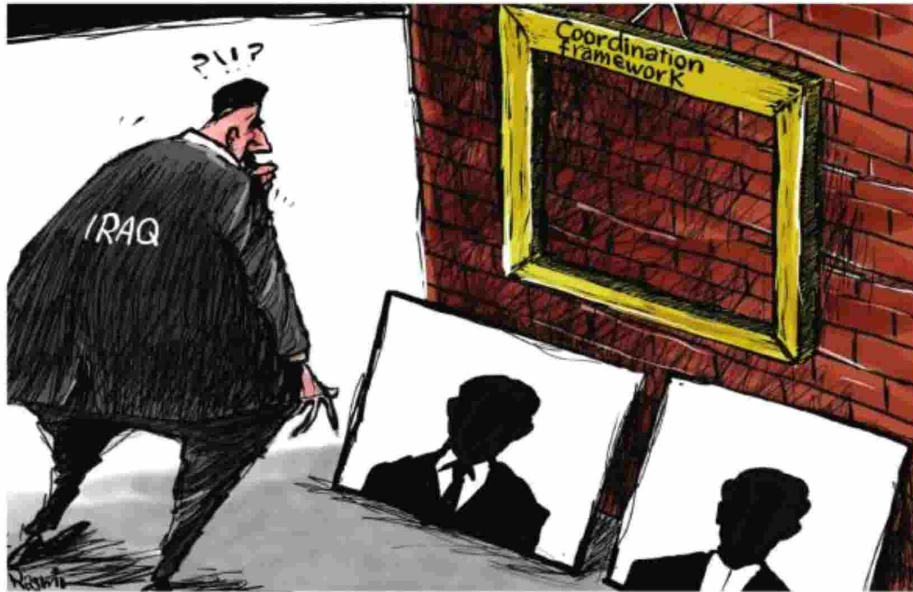
This leaves Germany increasingly isolated as the sole heavyweight protector of the status quo.

The traditional explanation for Europe's backing of Israel — historical guilt over the Holocaust — no longer explains the conduct of political elites. A more accurate explanation lies in Europe's own legacy of colonial violence and racial hierarchy.

However, the real shift belongs to civil society and the resilience of Palestinians who have bypassed traditional media filters to speak directly to the world.

Europe now knows that a genocide has been committed. This paradigm shift is unlikely to be reversed, regardless of whether EU bureaucrats manage to delay the inevitable.

Germany has repeatedly shielded Israel at the International Court of Justice and other global institutions



COURTESY: AMALAO FREEMAN/ARTISTBYALANJOY

Huge unfunded appeals have become a feature of the humanitarian landscape, with donor fatigue at acute levels

Palestinians in the firing line as Netanyahu faces voters

CHRIS DOYLE

UN agencies churn out plenty of depressing studies, but few more so than the "Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment" report on Gaza published last week in conjunction with the World Bank and the EU.

It calculates that reconstruction and recovery needs in Gaza are a trifling \$71.4 billion over 10 years, with \$26.3 billion needed in the first 18 months for urgent recovery. Back in February 2025, the same bodies estimated the costs to be \$53 billion.

What Gaza has endured in this genocide is near-total, systematic destruction. This means what is needed is not just an operation to rebuild what was damaged, but a complete reconstruction program. Clearing the 61 million tonnes of rubble alone will take years.

One does have to sympathize with the humanitarian sector. Huge unfunded appeals have become a feature of the humanitarian landscape, with donor

fatigue at acute levels and with the Trump administration leading the way.

The humanitarian sector will now be anxiously wondering how much the Israeli-US war on Iran will cost. And how much the reconstruction of Lebanon will cost when that war finally ends. Sudan, of course, remains the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

Prior to the Iran war, the one mechanism that was established was the highly flawed Board of Peace, a vehicle to remodel Gaza along the lines of US President Donald Trump's Gaza riviera plan of 2025, while being devoid of Palestinian design and consultation.

Even the Board of Peace now looks busted, given the lack of progress and committed funding. Hamas has yet to disarm. There is no international security presence. Who would bet against the Trump administration abandoning the whole process and leaving Gaza to the fate of the genocidal power, Israel?

Perhaps most importantly, Israel has yet



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to adhere to the October ceasefire in Gaza, in the same way it has yet to adhere to the November 2024 and April 2026 cease-fires in Lebanon. Reconstruction under bombardment and near-total blockade is a nonstarter. And who would carry this out? Diplomats and journalists cannot even enter Gaza. Israel has effectively barred humanitarian agencies from doing their lifesaving work there. So, which construction firms would be able to send their workers into Gaza and under what conditions?

All these UN reports have a dream-like quality. Who do they think they are kidding? They are vital, no doubt. Detailed plans are essential. Yet the genocide continues and the Israeli leadership is showing zero intent to lift the shackles and stop the collective torture of the entire population.

None of this should detract from the real and ongoing human costs. About 1.9 million Palestinians out of a total population of 2.2 million have been forcibly

displaced within Gaza, many multiple times. Everyone thinks of the fatality figures, but what about the 41,844 people — a quarter of whom are children — who have suffered severe, life-changing disabilities? What about the mental health costs? A staggering 728,000 schoolchildren have not had any formal education for more than two years, probably more if the COVID-19 pandemic is factored in.

Who would want to bet against most Palestinians in Gaza having to face another winter in flooded, freezing tents? Worse, who would bet against Netanyahu resuming Israel's full-scale genocidal assault on Gaza, rather than the slowed-down version of the last six months?

Netanyahu has an election to win and perhaps the saddest, most damning indictment of the current Israeli environment is that bombing Palestinians in Gaza wins votes, whereas ending the war and allowing humanitarian access would likely lose him the election. His only challenge is that there is little left to bomb.

Opinion

Iran, the Arab Gulf and the nonstate actor dilemma

DR. DANIA KOLEILAT KHATIB

Last week, I spoke at a seminar organized by the Eurasia Policy Council at the House of Lords in London. The event was titled "From ceasefire to lasting peace: What can the United Kingdom do to achieve lasting peace in the Middle East?" The attendees and speakers agreed that peace in our region does not start and end with an agreement between the US and Iran, but rather through an agreement between Iran and its neighbors, namely the Arab Gulf states.

Nasim Far, the deputy head of the Iranian Embassy, stressed that Iran has no hegemonic ambitions in the neighborhood and that the threat perceived by the Gulf states has been fabricated by the Americans. He added that Iran seeks brotherly relations with them. I addressed the key hurdle facing a normal relationship between the two sides of the Gulf: Tehran's proxies. The Iranian diplomat said they do not call them proxies, as they consider them to be legitimate liberation movements. However, he did strike a conciliatory tone by saying that Iran does not want to undermine neighboring states' security and is open to discussing

security concerns with them. The big question is how can Iran solve the issue of its proxies with its neighbors? It is important to examine the nature of the proxies in order to know how to handle them.

Iran has been under sanctions since 1979. It has not been able to make alliances with regional countries or renew its arsenal due to its animosity with the US. So, it resorted to unconventional methods to create deterrence. It built alliances with like-minded groups inside various countries. These proxies created a deterrence, as well as becoming tools for pressure and influence.

However, its relationships with these proxies differ. Hezbollah is a child of the Iranian revolution, while Iran came and engaged with existing movements like Hamas and the Houthis. While these are public movements, it is believed Iran has also been behind many sleeper cells in the region. The UAE last week announced the arrest of members of a group that was operating covertly in the country and plotting terrorist activities.

How can the issue of Iran's proxies or allies be solved? As I have mentioned in a previous article, Iran does not have an



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and off switch for its proxies. They have, at least partly, a domestic agenda. They have grievances against their governments and use Iran's support against their own states. Here, Iran's role could change from a spoiler to a facilitator. It could use its influence over these groups to play a positive role and contribute to reconciliation instead of being the cause of division.

The two proxies that would need immediate attention are the one that is the most important to Saudi Arabia, the Houthis, and the one most important to Iran, Hezbollah. Iran can help Yemen and show goodwill to the Kingdom by encouraging the Houthis to engage in constructive talks with the legitimate Yemeni government that could result in them joining the state under a federal structure. The other issue, which is more complicated, is Hezbollah. On this, Iran needs Saudi Arabia's help.

Hezbollah is currently fighting Israel. Today, Iran and Saudi Arabia have more in common on Lebanon than one might think. Neither country wants Lebanon to normalize relations with Israel for free. Saudi Arabia insists that it will not normalize with Israel unless the latter recognizes a Palestinian state.

In the meantime, Israel and the US are bullying Lebanon into "peace." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reportedly threatened Lebanese President Joseph Aoun that, if he does not meet with him in Washington, he will come on the back of a tank and shake Aoun's hand at the Baabda Palace, alluding to a possible invasion.

Saudi Arabia is adamant on the integrity of Lebanese territory and will not accept it ceding an inch of its soil to Israel. Adviser

Saudi Arabia and Iran could reach an arrangement that brings stability and saves Lebanon from civil war

to the Saudi foreign minister Prince Yazid bin Farhan last week visited Lebanon to make sure it was committed to the Taif Agreement that ended the civil war.

However, once the war is over, what will happen to Hezbollah? For sure, disarmament will be put on the table again. If conducted by force, it could lead to civil unrest and even civil war. The group and Iran need a graceful exit. On this, Saudi Arabia and Iran could reach an arrangement that brings stability and saves the country from the civil war that Israel has been scheming.

Iran and the US might be negotiating in Islamabad, but on the issue of Tehran's proxies, the most beneficial move would be for Iran to negotiate with its neighbors.

Europe's economic emergency

CARL BILD

Judging by what one sees coming out of all the EU's various meetings — at the European Council, the European Commission's offices and elsewhere — the bloc's limited bandwidth is obvious.

There are simply too many challenges and too many tasks. The world is a messy place and so too is the Brussels political scene. The first challenge, then, is to agree on priorities. This should not be too difficult, because some are patently obvious. Continuing to confront Russia's territorial aggression is a clear strategic imperative, with financial support to Ukraine helping to pave the way to peace and a new round of EU enlargement.

This month's election in Hungary, which ousted Prime Minister Viktor Orban after 16 years, has removed an embarrassing roadblock that was increasingly jeopardizing the EU's security.

But achieving stronger economic growth across Europe is no less urgent, given that a strong industrial and technological base is a prerequisite for security and strategic autonomy in an increasingly dangerous world. Major reports on EU

competitiveness and gaps in the single market by former European Central Bank President Mario Draghi and former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, respectively, have highlighted major challenges and identified the necessary remedies.

Yet, beyond generating a wave of headlines when they were released, Draghi and Letta's findings have barely registered on the EU's policy agenda. Almost none of their proposals have been implemented and this lack of follow-through remains evident in the macroeconomic data. Apparently, there are just too many other things happening for EU policymakers to give the economy's competitiveness and productivity challenges the attention they require.

But that is hardly a reassuring excuse. Europe's leaders must abandon their illusions and recognize what is at stake. In the face of subdued growth, persistent deficits and substantial government debt burdens, there is no way for EU member states to increase defense spending while also maintaining their welfare systems in the years ahead. Making matters worse, Europe's working-age population is



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expected to decline by about 12 percent in the next decade or so, placing an even greater burden on public finances and further limiting available resources.

Those needs are great, because defense spending for most EU member states remains stuck at about 2 percent of gross domestic product. Yet, if the past 15 months have shown anything, it is that Europe can no longer afford to delay major investments in its own security and its defense-industrial base.

Europeans must face reality. We are seeking to secure our physical safety, establish deterrence against potential aggressors (starting with Russia), decarbonize our economy and maintain consistent support for one of the oldest populations on Earth — all while confronting weak growth, high debt and demographic decline. Only through substantial reforms can our goals be achieved.

Fortunately, at the European Council's March meeting, European heads of state and government committed themselves to completing the single market by the end of 2027. If they are serious about implementing the reforms that this would

require, Europe's fiscal and strategic situation could improve substantially.

Trade within the single market, as it currently exists, supports close to 60 million European jobs and has already unlocked economic benefits equal to 8 percent to 9 percent of EU GDP. By completing the single market — namely, by creating a single market for digital connectivity, energy and investment capital — the EU could add another sorely needed 1 percent to 2 percent to GDP over the next decade.

But for this to be possible, the EU must make growth and economic dynamism a top priority. After all, success on this front is the only way to avoid failure on numerous others.

Europe is not doomed. We have the talent, the universities and the rule of law that businesses need in order to thrive. Our common currency is strong and our quality of life is superior to anywhere else in the world. But rather than allowing these strengths to lull us into complacency, we must recognize that they are all at risk. We must start meeting our single greatest challenge with the urgency it demands.

The first challenge is to agree on priorities. This should not be too difficult, because some are patently obvious

The EU must make economic dynamism a top priority. Success on this front is the only way to avoid failure on numerous others

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FINANCIAL TIMES

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King Charles and the 'special' relationship

Ties with the US need mending, but Britain must nurture other alliances too

British royal visits to the US have served as moments of bonding not just between heads of state but between their countries: think of King George VI eating hot dogs in 1939 with President Franklin D Roosevelt, or Queen Elizabeth II dancing with President Gerald Ford. King Charles III's visit this week, officially to mark the 250th anniversary of US independence, is more about renewing ties with America and Americans than with President Donald Trump. But the backdrop makes this one of the trickiest visits a UK monarch has faced.

UK-US relations are at their lowest ebb since the 1956 Suez crisis. Sir Keir Starmer's refusal to back the US-Israeli war with Iran has led Trump to denigrate the UK military and belittle the prime minister. A Pentagon memo

reportedly floated reviewing the US position on Britain's claim to the Falkland Islands in retaliation. Tensions were already simmering after Starmer joined in condemnations of the president's ambitions towards Greenland.

For Buckingham Palace, there were other disincentives. Trump has indicated designs, too, on Canada — of which Charles III also happens to be king. The monarch's brother Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor is being investigated for his links to Jeffrey Epstein. And this weekend's assassination attempt on Trump raised questions over safety.

Despite the potential pitfalls, the King is right to have gone ahead with the visit. Even postponing it could have been taken as disrespectful by Americans. Pressing ahead with a royal trip including an address to both houses of Congress and a White House banquet sends a message: whatever the quarrels over Iran, the relationship endures.

Even assuming a Trump tantrum can be avoided, it may be beyond the

monarch's diplomatic powers to do much to repair day-to-day relations between Britain's premier and a fickle president. But the King has in the past found subtle ways of harnessing Trump's fascination with the monarchy to signal disagreement with and perhaps even sway the president, notably on Ukraine.

The monarch broke into his Sunday schedule at Sandringham to meet Volodymyr Zelenskyy 48 hours after the Ukrainian president's White House humiliation last February. When he hosted Trump at Windsor Castle in September, the King's pointed warning of "tyranny" in Europe and call to stand together with Ukraine to "secure peace" were credited by Zelenskyy for a subsequent shift in tone from Trump.

Yet whatever the outcome of the trip, this is a moment for the UK to start to recalibrate ties. Military, intelligence and security co-operation remains deep. But the rise of China and other Asian economies means any US president — even if in less destructive fashion

The UK should channel Canada's PM to forge closer links with like-minded partners to preserve as much as possible of the "rules-based" system

— would be looking beyond the UK and Europe, and pushing the continent to take more responsibility for its defence. For all its shared history and culture with the US, Britain's place in the world is not what it was in the heyday of the "special" relationship.

All that increases the urgency for the government to find ways to spend more on defence — to convince the US of its seriousness and enable it to stand better on its own feet. It should channel Canada's Mark Carney to forge closer links with like-minded partners to preserve as much as possible of the "rules-based" system.

In doing so, it should exploit to the full its soft power resources — including the monarchy and the Commonwealth, the (badly underfunded) BBC World Service, and its higher education sector, and creative and sports industries. Britain rightly wants to preserve all it can of the special relationship. But in the harsh new world of the 21st century, other connections will matter a lot too.

Opinion UK politics

What Reform's attack on school history shows us

Arieh Kertman



Stephen Bush



In order to reverse the rise of "woke history", pupils in England will, under a Reform government, have to study a radically new curriculum — or rather, a radically old one.

Under plans put forward by the party's education spokesperson, Suella Braverman, pupils would have to cover the signing of the Magna Carta, the Wars of the Roses, the English Civil War, the Glorious Revolution, the Act of Union, the Enlightenment and Victorian Britain in a syllabus which would be at least 60 per cent devoted to "British" history. I take the view that there are no boring bits of history, and therefore no "wrong" answers on the curriculum. But I am baffled as to why only two out of three of England's civil wars have made the cut, and indeed why it is that learning about them is meant to make

half-decent history teacher will teach the skills of free inquiry and source interrogation that lead to awkward questions such as "what exactly happened in Ireland during the Glorious Revolution?" or, on the progressive side of the ledger, "so what about the Victorians' contributions to human liberty?" Historians do not agree about what the "lessons" of the past are, or even if there are any.

Reform's second difficulty reflects a broader confusion among modern parties of the far right: just whose values do they represent anyway?

The greatest hits of history in Braverman's curriculum are a series of staging posts — but stagingposts in the development of British liberalism, an ideological movement that Reform seems largely to oppose. Some of this has to do with the strategic ambiguity that serves parties like France's Rassemblement National well: leave people guessing just how much you have actually moderated and how you would govern once in office, the better to win over the votes of mainstream conservatives and at the same time hold on to your core support.

But the confusion here also reflects genuine uncertainty within these movements about what they actually stand for. At times this can result in moments of unintentional irony. For instance, much of the European far right takes the position that freedom of religion and expression is a key value and a principle so important that it can't be extended to Muslims. Their American cousins, meanwhile, think that Europe has so low down the promises of the liberal enlightenment that they are better served by building alliances of shared values with Vladimir Putin or the Gulf autocracies. Back in the UK, Reform leader Nigel Farage welcomes the support of Bonnie Blue, an adult entertainment star, while Danny Kruger, a Reform MP, decries a "totally unregulated sexual economy".

Ambiguity about their intentions can help enlightening populists electorally. But it comes with risks. The first, as we see with the Trump administration in the US, is that sloppy thinking about what you want leads to disarray in office. The second, in Reform's case, is that instead of being seen as a party that faces both ways — a party both of porn stars and Puritans — its electoral coalition turns out to comprise the rather smaller group of people who dislike Muslims, but whose own social policy preferences are uncomfortably close to the Taliban's.

A muddled attempt to use the history curriculum to instil British patriotism shows the ambiguity and uncertainty that might mean Reform, currently leading in the polls, could end up as a historical footnote.

The problem for Reform is twofold. First is the challenge facing anyone wanting to use the history curriculum as a tool of political indoctrination: all real history involves people behaving monstrously and heroically — often, unhelpfully, the same people. And any

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Letters

High-frequency trading has meant fatter profits for large firms

Robin Wigglesworth's article on the resurgence of high-frequency traders captures the commercial logic of the boom well (Alphaville, April 22), but it understates the structural reasons. This should concern us. The rise of these firms is not just a function of volatility, consolidation and retail activity. It has also been enabled by a market structure that has become increasingly complex: trading split across many venues, more activity taking place away from public exchanges, fee systems that reward

certain types of trading behaviour, and arrangements where retail brokers are paid for sending customer orders to large trading firms.

That matters because the consequence is not merely fatter profits for a handful of dominant firms. It weakens price discovery, greater concentration of market power, and a system in which more trading happens out of sight. When private trading venues and broker-quoted retail orders rely on public market prices without fully helping to form those prices, the

integrity of the public market is weakened.

It also matters because this model increasingly channels retail participation into a structure that looks democratic on the surface but often benefits the same large intermediaries. Commission-free trading and user-friendly apps have widened access, but they have also helped direct retail orders, data and profits towards a small number of technologically sophisticated firms.

Finally, there is the question of

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The message of Germany's new defence posture

That Germany's strategic reawakening should be welcomed rather than feared (FT View, April 24) captures a wider transformation. Berlin's military turn is part of the European defence shock triggered by Russia's invasion — a classic heterogenesis of ends, whereby Vladimir Putin may be producing the opposite of what he intended.

In seeking to weaken Europe, Moscow has helped galvanise it. German rearmament, Nordic enlargement of Nato, France's willingness to Europeanise its nuclear deterrent and Ukraine's revolution in low-cost, high-impact warfare all point to the same conclusion: security can no longer be subcontracted.

Even the long-neglected mutual defence logic embedded in Article 42.7 of the Treaty of the European Union is acquiring renewed strategic meaning. This suggests Europe is beginning, however hesitantly, to think in terms of a deterrence and strategic posture — the grammar of an international order increasingly shaped by continental actors. Germany's new posture should



be read not as a revival of militarism, but as part of Europe's emergence as a geopolitical pole.

If the coming era belongs to macropowers, Europe faces a choice: become one — or be shaped by them. Pietro Negri
Parma, Italy

Hic, hacc, hoc — classics is a route to computer science

Reading Martin Wolf's review of Mary Beard's book *Talking Classics: The Shock of the Old*, pointing out the transferable skills from studying classics, I was reminded that some years ago, when I was "careers adviser" in a girls' public school, I was invited to the University of Cambridge's Department of Computer Science and Technology ("The power of the ancients", Books, Life & Arts, April 25).

The department was keen to encourage more girls to apply for this subject. When we enquired what it was they were looking for in applicants, the answer came back: pupils who had studied Latin, but out of choice, not where it had been a compulsory subject.

Because of the grounding that the grammar of Latin and more particularly the grammar of Greek was said to provide in mathematical logic, this was felt to be very useful in developing algorithms, a key skill in computer science.

Harriet Tupper
Chippenham, Wiltshire, UK

Resilience and the progress on poverty eradication

Natalie Bennett, the Green peer and former party leader, chides Martin Wolf for saying the world economy is "resilient" despite the fact that 826m people (10 per cent of the global population) still live on less than \$3 a day — the International Poverty Line.

When the IPL was introduced in 1990 more than 40 per cent of the global population fell below it.

"That a million people have been lifted out of poverty every week for 35 years demonstrates the strength and adaptability of the economic system."

Wolf is right about the world economy's resilience, but he does add that it can't last. Blair Noonan
Dublin, Ireland

OPINION ON FT.COM

Should private credit be stressing out insurers? Apparently not

A new report by S&P Global Ratings has a go at answering one of the unknowns about the asset class writes Toby Nangile
www.ft.com/alphaville

OUTLOOK
BRITAIN

Why London's teens need more third spaces

Kayla's mum encouraged her to go out to a local youth club. "I was at home, mostly just in my bedroom, on my phone." Today, the 17-year-old sitting in a slightly chaotic office in Mary's youth club in Islington, north London, speaks with quiet confidence about overcoming her initial shyness. "I've talked to more people, made more friends."

by Emma Jacobs

Next to her is 18-year-old Mikala. Naturally gregarious, she started coming to the youth club because she craved a welcoming and safe venue to socialise after school. There seemed to be few alternatives, as many local shops and fast-food restaurants restrict the number of children allowed. "The bad few make a bad rep of teenagers, [making it difficult for] people who generally just want to have fun while being out."

This was reinforced over the recent school holidays when police were called to deal with hundreds of teenagers meeting in Clapham, south London, West Midlands and Rochdale in Greater Manchester in so-called "link-ups" arranged on social media platforms. Some saw this as yet more evidence of ferocious youth; others blamed the lack of spaces for teens.

After all, many youth clubs shut due to austerity cuts in council budgets. One report estimated that between 2010 and 2023, 1,243 youth centres closed, leaving just 581. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, a think-tank, found closures led to increased crime and declines in exam results.

Sometimes it feels like young people are either demonised for staying in — or going out. Connie Muttock, the head of policy at think-tank Centre for Young Lives, says: "We talk about the time children spend on their phones, but we don't talk about alternatives."

The debate over teens' social media dependency has intensified. Countries including the UK are considering following Australia by banning social media for under-16s. Last month, a court in New Mexico fined Meta and Google for harming a young woman's mental health. Generation isolation, a report by OnSide, a youth charity, found that almost half of young people spend most of their free time in their bedrooms, and nearly a fifth are mainly alone.

Teenagers can be confusing to adults because they flip between playing as kids and behaving like adults, says Dinah Bornat, architect and author of *All To Play For: How to Design Child-Friendly Housing*. "These big children want other adults" nearby, "practising being young people in safe spaces", like shopping centres. "More attention should be spent on... [how adults] can support them to independence."

It is clear that Mary's is also a place for Mikala and Kayla to learn life skills, including camping and a financial workshop that advised them to stay away from crypto. Local musician, Little Simz, has credited the Islington youth club with helping her career. "I can't imagine what my life might have been if I didn't have that,"

she told Elle magazine. "Creativity is a way of life. When it's tended to and nourished, you learn how to figure things out, how to make and create things, and that really helps you in your future."

Recently, Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, pledged £30m to ensuring each borough in the capital has a late-night youth club. The Labour government has pledged £500m over 10 years to tackle education, unemployment and loneliness, including opening youth clubs. Jamie Masrati, OnSide's chief executive, is heartened by the "significant step... although it doesn't come close to filling the gap. It was better than we've seen." Emma Warren, author of *Up The Youth Club*, worries about funding long term.

In Queen's Park, north-west London, advertising veteran Paul Billingsley co-founded a "social space for teenagers" with a games room and café because he could see that young hires were "really struggling with the basics of sitting across the table from someone, being resilient and reconciling differences of opinion". At Mary's, 18-year-old Nevan says the joy of such places is that they operate outside school "where there's high expectations". It is also a place where they can support peers who are dealing with "friendship drama", says Mikala. "Sometimes you may be alone and that's okay, but how you handle it is also important."

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Opinion

A troubling plan to revive America's frozen property market

BUSINESS

Brooke Masters



U.S. housing has been in a deep freeze. The slowest jobs market in six years means fewer people need to move, and the gap between today's higher interest rates and those attached to older mortgages has made everyone reluctant to trade up or down. Even when homeowners were open to a sale, they struggled to find buyers willing or able to meet their desired price — withdrawn listings shot up last year in many markets. As a result, sales rates of new and existing homes have plunged below depths last plumbed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis once population growth is taken into account, according to RBC analysts.

Since 2024, Compass, America's largest real estate brokerage, has absorbed two of its biggest competitors, @properties and Anywhere, in spite of concerns that the combined company would have more than 30 per cent of home listings in some markets.

It then forged an alliance with the owner of Redfin, one of the biggest online real estate sites. Compass agents can now market homes exclusively on the Redfin site without having to put them into the general "MLS" multiple listing services available to all brokers.

This allows homeowners to test the waters and change the sales price, without starting to rack up "days on the market" that alert buyers to the fact the home hasn't immediately sold.

Such arrangements make sense for both the listing platforms and the brokers. The sites get exclusivity, and in return direct would-be buyers straight to the selling agent. That creates

an opportunity for the listing brokerage to represent both sides, rather than having to split the commission with another firm.

The bigger a real estate group grows and the more exclusive listings it lands, the more it can squeeze out other brokers, retain sales in-house and keep commission rates high — but they remind me of securities "dark pools",

which match buyers and sellers without providing as much public information as a traditional stock exchange. Jordan Moorhead, a broker in Austin, Texas, speaks for many when he predicts that the main impact will be that "people like me are going to lose a lot of business".

Compass contends the arrangement could bring an additional 500,000 listings on to the market (10 per cent of last year's home sales) and benefit home sellers. A study of sales in 2024 found that properties that were "pre-marketed" ultimately sold for nearly 3 per cent more than those that went straight to MLS public listings. And that was before the Redfin deal made it possible to market more broadly without sharing price and listing time details.

But what about buyers? In parts of the country where inventory is tight, more homes for sale would be welcome. However, would-be purchasers now face a world where they have to trawl multiple websites to find listings and make offers without having a full picture of the property's history. As brokerages consolidate and more sales listings become exclusive, it will also be that much harder for

both buyers and sellers to take advantage of the 2024 settlement to negotiate lower commissions.

None of this seems positive for the many people already struggling to get a foot on the property ladder. Just 21 per cent of sales last year went to first-time buyers, the lowest since record-keeping began 45 years ago.

In big US cities, renting is cheaper than buying a home with today's 6 per cent average annual mortgage rates. Add in fears of overpaying for what is the largest purchase most people will ever make, and it's no wonder one in three young Americans is unsure they will ever own a home. Existing home sales fell to a nine-month low in March. "There's an awful lot of short-term thinking going on here," warns Stephen Brobeck, senior fellow at the Consumer Policy Center, which recently issued a report warning about Compass' growing market power. "It has the end result of making the market less transparent and less attractive to buyers. That's not good for sellers overall."

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EU's methane regulation could spark an energy crisis

Andrew Puzder

Europe cannot secure affordable, reliable energy while saddling its suppliers with rules that drive up costs, reduce supplies and create uncertainty. Energy importers and producers are now warning that the European Union's methane regulation is just such a rule.

This regulation could precipitate another energy crisis at a time when Europe can ill-afford one. Brussels already appears to be aware of the risks. Earlier this month, the EU Commission floated recommending "flexibilities" to the stringent requirements in an effort to reduce supply security concerns.

Unfortunately, avoiding an energy crisis is going to take far more than "flexibilities" that tweak the edges of a fundamentally flawed regulatory framework. The industry warns of price impacts "equivalent to those witnessed on European energy markets due to the ongoing crisis in the Middle East". It could be a long, cold and costly winter.

Hill measures will not solve this problem. The EU must heed calls from industry, member states and members of the European parliament to address the regulation's core defects if it truly wants energy security, industrial competitiveness and a role in the energy-intensive AI economy.

The original methane regulation was intended to reduce methane leaks from the fossil fuel supply chain. US policies, combined with innovations such as advanced leak detection, satellite monitoring and best practice standards have driven US methane emissions from oil

Paperwork-heavy requirements on importers will restrict access to supply options

and gas down sharply between 2015 and 2023 even as production has soared. American LNG on average is among the lowest methane-intensity fuels available on the global market.

The approach in Brussels has been different. The EU's methane regulation imposes extraterritorial, prescriptive and paperwork-heavy requirements on importers. This will restrict access to supply options, forcing EU factories, power plants and households to face an energy supply gap and higher prices. In an era when European homes and industries are already reeling from high energy prices, every extra euro matters.

Flexibly applying the regulation's requirements will not reduce the legal risk importers and suppliers face if the EU later decides its "flexibilities" were too generous. Without specific changes to the regulation, producers and importers will need to build expensive new systems and navigate shifting interpretations to avoid penalties of up to 20 per cent of their global revenues. This is a risk no rational CEO will accept. Similarly, suppliers will hesitate to sign the most cost-effective long-term contracts when the regulatory goalposts could move again in a few years, making it impossible to meet their contractual obligations. The result is predictable: reduced incentives for producers to prioritise the European market, an unnecessary security of supply crisis and higher prices for European consumers.

The war in Ukraine and resulting scramble for non-Russian energy offers a stark reminder of how our energy partnership should work. US LNG and crude oil exports to Europe surged precisely because American producers could respond quickly and reliably. Yet if compliance costs and market uncertainty persist, global suppliers — including US companies — will quite rationally redirect supplies to markets that reward reliability rather than punish it.

The EU relationship thrives when we align incentives, not when we export "one-size-fits-all" regulatory requirements. Proposing "flexibilities" is a welcome acknowledgment that incentives matter. Yet, to have an impact, the Commission must take decisive action. America stands ready to be the reliable partner Europe needs. We can scale exports rapidly if the EU's regulatory environment welcomes us. Brussels must therefore match its new pragmatism with the boldness the moment demands.

The writer is the US ambassador to the European Union

Are Europe and the US headed for divorce?

GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Gideon Rachman



The US Air Force moved into Lakenheath in Britain in 1948. Ramstein air base was established in Germany in the early 1950s. Today there are over forty US military bases in Europe, hosting around 85,000 troops.

But nothing lasts forever. And, for the first time in my life, it is conceivable that the US military presence in Europe could come to an end.

The immediate irritant is the war in Iran. European reluctance — and occasional refusal — to let the US use its European bases for missions in Iran has infuriated Donald Trump, who has lambasted Europeans as "cowards" and called Nato a "paper tiger". Marco Rubio, the US secretary of state, has pointedly asked why America bothers to maintain bases in Europe — if it cannot use them when the chips are down.

The Trump administration is believed to be contemplating a list of punishments for European allies to be meted out when the Iran war is over. The ideas floated include booting Spain out of Nato and withdrawing recognition of British sovereignty over the Falkland Islands.

What the Trump administration may

not fully realise, however, is that the fury flows both ways. European politicians are complaining bitterly — sometimes publicly — that the US launched an ill-conceived and illegal war without consulting its Nato allies. European confidence in US leadership is also at an all-time low — which is understandable when America's commander-in-chief posts Jesus-like images of himself and threatens to erase an entire civilisation.

The Iran war has also followed a year in which the US has imposed tariffs on European allies and threatened to invade Greenland — opening up the dizzying possibility that European soldiers might end up fighting Americans. A Politico poll taken earlier this month showed that in Spain, Italy, France and Germany more people now regard the US as a threat than a "close ally". Spain's Pedro Sánchez has revived his political fortunes with his flamboyant condemnation of US foreign policy — and even the leaders of staunch American allies, such as Poland and Germany, are openly questioning Washington's leadership.

Since the second world war, the US presence in Europe has been an "empire by invitation". But some Europeans are increasingly tempted to withdraw the invitation.

So who would lose more — the US or Europe — if the American military presence in Europe was wound down?

For the Americans that would depend a great deal on whether the US still wants to project power in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Despite the



political posturing on both sides of the Atlantic, the reality is that the US has been using its European bases heavily during the current war. The American airman who was shot down over Iran and rescued had probably taken off from Lakenheath.

If the US could be confident that it will never need those European bases again, it could certainly close them. But given the frequency of America's military interventions in the Middle East (as well as the Balkans), in recent decades, it seems rash to assume that the current Iran war will be the last such involvement. European purchases of American armaments and other goods are also implicitly tied to a continuing US security guarantee to Europe. As doubts about that commitment grow, the move

Most European leaders remain extremely cautious about acting out their 'Love Actually' daydreams

to "buy European" is gathering pace.

Waving the Americans goodbye would also involve big risks for Europe. Russia is still waging war in Ukraine. And Donald Tusk, Poland's prime minister, has warned that Russia could attack Nato territory within months. Similar warnings — couched in years, rather than months — have come from political leaders in Berlin and London. As Tusk pointed out, there are increasing doubts about whether a Trump-led US would honour the Nato mutual defence clause.

Mark Rutte, the Nato secretary-general, has warned that Europe cannot currently defend itself against Russia without American help. He has become the public face of European efforts to keep Trump happy at all costs.

Some European leaders are more optimistic: than Rutte about the continent's ability to defend itself. They point out that Russia's military performance in Ukraine has been less than stellar. Even so, it is widely acknowledged that Europe currently relies on America to provide military capabilities that would

be critical in any conflict. These include air defences, intelligence resources and the heavy-lift aircraft that would be needed to move troops to the frontline quickly. Filling these gaps could take many years. Nato's command structure is also built around US leadership.

For all these reasons, most European leaders remain extremely cautious about acting out their *Love Actually* daydreams — and telling the European president to get lost. At the same time, it is notable that the revenge fantasies against Europe, currently doing the rounds in the Trump administration, do not actually include the wholesale closure of US bases in Europe. The two sides of the Atlantic seem to understand that, for now, they are locked into an unhappy marriage.

For both the US and Europe, a formal divorce still feels like a step too far. But both sides are saying and doing things that cannot be easily forgotten or withdrawn. In an alliance, as in a marriage, that is a dangerous state of affairs.

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TECHNOLOGY

Martin Sandbu



When xAI sued the state of Colorado over a law against "algorithmic discrimination" this month, it marked a political stand-off brought on by a rapidly changing technological reality. But more profoundly, the suit raises questions about what it is to be a democracy, and what it is to be human.

The law targets AI systems used in the provision of certain services, including education, housing, health and finance, some of them from the government. In passing it, Colorado lawmakers have defied much of the AI industry as well as the White House's push for a single federal set of AI rules.

Now Elon Musk's xAI, which developed the large language model Grok,

wants the law struck down because, it alleges, it infringes on the company's free speech rights and forces it to change Grok to incorporate what it calls the controversial viewpoints of legislators.

The company clearly protests too much. The law requires transparency over risks of bias and a duty of care to avoid unlawful discrimination. At most, Grok cannot be used for allocation decisions in the sectors designated by Colorado's government.

But beyond the narrow legal questions, there is a much more interesting and deeper matter at stake here. What the Colorado law does is to sweep AI-powered decision-making inside a fundamental demand for justification. The basic ground for doing this is that "my AI said so" is not enough to justify allocation decisions of certain goods and services where there is reason to fear unjust discrimination.

Why not? One reason is democratic. Giving legitimate reasons for how we are treated is at the core of the rule of law: the exercise of power must follow publicly known rules that apply to all. This is doubly true for electoral democracies

where not just the structure of the law, but those writing and wielding it, should be accountable to citizens for the substantive choices they make.

The very term "accountable" is revealing. In democracies ruled by law, those who wield power must account for what they do — give adequate justifications and reasons — and be held to account by those subject to their decisions.

This role of justification and reason-

The question is whether LLMs such as Grok can give legitimate reasons for the decisions they make

giving was central to the political theories of the late German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, as well as the American thinker John Rawls. But justification matters in interpersonal relations too.

When we want to convince someone to agree with us or persuade them to do something we want, we are called on to justify our demand. Forcing agreement

or obedience without justification is abusive, a failure of basic respect. The fundamental human intuition behind Habermas's and Rawls's theories is that as citizens and simply as people, we owe it to each other to give reasons.

Unfair discrimination itself can be understood in this light: it happens when some groups get less of something valuable than others, for no justifiable reason. So at one level, Colorado is simply demanding that AI systems must provide whatever reasons are satisfactory to justify differential treatment as legal — as in all other cases.

The complaint shows that xAI is particularly incensed at how Colorado's law excludes biases designed to "increase diversity or redress historical discrimination" from the definition of algorithmic discrimination. This is indeed an odd choice by the legislature, which could have simply deferred to existing anti-discrimination laws on the question of whether such positive discrimination is permissible (for this, too, justification can and should be given).

Ironically, xAI's brief in itself constitutes an earnest effort (albeit an unsuccess-

ful one) at justification. The company, or at least its lawyers, grasp the need to offer reasons that others might deem legitimate. The more difficult question is whether LLMs such as Grok can themselves fully justify the answers they give and decisions they make.

Suppose, for example, a Colorado landlord or triage clinician uses Grok to decide who gets the house or the hospital bed — but makes sure to require the model back up its input with reasons. What then? If Grok can adequately justify decisions as not violating discrimination law, and its developers can document this to users, that should fulfil the new law's demands. The deeper human requirement for justification, however, requires much more.

Even if LLMs can provide a trace of their "reasoning", that is not enough. When we admit that we owe each other justifications, we recognise each other as equals, with all the moral commitment to reciprocity that this entails. That is a commitment which — so far — only humans can make.

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OPINION

Hooray for the Secret Service



MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

Three days after gunshots brought the annual White House Correspondents' Association Dinner to a premature end, the verdict—at least among the commentators—is in: The Secret Service blew it.

The 31-year-old suspect, Cole Tomas Allen, traveled by train from his parents' home outside Los Angeles to the Washington Hilton. He came with weapons, including a shotgun, a handgun and several knives. His targets were the president and as many "administration officials" as possible, "prioritized from highest-ranking to lowest," he wrote.

On Saturday night, he did manage to run through the security checkpoint and past Secret Service agents. Even so, within seconds agents fired at Mr. Allen and subdued him—eliminating the threat. One agent was shot in the chest during the gunfire but, fortunately, was wearing a ballistic vest. After a short stint at a hospital he was released.

In the thick of all this, the Secret Service brought President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump to safety. The dominant fact of that terrible evening was that the Secret Service did its job—protecting the president—with no

loss of life. It's one thing we all ought to applaud.

You might not know it from the commentators. One conservative called the Secret Service's handling of security an "unmitigated failure." Others complain about the "security." The Washington Post reported that "the Trump administration provided a lower level of security for the White House correspondents' dinner than it has for other gatherings of high-ranking officials." Attendees have reported being waved in to the building with barely a show of their ticket—though the security perimeter around the ballroom held.

The second-guessing has only begun, and it's becoming wrapped up with other issues. On his X account, Chairman James Comer of the House Oversight Committee noted that the Department of Homeland Security, "including Secret Service, has been unfunded for more than 70 days now."

President Trump has his own issue: The ballroom he wants to build faces a lawsuit threatening to halt construction. The prevalent view is that the correspondents' dinner would be much safer if held inside his "big, beautiful very, very secure building" with its "massive bulletproof glass—it's almost 4 inches thick" and located on the White House grounds, "the most secure ground probably in the world."

Plainly the Republican president has learned the lesson so clearly stated in 2008 by Rahm Emanuel, chief of staff for President-elect Barack Obama: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that [is] it's an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before."

President and Mrs. Trump and many others were kept safe. That's a success.

All these issues should be aired. At the same time, reality demands a recognition that there is no foolproof security arrangement, and a president's security is complicated because normal life is going on around him anytime he makes an appearance outside the White House. The reality for the Secret Service is that it operates within a free society.

And merely because the president wasn't shot and no one was killed doesn't mean the Secret Service can't improve. But looking for ways to improve can happen without the Beltway's favorite game: hunting for someone to blame.

Maybe the Washington Hilton—where Ronald Reagan was shot in 1981—is too insecure a venue in which to protect a presi-

dent. The special difficulty of guarding this president, given the great hatred for him, must also be considered. And maybe his critics should check their rage, some of which the shooter appropriated for the manifesto he signed "Friendly Federal Assassin."

Mr. Trump, in his first appearance after the gunshot—still in his tux at the White House press room—summed up the evening this way: "A man charged a security checkpoint armed with multiple weapons, and he was taken down by some very brave members of Secret Service, and they acted very quickly."

When I worked in President George W. Bush's White House, I gained, as most everyone did, a special appreciation for the professionalism of the Secret Service. Karl Rove was a colleague, and on "Fox News Sunday" this weekend he suggested that although we all have questions that must be answered, in the aftermath of an assassination attempt that was thwarted, we should be celebrating these agents.

Let's work it out tonight," he said. "Let's be honest about it. Somebody attempted to kill people and he was stopped. And he was stopped by the courageous act of Secret Service agents—one of whom took apparently a shotgun blast to the chest."

Write to mcgurn@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Stephen Brumwell

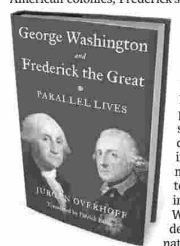
Enlightenment In Practice

George Washington and Frederick the Great

By Jürgen Overhoff
Princeton, 344 pages, \$35

In 1759 George Washington was renovating his estate at Mount Vernon, Va. Recently retired as colonel of the Virginia Regiment, Washington wanted to furnish his home with art commemorating ancient and contemporary military commanders. Among his intended purchases was a bust of Frederick the Great.

Frederick II, king of Prussia and elector of Brandenburg, was at the time Britain's ally in the global conflict now known as the Seven Years' War (1756-63). Washington, who had led troops in the war's North American theater, admired Prussia's indomitable warrior-king. After victories in late 1757 over the Catholic French and Austrians at Rossbach and Leuthen, Frederick had emerged as a popular Protestant hero. In Britain's American colonies, Frederick's exploits were reported with



enthusiasm in newspapers, and his image was reproduced on tavern signs and teapots.

It is unlikely that Washington could have imagined that, within 20 years, he would rival Frederick in fame, winning praise from the monarch himself. But as Jürgen Overhoff demonstrates in "George Washington and Frederick the Great," mutual admiration gave way to suspicion in the years following American independence. While both statesmen were deists who believed in predestination and embraced the rational philosophy of the Enlightenment, they had different conceptions of what enlightened government meant.

Born in 1712, Frederick was 20 years older than Washington. As the sensitive, flute-playing heir of the boorish, beer-swilling Frederick William I, the young prince had scant interest in soldiering. But Frederick experienced an epiphany in 1734 after an inspirational encounter with Prince Eugene of Savoy, who had helped defeat the Ottoman Turks at Vienna in 1683 and the French at Blenheim in 1704. Soon after his father's death in 1740, Frederick demonstrated his aptitude for warfare when he invaded and won the Austrian province of Silesia.

In December 1745, following a decisive victory over the Austrians and their Saxon allies, Frederick returned to Berlin and was hailed as *Friederichs Magister*—Frederick the Great. No one was more surprised than the king himself by a philosophically inclined monarch had become such an impressive military leader. In his own words, Frederick marveled that "providence would choose a poet to upset the political order of Europe."

Unlike Frederick, Washington had precocious ambitions for martial glory. From 1754 to 1758, he served his military apprenticeship against the French and their Native American allies on the frontiers of Virginia and Pennsylvania. Covering this period, Mr. Overhoff, a professor of history at the University of Münster, perhaps relies too heavily on secondary sources, and repeats some of their misconceptions. For instance, Washington would have been mortified to hear his rigorously trained Virginia Regiment characterized as a lowly militia. As one of Washington's officers reported, its members could "parade as well as Prussians."

Frederick, meanwhile, was consolidating his reputation leading the army that set such standards. He scored stunning victories during his rambling and bloody European campaigns. Hefty British subsidies allowed Frederick to fight through setbacks. As Mr. Overhoff observes, there was widespread amazement that the "combined continental superpowers Austria, France, and Russia," which totaled more than 60 million inhabitants, were unable to defeat Brandenburg-Prussia, with a population they outnumbered 12 to 1.

Prussia's fortune was especially significant for Washington's countrymen. France gave priority to Europe over Canada, which helped the British triumph in North America in 1763. But Britain's postwar efforts to recoup the financial costs of victory led to the program of American taxation that prompted resistance, then outright rebellion in 1775.

The Prussian king admired the commander of the Continental Army. But the two statesmen had different conceptions of governance.

Frederick initially had no sympathy for those seeking to reject the authority of their rightful king, and little interest in Washington. It was only in the second half of 1777, Mr. Overhoff writes, that Frederick learned to spell Washington's surname correctly. But Washington's performance against the British eventually attracted the king's attention. The traditions of Frederick's own redoubtable army were grafted upon Washington's when Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a former Prussian officer, volunteered his services in the Patriot cause. Appointed inspector general of the Continental Army in May 1778, Steuben overhauled his drill, instilling the professionalism that contributed to final victory.

Frederick actively pursued a treaty of amity and commerce with the new American republic, an important step toward broader recognition of the United States. But as Mr. Overhoff emphasizes throughout his thoughtfully written book (translated from the German by Patrick Baker), Washington and Frederick were incompatible in certain respects.

Reflecting his own abiding interests, Frederick wanted to turn Brandenburg-Prussia into a "kingdom of the Enlightenment," characterized by religious tolerance and patronage of the arts and sciences. But he maintained that such a benevolent realm could only be ruled effectively by a wise king exercising sole authority, free of parliamentary constraints. In Frederick's estimation, zealous republicans were courting anarchy.

Washington, by contrast, recoiled at the very notion of monarchy. In May 1782 he reacted with horror when one of his officers, Lewis Nicola, suggested that he should become another King George. As the first president of the U.S., Washington deemed himself fully accountable to Congress, and readily stepped down after his second term. His farewell address of September 1796 included the stark warning that all democracies were vulnerable to future challenge by autocrats and unlawful usurpers of power.

Washington's message is relevant in our own age, when democratic and authoritarian models of governance vie across the globe. In his prescient epilogue, Mr. Overhoff contends that the divide between Washington and Frederick is no "relic of transatlantic history" but an instructive guide to the present and future.

Mr. Brumwell is the author of "George Washington: Gentleman Warrior."

It's Way Too Early to Declare Defeat in Iran



GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

The establishment consensus is hardening. President Trump's war with Iran is the culminating disaster of the most damaging and misguided American foreign policy in history. Iranian leaders are humiliating the U.S., German Chancellor Friedrich Merz warned. "Superpower suicide" is how Wendy Sherman, a top Iran negotiator under President Obama and Joe Biden's deputy secretary of state, described Mr. Trump's Iran policy to ABC News. As Ms. Sherman sees it, the Iran war has alienated allies, assisted Russia financially, and weakened America's position vis-à-vis China. For Fareed Zakaria, the question is no longer whether the administration's policies will backfire but whether the damage can ever be repaired.

Critics of the war believe Mr. Trump has worked himself into a trap. The military strikes aimed at decapitating Iran's leadership brought the most radical elements of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to power. Iran's stranglehold on the Strait of Hormuz can't be broken without a politically unsustainable ground war. Spiking energy prices offered Vladimir Putin a financial windfall just as

Russia's economy was buckling under the strain of sanctions. China gleefully watches America trash its European alliances and deplete munition stocks needed to defend Taiwan. Meanwhile, because the president has done little to prepare the public for a long conflict, Iran has him over a barrel, and he must bribe or beg the Iranians to give him a quick exit from an unwinnable war.

Time will tell, but it would be a mistake for investors and decision makers to assume that Mr. Trump is desperately looking for the exits. Viewed from the Oval Office, the war may seem less costly than critics charge, and the likelihood of a favorable outcome may appear significantly greater than a horrified foreign-policy establishment can bring itself to believe.

True, the war has gone on longer than originally hoped and is taking a toll on the president's popularity. But he may feel less trapped than critics think he should. Domestically, far-right critics like Tucker Carlson and Candace Owens appear to be spiraling into irrelevance as Mr. Trump maintains his hold on the affections of his base. In the Gulf, American naval forces have, without taking casualties, consolidated a crushing blockade of Iran that Tehran seems unable to counter. Financial markets have stabilized and even strengthened

despite the closing of the strait. With the arrival of a third aircraft carrier in the region, American military options are expanding. And if European allies are shunning the war, support in the Gulf for a decisive effort against Iran is stronger now than at the outbreak of hostilities.

Trump's critics think he is desperately looking for an exit. Don't count on it.

Mr. Trump probably isn't losing sleep over the conflict's effect so far on the balance of power with Russia and China. Russia may be reaping windfall profits from the oil-price surge, but American energy companies are enjoying a greater and likely longer-lasting boom. In any case, 2026 has been a bad year for the Kremlin. Its weapons fizzled against Israeli and U.S. missiles; its forces are stalemated in Ukraine; its Africa Corps has sustained a humiliating setback in Mali.

Mr. Trump likely isn't worried about China's taking advantage of America's Middle East focus. Iran's failures as well as its successes give Beijing food for thought. The ability of cheap and quickly built Iranian drones to harass shipping reinforces the les-

sons of the Ukraine war. In the Black Sea, Ukrainian drones have confined Russia's surface fleet to port. That's an ominous development for a Chinese navy that would need to transport and supply large forces across the Taiwan Strait to mount a successful invasion.

Perhaps worse from Beijing's standpoint, America's successful blockades of Venezuela and Iran demonstrate a strategic depth and political will that could greatly complicate China's goal of reducing Taiwan to obedience. Should China invade or blockade Taiwan, American forces could impose a crippling counterblockade from bases well beyond the reach of Chinese coastal weapons and naval forces. Mr. Trump, it should now be clear, is willing to impose such costly and disruptive blockades even in the face of strong allied and domestic opposition.

War is unpredictable, and Mr. Trump's critics may yet have their day. While the pressure on the administration is for the moment sustainable, market turmoil or a dramatic collapse in the president's approval ratings could make a change of course attractive to an often-impulsive administration. Still, for now the president can afford to wait and see how mounting pressure affects the Iranian side. Betting the farm on TACO scenarios seems dangerously premature.

The Best Place for a Data Center? Croatia

By Ryan Rich

Dubrovnik, Croatia's data center markets need more energy. Demand for energy to power the data centers is projected to grow from 10 gigawatts in 2024 to 35 gigawatts by 2030. The only place on the Continent with the power and political will to meet that demand is one most people haven't thought of—and the war in the Gulf has reinforced the urgency to secure artificial-intelligence infrastructure for the U.S. and our allies.

With Iran threatening "complete and utter annihilation" of data centers in Abu Dhabi and calling European tech companies legitimate military targets, the question is no longer whether the West should rethink where to build its crucial AI infrastructure, such as data centers. The question is where they should go.

Croatia is geographically removed from every active conflict zone. As part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the European Union,

the Schengen Area and the eurozone, Croatia delivers regulatory predictability and political durability that institutional capital requires. A data center in Croatia is infrastructure protected by our sacrosanct collective defense guarantee.

Croatia's grid is among the cleanest in Europe: Renewables supplied more than 52% of all electricity consumed in 2025, with a further 15% from

Its location, stable rules and energy grid land a record project.

nuclear. Electricity prices run significantly below the European average. The climate and access to natural water resources provide thermal management advantages that reduce energy consumption and operating costs, alongside high-voltage grid capacity that congested Western European hubs can't offer.

European digital infrastructure investment is projected

to reach €100 billion by 2030. EU data sovereignty rules are compelling major U.S. technology companies to store European data within EU borders—creating demand for U.S.-owned, EU-based capacity that doesn't yet exist.

I have spent my career betting on overlooked infrastructure. The underlying logic is always the same: Find the structural gap, understand why it exists, and build first.

This is why I am in Croatia to announce Project Pantheon: a next-generation 1-gigawatt data-center campus on 310 acres. The campus will host 800 megawatts of usable IT load—enough to power the city of Baltimore. The facility is designed to be more resilient than most data centers in operation today, reaching 99.999999% uptime just as hyperscalers need facilities that can run massive workloads continuously and draw huge amounts of power without interruption.

Croatia sits between key areas of the EU, opening corridors to regions in Central and

Eastern Europe as well as Greece and Turkey. Pantheon Atlas LLC's total initial investment in the project is \$13.5 billion with the potential to grow to beyond \$50 billion.

This is the largest single private investment in Croatian history. No U.S.-led gigawatt-scale AI-optimized facility currently exists in Central or Eastern Europe. Pantheon will be accessible to European defense, intelligence and commercial users, thereby helping the EU reach its goal of tripling European data center capacity within five to seven years.

The war in the Gulf has revealed that concentrating AI infrastructure in jurisdictions where a single strike can take a \$30 billion investment offline is a strategic liability. Croatia offers the advantage of a collective defense guarantee that no insurance premium can match.

Mr. Rich is managing partner of Pantheon AI and founder of 24 Ventures, a venture firm headquartered in Buffalo, N.Y.

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| <u>2) Hindustan Times</u> | <u>7) Live Mint</u> |
| <u>3) Business line</u> | <u>8) Financial Express</u> |
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OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Qatar and the ICC Prosecutor

The trouble isn't over for Karim Khan. He's the International Criminal Court prosecutor who requested arrest warrants for Israel's leaders in 2024, shortly after learning he had been accused of sexual assault. He took leave in May 2025, and this month the court's governors voted to advance disciplinary proceedings. Now a witness statement says the Qatari government promised to "look after" Mr. Khan if he moved against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

This builds on the Guardian newspaper's November report by a Qatar-linked private intelligence operation by at least two firms, Highgate and Elicius Intelligence, hoping to discredit Mr. Khan's alleged assault victim. Elicius didn't reply to requests for comment. Highgate said in a statement that it had worked on a file in defense of the ICC, but denied it was commissioned by a government entity or aimed at discrediting any individual.

The new witness statement is by a person familiar with that operation who requests anonymity. We've reviewed it along with supporting audio recordings. The statement was submitted to the FBI to request an inquiry and is known to several Members of Congress. It suggests the private intelligence operation also sought to target two Americans: Tom Lynch, the senior ICC official who first reported the assault allegation, and Sen. Lindsey Graham. Several ICC officials who became targets have been interviewed by the NCTV, the Dutch counterterrorism agency, two sources confirm.

In recordings, private investigators discuss their intelligence operation's connection to what seems to be Qatar, which they call the "client country." In writing, one investigator instructs others to say "client" to describe "Q country." Two sources familiar with the intelligence operation tell us Qatar was ultimately the client.

The witness statement says that a source of Elicius's had claimed—albeit without providing evidence—that Israel's Mossad believed Mr. Khan to be a Qatari agent. This led the private intelligence team to discuss the ICC prosecutor.

"I spoke to the client about it," the intelligence operation's manager is heard saying in an Aug. 5 recording, "and they weren't surprised that it had leaked that they were wrapping their arms around him."

Around "KK"—Karim Khan—a researcher clarified.

"It's not that long that they wrapped their arms around him," the manager continued, per the recording and the witness statement. "It's all in the context of issuing the warrant. That was basically the deal. He was like, 'I want to issue the warrant, but I'm terrified to do it.' And they said, 'if you do it, then we'll look after you.'"

The intelligence operation's manager was asked whether the support came from an individual sheikh or from the Qatari state. He said, "No, it's the state."

A lawyer for Mr. Khan says that neither the prosecutor nor his team had any involvement in such an intelligence operation. He adds, "Our client was not offered or given (and would not have sought or accepted) any 'promise' by any state (whether Qatar or any other) to 'look after' him if he applied for the arrest warrants." Mr. Khan "never had any discussions with any Qatari official prior to the warrants being issued."

The Qatari embassy reiterated a November statement calling the allegations "unfounded." The ICC Office of the Prosecutor said it is "deeply concerned by the unverified allegations against its personnel."

The recordings show the private intelligence team speculating about connections that Mr. Khan's alleged abuse victim, a subordinate ICC lawyer and Malaysian Muslim, might have to Israel or Jews. A June 3 recording has the investigators discussing their research. The alleged victim "didn't have a Jewish grandmother," one says, as if such a thing would matter.

They are also heard discussing whether she could have a secret Israeli passport. This passport theory was then raised in a June 6 tasking document by Highgate to Elicius Intelligence that we have reviewed. The Guardian reported that the private investigators attempted to access the alleged victim's travel history and her son's birth certificate, and uncovered some of her online passwords. Highgate has denied seeking this information.

In a July 15 recording, a researcher claimed that the alleged victim's husband once worked for a company that had a kosher-food subsidiary.

"There'll be a rabbi associated with it," the operation's manager said on the recording. "It could be good cover employment" for an agent.

Nothing came of these theories, but the intelligence firms also entertained an alternate hypothesis: What if the alleged victim didn't have a nefarious agenda but was being manipulated by someone who did?

"Establish any ties between Thomas Lynch and Israel / Jewish heritage," the June 6 tasking document said. A 10-page dossier on Mr. Lynch—the American ICC official who was Mr. Khan's right-hand man until he reported the assault allegation—was shared among researchers. It included a photo of him and his family. "Anything else that you're getting on Lynch?" the intelligence operation's manager asks in the July 15 recording.

Briefing notes were shared among the intelligence team in a document titled "Further context on TL," which we have reviewed. "Thin gruel," one investigator commented. The document alleged that Mr. Lynch had built "close ties with Lindsey Graham." From this dubious premise it jumped to a conclusion: "TL clearly has some sort of liaison role—perhaps it is not with the State Dept but with e.g. Israel political lobby on the Hill." The researchers proposed to make this the focus of the "second stage" of their investigation.

In a statement, Mr. Lynch dismissed the speculations of the intelligence firms and said their alleged actions are "disturbing" and "cross all lines of acceptable conduct."

All the grasping at straws by the intel firms led nowhere, according to persons familiar with the operation. The firms found no evidence the alleged victim was part of any Israeli plot. And if anyone tried to manipulate her, the alleged victim says it was the ICC's Mr. Khan.

"Think about the Palestinian arrest warrants," Mr. Khan told her, urging her to withdraw the allegations, according to her U.N. testimony reported by the Journal. She testified that Mr. Khan called her to his hotel suite in New York and forced sexual intercourse—the first of several alleged instances. Mr. Khan denies any misconduct.

The U.N.'s yearlong inquiry, whose summary we have reviewed, found a "factual basis" for the alleged victim's allegations and for allegations that Mr. Khan retaliated against ICC staff. Witness accounts of contemporaneous conversations with the alleged victim were found to "lend support to her claims." The summary also noted that Mr. Khan "would not confirm, in an interview, whether he had had a sexual relationship" with his accuser.

An ICC-commissioned panel of judges later found that the U.N.'s evidence wouldn't pass a "beyond reasonable doubt" standard used in criminal cases. In its summary, the panel also said the disputed facts "do not disprove the allegations of misconduct definitively."

It isn't clear why the panel used that criminal standard for an employment decision, and this month the court's governors made an "initial determination," two sources confirm, that Mr. Khan may have committed misconduct and disciplinary proceedings should advance. A source familiar with the ICC says most states on its governing body find it absurd that Mr. Khan could continue leading the court after a U.N. finding against him based on the preponderance of the evidence.

The claims in the witness statement and recordings warrant investigation. If true, we don't know what it would mean for Qatar to "look after" Mr. Khan. But we'd like to know.

It was always egregious to indict Israel's Prime Minister and Defense Minister for the country's defensive war, which Hamas began. What the Nuremberg tribunal rejected after World War II—the argument that the democratic defender's bomber pilots were equivalent to the totalitarian aggressor's death squads—Mr. Khan endorsed by seeking to prosecute both Hamas and Israeli leaders.

In October 2024 these columns urged the ICC to halt its anti-Israel proceedings and to investigate Mr. Khan's personal conduct and its role in his sudden decision to seek arrest warrants on CNN. That decision junked Mr. Khan's own investigatory timeline, shocking his ICC staff.

Instead of stopping, the court issued the warrants. In 2024 we wrote that Mr. Khan's conduct had placed the ICC's targeting of Israel "under a cloud." Now it's raining.

The California Wealth Tax Advances

Progressives are testing how much ruin there is in California. On Sunday they said they've gathered enough signatures to place a wealth tax referendum on the November ballot, even as a new study shows it is likely to result in less state revenue.

The proposed ballot measure would impose a (supposedly) one-time 5% tax on individuals with more than \$1 billion in wealth. The tax would hit nearly all of a billionaire's assets including trusts, as well as voting interests in a company if that exceeds his equity stake. It applies to billionaires who were California "residents" as of Jan. 1 this year.

Billionaires are already leaving the state. California Tax Foundation visiting fellow Jared Walczak estimates in a new paper that "reported departures already total \$777 billion," and more "quiet departures" that do not draw media coverage are likely this year since "there are solid legal reasons to believe that the initiative's residency date and approach could

be challenged successfully in court."

By his estimate, the wealth tax exodus could total \$1.23 trillion and reduce annual state tax revenue by \$3.53 billion to \$4.49 billion, mainly from lower income-tax collections. He calculates that "the net present value of these ongoing losses outstrips the one-time revenue projected by the initiative's proponents effects." That means the tax will over time cost the state more revenue than it raises because of out-migration and slower economic growth.

In addition, he warns, "eroding existing tax bases could amplify the perceived 'need' for ongoing wealth taxation." If voters approve the tax, expect progressives to push soon to extend it or reduce the wealth threshold at which it hits. That's the history of income tax hikes. The referendum also lets the Legislature and Governor amend the tax, so Democrats won't even need voter approval. The wealth tax would be the biggest act of economic self-sabotage in U.S. history.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

What's Missing From Yale's Reform Report

Regarding your editorial "Yale Takes Itself to Reform School" (April 20): As the founder of the Buckley Institute, which has been fighting for intellectual diversity and freedom of speech at Yale for the past 15 years, I am disappointed by the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education's report and President Maurice McInnis's response. While many education leaders deflect, resist or hide behind political battle lines, Ms. McInnis should be applauded for recognizing that the problems of trust are serious ones and for committing to take steps to address them. The report even acknowledges the Buckley Institute's research in numerous areas, including our finding that Democrats outnumber Republicans on the faculty by a ratio of 36 to 1.

However not only is it all "nothing but words" if its recommendations aren't implemented, as your editorial notes, but two glaring omissions

in the report deserve attention.

First, in 2021 Yale eliminated the process by which alumni could run for a spot on its governing board by petition. Alumni now only have the illusion of choice in who guides their alma mater. They select between Yale's hand-picked candidates whom Yale prohibits from publicly discussing their views on issues. How does Yale expect to earn back the trust of the public if it doesn't even trust its own alumni?

Second, Yale's DEI efforts aren't addressed. A recent Buckley Institute report found there are over 200 DEI staff still at Yale almost a year after the university supposedly ended its signature DEI program. Seventy-five of those staff were given new titles with less controversial terms. Yale needs to confront rather than hide from the legacy of these programs.

LAUREN NOBLE
New Haven, Conn.

Finding More Choices for Schools in Florida

While "In Florida, Billionaires Open Their Own Schools" (Page One, April 18) explores how the wealthy are developing more educational facilities across South Florida, it is equally important to consider supporting public-private partnerships to fill this educational gap, including learning environments that consider those living with disabilities.

At Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, we believe the private sector's role should focus on expanding specialized access for all. Through our Miami Lighthouse Academy, a first-of-its-kind model operating in a partnership with Miami-Dade County Public Schools, early learners benefit from a public-private model, in which blind and visually impaired students can learn alongside their sighted peers. This collaboration enables and supports all students to excel—adapting learning modalities to their specific needs, using advanced technology, and employing specially trained teachers alongside classroom educators. The effect is life-changing.

One of our lifelong participants, despite total blindness, is graduating from the University of Miami Frost School of Music and transitioning on full scholarship to the University of Miami School of Law. Stories like this prove that when private expertise and public resources join forces, we can create true equity and opportunity. Our partnership ensures that students, regardless of family wealth, have access to world-class specialized education.

True educational innovation is found when we prioritize the unique

needs of our most vulnerable learners. By fostering these collaborative models, we ensure that South Florida's growth benefits the entire community, providing every child the chance to see the future clearly.

VERGINIA A. JACKO
President and CEO
Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Billionaires opening their own private schools have been able to work through local bureaucracies by buying land, hiring lobbyists and building new buildings. But most school founders are passionate parents trying to build something better for their children and community. They don't have the money or experience to fight with city zoning boards and building commissions.

We recently worked to support a new state law that advances school choice by implementing common-sense regulatory reforms to make it easier to open schools. The new law, signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis on April 20, requires cities to treat small schools as they would any other small business and to allow them to open in commercial zoning districts.

This change will increase the supply of private schools for all parents looking for the best option for their children. Other states should take note and adopt similar regulatory relief for families, ensuring every child has access to the best education for that individual.

DANNY AQUA
Teach Florida
Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Preserving Freedom Requires a Moral Compass

I appreciate Matthew Continetti's expressing my concerns so clearly with his op-ed "The Democrats Unify Against Israel" (April 23). When there were rallies on college campuses supporting Israel's enemies, I assumed those involved were poorly educated.

They didn't understand the unique relationship between the U.S. and the only democracy in the Middle East: the bond of both shared moral values and adversaries, radical Islamists pursuing nuclear weapons. But when 40 out of 47 Democratic U.S. senators vote to block the sale of bulldozers and bombs to Israel, are they also ignorant of history? Or are they morally compromised? Our democracy and values need to be protected. To quote Ronald Reagan, "Freedom is never more than

one generation away from extinction." Freedom needs a moral compass. Has the Democratic Party lost that guide?

ELLEN B. MILLER
Baltimore

Reading Mr. Continetti's op-ed on the Democratic Party's anti-Israel movement, I was reminded of how in 1930s Germany Jews were for the most part complacent to their peril. Now antisemitism is growing in America and amazingly in the party where most Jews reside. Are we Jews in America too complacent?

MARTIN WALDINGER
Scottsdale, Ariz.

The Eternal Golden Arches

Faith Buttom is right about cheeseburgers ("In Defense of the McDonald's Cheeseburger," op-ed, April 23). Greasy, salty, chewy and—as Richard Wilbur wrote of the potato—"beautiful only to hunger," they simply taste good. (And the poet was forgetting about McDonald's french fries.) McDonald's plans to expand to 50,000 locations by next year. Even if the world ever lost its taste for its cuisine, and one store shuts down a day, there would still be a few golden arches around in the year 2160.

BARRY GAULT
West Newton, Mass.

Who Would Be Afraid of IA?

Regarding Jason Riley's "The Biggest AI Risk Is Foolish, Fear-Driven Policies" (Upward Mobility, April 22): Perhaps if AI had been more aptly named IA (Intelligence Aid) it might not have scared the pants off people. "Artificial" has no positive connotation. For various reasons, some will lose their current jobs, but for the masses AI hopefully will be more of an aid than a scourge for a long while.

PAT SULLIVAN
Massillon, Ohio

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Pepper ...
And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"I don't know how it happened either, but I did have a great legal team on retainer."

OPINION

When Rationalization Turns Deadly

By Jonathan Alpert

The shooting at the White House Correspondents' Dinner wasn't random. The alleged perpetrator accompanied it with a manifesto justifying his actions: "Do you think that when I see someone raped or murdered or abused, I should walk on by because it would be 'inconvenient' for people who aren't the victim?" he wrote. "In so far as representatives and judges do not follow the law, no one is required to yield them anything so unlawfully ordered."

This reflects a pattern you see every day in less spectacular form. Nadja Spiegelman, an editor at the New York Times, recently coined the term "microlooting" to describe acts of stealing from big corporations, such as shoplifting from Whole Foods, and feeling justified in

brief pause when I feel the recognition—he knows he crossed a line. Then the explanation comes in, fast and practiced: The company is exploitative. The system is rigged. It events things out. By the time he's done, the recognition is gone. He doesn't face the guilt but explains it away, reshapes it into something easier to live with—and more dangerous, because it feels like clarity.

This isn't about theft. It's about how easily grievance turns into permission—how feeling wronged starts to look like a reason to do wrong.

I see this more clearly when I ask a patient to stay with the behavior itself—with what he actually did. His tone shifts. His explanation tightens. At that point, he's defending his action.

This is what therapists call rationalization. It's more consequential than it looks. Once frustration is aimed at a broad target—corporations, the wealthy, the system—it starts to act like moral credit. Something was taken from me, so taking something back feels less like a violation and more like correction. The question quietly shifts from "Is this right?" to "Who deserves it?" Once it shifts, the answer usually follows. And when a person is seen as harmful, almost anything done to him starts to feel justified. Thus the Times gave Mr. Piker a forum to explain away the assassination of an insurance executive: "Friedrich Engels wrote about the concept of social murder. And Brian Thompson, as the United Healthcare CEO, was engaging in a tremendous amount of social murder. The systematized forms of violence, the structural violence of poverty, the for-profit, paywalled system of healthcare in this



Law-enforcement agents evacuate the Washington Hilton ballroom on Saturday.

country—and the consequences of that are tremendous amounts of pain, tremendous amounts of violence, tremendous amounts of deaths."

What matters is how quickly this spreads. When a behavior gets explained often enough, it stops feeling like an exception and starts to feel like something you can choose. It happens gradually, one justification at a time, until a line that once felt obvious doesn't feel like a line anymore. As that reasoning is repeated—especially by people with large audiences—it starts to feel normal. What once sounded like a stretch no longer does. The language smooths out, the argument grows more confident, and the hesitation fades. That's how a private justification becomes an accepted behavior.

What makes this powerful is that it doesn't feel like self-deception. It feels like clarity—like dropping rules that no longer seem to make sense.

That's why pushing back on it rarely works. At that point, it's no longer about logic. It's about how people see themselves.

Repeated moral labeling plays a role here too. When people are described as fundamentally dangerous or illegitimate, it changes how actions against them are seen. For most people, that language remains mere language. But for someone unstable, hearing it often enough can lower the psychological barrier to acting. It can begin to feel less like a choice and more like a kind of obligation.

Language plays a role in more everyday ways as well. Terms like "microlooting" soften the act, making something plainly wrong feel qualified and easier to defend. But the harm doesn't disappear. It moves to higher prices, to workers, and to neighborhoods. Stores lock up basic items, cut hours, or close. The effects are indirect, which makes them

easy to ignore, but they're real. Missing in this is how selective this reasoning is. The same people who argue that corporations can absorb the loss wouldn't apply that logic to people they know. They wouldn't accept a friend taking money from them because "it evens out" or excuse a colleague cutting corners on grounds that others do worse. The principle holds only when the target feels distant.

You see how this plays out. In places where retail theft was treated as a low-level concern, it didn't stay contained. What started as small, rationalized decisions developed into something pervasive and hard to stop. One person doesn't make much difference. The reasoning does. Once a justification is out there and starts to feel acceptable, it

lowers the bar for everyone else. None of this is new. People have always found ways to justify what they want to do. What has changed is how quickly it spreads—and how confidently it is delivered. The gap between recognizing that something is wrong and explaining it away has narrowed.

Most people don't need to be told that stealing, much less murder, is wrong. The harder part is holding on to that judgment when tempted with a plausible and self-serving explanation. It isn't a failure of knowledge but a failure of restraint. That's the real shift. Not just in what people do—but in how easily they come to believe it makes sense. The result easily could have been deadly on Saturday night.

Mr. Alpert is a psychotherapist practicing in New York and Washington and author of "Therapy Nation," forthcoming in May.

The common thread that ties a would-be assassin's manifesto to a journalist's excuses for 'microlooting'

doing so. Ms. Spiegelman hosted a podcast in which left-wing commentator Hasan Piker said his "practicing stealing from big corporations, because they steal quite a bit more from their own workers" and because self-checkout systems anticipate theft.

The logic is familiar: Large companies can absorb the loss; the system is unfair; the harm is negligible. The explanation recedes. The explanation takes over.

I hear a version of this logic often in my therapy practice. A patient sits across from me and describes taking something that wasn't his. There's a

Can Trump and King Charles Save the 'Special Relationship'?



EDITOR AT LARGE
By Gerard Baker

The world's longest-running historical irony, the "special relationship" between the U.S. and the U.K., will get a few more twists this week. King Charles III is here for his first state visit, to join Americans in kicking off the celebration of the 250th anniversary of their act of violent secession against his predecessor. Again the reigning successor to George III will be obliged to say nice words about the men his ancestor would gladly have hanged from the nearest tree. Again the backdrop of the White House will provide an awkward reminder of the unpleasantness between the two countries in 1812.

But there's a contemporary and more important irony. The British government hopes the king's visit will help repair some of the frayed ties between the two countries' political leaders. It's no secret that President Trump and Prime Minister Keir Starmer are hardly close allies. But the president's admiration for

Charles is equally evident. For the British the hope is that the trip will exploit the modern irony that the world's most powerful republic finds an old monarchy's hereditary king more congenial company than its elected leader.

Mr. Trump is furious with what he sees as insufficient British support for the Iran war. Mr. Starmer, in classic desultory fashion, initially said the U.S. couldn't use American bases there for offensive action but later permitted some use. The president is loathed in Britain; a recent YouGov poll put his approval rating there at 14%. Some of this is a reflection of divergent political cultures (the British have never liked Republican presidents), but the odium also surely has to do with Mr. Trump's disdainful comments about Britain (along with every other U.S. ally).

Enter the king. Can he persuade Mr. Trump and his compatriots that Britain's game is worth the candle? Americans could be forgiven for wondering what is the point of the old country beyond some fine costume drama, a smattering of challenging golf courses, and a cheap alternative for their children's edu-

cation. Britain's decline from global superpower to minor-league straggler shows no sign of stopping.

When Charles's mother, Queen Elizabeth II, came here to celebrate America's 200th birthday in 1976, Britain was already in free fall, its economy ravaged by stagflation, militant trade unions and fiscal incontinence, its political leadership a tired,

The world's most powerful republic finds the elderly monarch more congenial than the prime minister.

bickering rump. After a brief economic resurgence under Margaret Thatcher and a briefer moment of supposed cultural leadership ("Cool Britannia") under Tony Blair, Britain has sunk back beneath the waves it no longer rules. Its share of global economic output has shrunk from 5% half a century ago to 3% today. Even this masks an accelerating collapse in economic performance: Productivity has been stagnant for 15 years (since well before Brexit), and per

capita output is below the poorest American state.

The caricature of Britain as a country in the grip of Shariah and under the heel of an authoritarianism that locks up citizens for saying nasty things about it is a little overdone. But there is no doubting the cultural and political malaise. Decades of self-loathing multiculturalism, mass immigration, declining birthrates and the elites' systematic degradation of national pride and traditional values has produced a nationwide anomie and rising popular discontent.

The truly shocking indicator of decline is in Britain's military capability. Mr. Trump was characteristically cruel when he derided the Royal Navy's vessels as "toy ships" last month, but years of complacency after the Cold War have reduced the number of warships in the successor to Adm. Lord Nelson's fleet from more than 100 in 1976 to only 25 today. The British army has been cut to its smallest numbers since the Napoleonic wars.

Arguably Britain's strategic value to the U.S. has declined beyond these numbers. Its leadership has been characterized by utter

chelusness for years. Having voted to leave the European Union and strike out on its own, it has spent the past 10 years demonstrating no idea of where it wants to be or even where it is. The procession of prime ministers (six in 10 years) has been comical.

So what's the point, your majesty? As a native-born Englishman, I will aver that Britain retains some virtues. Its cultural output remains peerless. It has the world's greatest universities. Its technology sector is a sole economic bright spot—the U.K. is the third-largest market for investment in artificial intelligence. And Mr. Trump should remember that allies—even ones in decline—are useful to have.

But the king will surely appreciate the irony: A man whose job is to "do nothing in particular and to do it very well," in the words of those great Britons Gilbert and Sullivan, must persuade a skeptical America that his kingdom is more than a place of regal pageantry, glitzy medieval castles, and never-ending entertainment provided by a soap opera of the world's most famously dysfunctional family.

By John Bolton

Uncertainty hovers over negotiations to end the Iran war. President Trump should see that diplomacy won't eliminate all threats from Tehran's regime. To protect the interests of the U.S. and its allies, the administration must eliminate Iran's nuclear menace and destroy its terrorist capabilities and capacity for economic extortion. That can't be accomplished with negotiations—it requires regime change.

Terrorism and economic threats aren't Trump administration priorities, and even discussions around nuclear weapons are too constrained. The president's narrow focus is on extracting Iran's highly enriched uranium (which he insists on calling "nuclear dust"). So doing would impede the Islamic Revolutionary Guard

reactor to produce plutonium, which Pyongyang later supplemented with a uranium-enrichment program. Bushehr's construction started under the shah, with Russia largely finishing the physical structures in the 1990s. George W. Bush's administration tried repeatedly to prevent Russia, which was also supplying fuel rods, from actually making Bushehr operational unless Iran guaranteed it would return all spent fuel to Russia. Some in the administration, including me, urged that the better solution was Israel's Osirak approach, but that view didn't prevail.

Once Bushehr launched, its accumulating spent fuel amounted to ever larger amounts of accessible plutonium. Mr. Obama's nuclear deal glossed over this issue, relying on Russian-Iranian commitments to return spent fuel rods to Russia and barring Iran from reprocessing the fuel for 15 years. Iran ignored these provisions. Based on current Russian estimates of spent-fuel levels at Bushehr and International Atomic Energy Agency estimates about the reactor's energy production, nuclear proliferation expert Henry Sokolski estimates that Iran has enough plutonium to make more than 200 nuclear weapons.

There is no justification for any Iran deal that doesn't eliminate both the plutonium and the enriched-uranium options for nuclear weapons.

There are further problems. Since 2015 there is every reason to worry about Iran outsourcing some—or even all—of its nuclear-weapons activity to North Korea, which could conduct its work hidden from view. Tehran and Pyongyang have long co-

operated on both nuclear and ballistic-missile capabilities. Both purchased uranium-enrichment and weapons designs from the infamous Pakistani proliferator Abdul Qadeer Khan (as did Libya). Both used Soviet-era SCUD missiles as the basis for their indigenous missile programs. In Syria's desert, North Korea constructed a clone of its Yongbyon reactor that was almost certainly intended for Iran's nuclear-weapons program, until the Israelis destroyed

pect of nuclear materials, the greater Iran's confidence to carry forward a weapons program.

Although Israel over the years has eliminated many Iranian scientists, considerably slowing Iran's nuclear efforts, Tehran's intellectual capability hasn't been completely extinguished. Critics of the U.S.-Israeli strikes against Iran have raised precisely this point. "You cannot bomb knowledge out of existence," Sen. Chris Murphy (D., Conn.) said.

Exactly the same could be said about Saddam Hussein's Iraq after the first Gulf War. United Nations weapons inspectors destroyed Iraq's nuclear program, and there was no evidence in 2003 that Iraq had centrifuges spinning. Nonetheless, Saddam had sustained his team of some 3,000 nuclear scientists and technicians who could have re-created Iraq's capability. These "nuclear mujahideen," as Saddam called them, posed a continuing threat.

That's why in Iran today, as in Iraq earlier, regime change is the only long-term solution. Even if today's Gulf war wasn't initially launched to depose the Iranian regime, that outcome remains the most certain path to prevent renewed Iranian nuclear proliferation and end its terrorism and economic blackmail. Making a deal with Tehran's current leadership won't turn out differently than in the Obama years. In Iran, the new boss is always the same as the old boss.

Trump is repeating one of Obama's mistakes: focusing on uranium and ignoring plutonium.

it in September 2007. Cooperation between Tehran and Pyongyang isn't hard to understand: An oil-rich country wants nuclear weapons, and a desperately poor country has detonated six nuclear devices. Given their long history of duplicity, broken promises and obstructionism on nuclear matters, cooperation between Tehran and Pyongyang shouldn't be permitted in any form.

Most important, the JCPOA didn't eliminate Iran's intellectual capacity to re-create nuclear-weapons efforts in concealed locations. Instead, the deal allowed Iran's scientists and technicians to continue gaining experience with nuclear technology and the handling of materials that aren't only radioactive but also highly toxic and corrosive. The greater the familiarity with as-

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Opinion

The New York Times

By Week's End, Trump's War Will Be Plainly Illegal

Erwin Chemerinsky

The dean of the law school at the University of California, Berkeley.

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S war with Iran is almost certainly illegal. Congress hasn't declared war or authorized it by statute, and it wasn't precipitated by an imminent attack or a national emergency. If the war continues through Friday without congressional approval, it will clearly be illegal, having passed the 60-day threshold and the 48-hour notice period that the president is given, under the War Powers Resolution of 1973, to conduct this kind of military operation.

Whether you support or oppose this war — or, as Mr. Trump has called it, this "excursion" — time will be up. And it is the obligation of the federal courts to say so.

The resolution, often called the War Powers Act, was adopted during the Vietnam War. It applies when American troops are engaged in hostilities or in situations in which hostilities are impending — such as during this war with Iran.

Despite Mr. Trump's saying, on Thursday, "Don't rush me" regarding the war's timeline, the act requires that the president withdraw our military from participation in hostilities after 60 days unless Congress has declared war, has authorized a 60-day extension or is physically unable to meet as a result of an armed attack against the United States. The president can extend this by 30 days if he certifies to Congress in writing that an "unavoidable military necessity" regarding the safety of our armed forces requires it.

The Iran war began on Feb. 28. For these purposes, the clock started running on March 2, when the president formally notified Congress of his military action against Iran. Congress has not declared war or done anything to authorize the war, and its refusal to do so in no way constitutes the requisite approval to continue the conflict — the War Powers Resolution doesn't come with a check box for opting out.

If the president and Iran's leaders don't reach an agreement to end the war before the deadline, every indication is that Mr. Trump and the Republican majorities in the House and Senate will ignore the act. To try to justify continuing the war, there's a good chance they'll come up with some new form of legal-sounding double talk. If that's the case, it will be left to the courts to uphold the law. Suits should be brought, including by service members and by members of Congress, to enforce it.

Unfortunately, recent efforts to enforce the act have been dismissed by the courts as

Federal judges must check the president's power to use military force.



BAMSON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

involving political questions that they cannot decide. For example, in *Crockett v. Reagan*, in 1982, a Federal District Court dismissed a lawsuit by members of Congress that challenged U.S. military assistance to El Salvador. In *Doe v. Bush*, in 2002, a Federal District Court dismissed a suit to enjoin President George W. Bush from invading Iraq. The court said that the issues raised were political questions "beyond the authority of a federal court to resolve." *Kucinich v. Obama*, in 2011, challenged America's military actions in Libya as violating the act and the Constitution. A Fed-

eral District Court dismissed the case.

These decisions make meaningless Congress's war powers. In the face of congressional inaction, and without judicial enforcement, there are realistically no checks on the president's ability to unilaterally wage war. If the federal judiciary, up to and including the Supreme Court, won't uphold its responsibility here, it will nullify our Constitution's design that two branches of government should be involved when our country goes to war.

The courts haven't always been so reluctant. The Supreme Court decided several

cases arising from the Quasi War, an undeclared naval war with France between 1798 and 1800. In *Talbot v. Seeman* (1801), the court emphasized the importance of Congress's involvement in any type of war. Chief Justice John Marshall wrote that the "whole powers of war" were vested in Congress. In *Little v. Barreme* (1804), the court held that even during wartime the president cannot authorize actions that violate acts of Congress.

In the Prize Cases, the Supreme Court considered the constitutionality of Abraham Lincoln's blockading Southern ports in 1861. In a narrow 5-to-4 decision, the court ruled that although the president cannot initiate war, as the commander in chief he could meet an armed rebellion with force. It did not, however, question its own authority to rule on a president's war powers.

The notion that courts cannot enforce constitutional and statutory provisions concerning war powers has no historical foundation. Nor is there any basis for arguing that the War Powers Resolution is unconstitutional as an infringement of the president's powers as the commander in chief. Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution grants Congress the power "to declare war, grant letters of marque and reprisal, and make rules concerning captures on land and water." That last phrase has immediate and obvious relevance when it comes to our military blockading or boarding ships in the Strait of Hormuz.

The Constitution's framers unquestionably intended that the power to use military force lay with Congress. During his presidency, George Washington wrote, "The Constitution vests the power of declaring war with Congress, therefore no offensive expedition of importance can be undertaken until after they shall have deliberated upon the subject, and authorized such a measure."

Yes, presidents control the execution of wars, but they don't decide whether to take the country to war. While in Congress, James Madison wrote, "Those who are to conduct a war cannot in the nature of things, be proper or safe judges, whether a war ought to be commenced, continued or concluded."

The courts should simply hold that the War Powers Resolution requires the president to end our involvement in the war with Iran unless and until Congress authorizes it. This shouldn't be — and isn't — different than any other injunction on any administration to comply with the law. Mr. Trump might disregard such an order. But that isn't a reason for the federal judiciary to abandon its duty to enforce the law.

COLUMNIST | DAVID FRENCH

Meet the New Leader of the Free World

A REMARKABLE THING has happened on the world's battlefields. Ukraine — a nation that was supposed to dissolve within days of a Russian invasion — has fought Russia to a stalemate, revolutionizing land warfare in the process. It has become an indispensable security partner in the Western alliance, including in the war against Iran.

Now, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, is taking the next step, one that would have been unthinkable even as recently as 2024. By word and deed, he's showing Europe and the world how the post-American free world can preserve its liberty and independence. This is what happens when, as Phillips Payson O'Brien wrote in a piece for *The Atlantic*, "Kyiv appears to have given up on the United States."

If that is true — and it looks as though it is — it may be worse news for the United States than it is for Ukraine.

Events on the ground and in world capitals are moving so quickly that it's hard to keep up. First, the strategic situation in the Ukraine war seems to have changed. Last week, Mick Ryan, a retired Australian major general and one of the most astute analysts of the war, wrote that Ukraine has largely stabilized the front line in eastern Ukraine, deepened its coalition, isolated Russia diplomatically and developed an indigenous arms industry that makes it less dependent on external support.

It's no longer accurate to think of Ukraine as a desperate underdog; it's becoming an independent power. Even as it fights for its life against Russia, it's reportedly reaching defense deals with the Gulf states and with the United States — and this time it's Ukraine that's providing military assistance.

In February 2025, President Trump mocked Zelensky in the Oval Office. "You're not in a good position. You don't have the cards right now," Trump said. In April 2026, Ukraine has enough cards left that it's sharing them.

This might be difficult for many readers to grasp — given our nation's longstanding military supremacy — but the Ukrainian Army, while the precise numbers are classified, the Atlantic Council estimated in 2025 that Ukraine had roughly a million men and

women under arms, the vast majority of whom serve in the ground forces.

America's total force is larger than Ukraine's, but to put the size of Ukrainian land forces in perspective, the combined size of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps is around 620,000. It's also worth noting that the U.S. forces have much less combat experience than Ukraine's forces — especially when it comes to combat with a great power. No one should minimize Ukraine's manpower issues (more recent estimates place its total number of active troops well below the million-body peak) or the fact that it has no nuclear weapons and Russia has thousands. But its army is still vast, and its military is the only Western force that has fully adapted to modern drone warfare. Indeed, Ukraine is arguably the world's leader in drone warfare.

Rapid change isn't occurring just in Ukraine. Other developments across the Western alliance show that European nations are working with shocking speed to free themselves from dependence on America.

France is expanding its nuclear arsenal and increasing its defense spending. It is even changing its nuclear doctrine to allow it to deploy nuclear-armed aircraft outside France.

Germany has approved a plan to spend up to a trillion euros on defense and infrastructure. It has also set the goal of creating the strongest military in Europe by 2039 (ironically enough, the 100th anniversary of the German invasion of Poland).

Canada is enacting its own defense budget increases — with the added twist that it will be spending far less money on American weapons.

This decision mirrors larger European and allied trends. Our allies are increasing their defense budgets and decreasing their dependence on American technology.

All of this is taking place after news reports that Denmark had been prepared to blow up airfields in Greenland if its fellow NATO member, the United States, attempted to invade.

Given these developments, is it any wonder that Zelensky has proposed a new defense arrangement for Europe if America keeps stepping back — an alliance between E.U. nations, plus non-E.U. powers like the United Kingdom, Norway, Turkey and Ukraine?

THERE ARE READERS who will welcome these developments. Good, you might think. Europe should take primary responsibility for its own defense.

But there is an immense difference between allies who step up to contribute their fair share to a cooperative alliance and nations that engage in a military buildup to replace American power, which they no longer trust.

I don't think Americans fully appreciate the extraordinary cost of Trump's bluster and blunders.

It should go without saying, but once you



LEON NEAL/GETTY IMAGES

threaten to invade an allied country, you don't just place the existence of the alliance in jeopardy; you raise the possibility of allies turning into mortal enemies. You can also trigger the kind of insecurity and scramble for power that contributed to the start of World War I.

In practical terms, it's hard to see how alienating American allies puts America first.

There's certainly no military benefit. Americans have spent the last several weeks watching our president dismiss our European allies as irrelevant, then rage at them for not helping American forces reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

By launching the war against Iran without seeking the help of (or even consulting) our European allies, we lost potential access to their advanced fighters and frigates, as well as to France's carrier battle group. In this context, there is no such thing as addition by subtraction. We are not stronger when there are fewer forces that will deploy to our aid.

There's no fiscal benefit, either. This may sound overly basic, but it needs to be said: If you break faith with your allies, you can't count on them to come to your defense. And that means you have to spend more money to maintain the same level of deterrence.

That's exactly what Trump is planning to do; he has submitted a roughly \$1.5 trillion

budget request for the U.S. military, a staggering 40 percent increase from this fiscal year.

HISTORY HAS ITS HINGE POINTS, and here is one: On Friday night, Feb. 25, 2022, Volodymyr Zelensky released a brief video from Kyiv. He told the people of Ukraine that the government had not fled to safety in the West and that it intended to stand and fight.

"We are here," Zelensky said. "We are in Kyiv. We are protecting Ukraine."

When I visited Ukraine in 2023, I spoke to Ukrainian soldiers who told me that statement sent a jolt of electricity through Ukrainian lines. From that moment, they knew they would not surrender; they would stand.

In hindsight, that decision hasn't just changed the course of Ukrainian history. Its ripple effects are extending across the globe.

Here's another hinge point: the night of Nov. 5, 2024, when the American people returned Trump to the White House. It's now clear that Trump's second term will cause generational damage to American alliances.

Given that Americans saw how Trump behaved in his first term and put him back in power anyway, it's fair for Europeans to conclude that the rift isn't with Trump alone; it's also with a critical mass of Americans.

The European nations don't have the luxury of blaming Trump's re-election on inflation and the border — or presuming that the Western alliance will be safe once Trump is gone.

One of Trump's most likely heirs, JD Vance, is arguably even more hostile to the Western alliance and Ukraine than Trump is. After all, Vance recently said that one of the things he's "proudest" of is the administration's decision to stop buying weapons for Ukraine. How can we be trusted as an ally if only one political party is committed to fulfilling our commitments?

For the foreseeable future, America's allies will reasonably fear that they may be one election away from abandonment and betrayal.

Politics abhors a vacuum. When America swapped back, other nations were bound to step forward.

While America is still the world's most powerful nation and it remains (for now) in NATO, it is rapidly forfeiting its role as the leader of the free world. And while we have certainly made mistakes in that role, we did lead the NATO alliance to victory in its generations-long confrontation with the Soviet Union. And we did so without trading into another catastrophic world war.

But you cannot threaten the free world and lead it at the same time. No nation can match American might, but for the first time in my adult life, the moral and strategic heart of the defense of liberal democracy doesn't beat in Washington. It doesn't beat in London or Paris or Berlin or Ottawa, either. It's in Kyiv, where a courageous leader and a courageous people have picked up the torch America has dropped.

Zelensky is showing nations how to survive the decline of U.S. leadership.

The Democrats' Premature Elation Trap



BEN WISEMAN

Frank Bruni

A contributing Opinion writer who was on the staff of The Times for more than 25 years.

FOR Democrats, the good news just keeps on coming.

Did I just write that? I'm in shock that I had legitimated cause to. That it's true. The party ended 2024 in such profound devastation and stumbled through so much of 2025 in a daze that I'd begun to wonder if it were operating under a cosmic hex, never again to feel a flicker of hope, a tickle of joy.

But here we are. Virginia voters just passed a redistricting plan that could net the party an additional four House seats in November. It answers, fit for it, Republican gerrymanders elsewhere. Even before that hopeful, joyful turn, political analysts were abuzz with how increasingly friendly to Democrats the midterm political environment was shaping up to be. My Times colleagues Emily Cochran and Reid J. Epstein reported last week that the Democratic Party was expanding its midterm ambitions to red House districts that it discounted before. In an article the following day, my Times colleague Nate Cohn explained why the Democrats' designs on a Senate majority, once wishful, were now realistic.

President Trump may not be Jesus, but he's performing a resurrection — of the Democratic Party. It's enough to give an agnostic like me religion.

But there's always doubt, and mine arises from the dangers of overconfidence. With the president at peak derangement, with former patriots such as Tucker Carlson swearing off him, with tacky monuments rising, with prices refusing to fall and with the country lurching ever closer to the edge, how could Democrats not start to think that the midterms are in the bag? They have a surfeit of reasons for optimism, which means I have grounds for gloom for dread. The party could face a premature elation problem.

To ward that off and make sure that they don't snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, Democrats should keep these warnings in mind:

Voters still dislike them. A lot. By some measures, voters remain more sour on Democrats than they are on Republicans or on Trump. According to the Real Clear Politics

polling average as of last week, just 34.3 percent of voters had a favorable view of the Democratic Party while 57.0 had an unfavorable one. The comparable numbers for the Republican Party were 37.7 and 56.1. Meanwhile, despite all of Trump's troubles, 40.3 percent of voters approved of the job he's doing while 57.8 disapproved, according to Real Clear Politics.

"Every time people tell me, 'Well, Trump is getting less and less popular, and his approval ratings are so low,' I say, 'Yeah, and national Democrats are even lower,'" Senator Elissa Slotkin, Democrat of Michigan, told Politico's Playbook earlier this month. "So when there's a binary choice, we still don't come out winning on those comparisons." That means the party cannot follow the script it did in 2024, cannot assume that an anti-Trump posture and message are enough and must attend to its cultural disconnect from many voters. Its

Flipping Congress is a real possibility, with some important caveats.

fortunes have risen without its reputation being restored — and that leaves it vulnerable.

Not all elections over the past six or so months — and not all data — point to a swelling blue wave. Yes, Democrats romped in November in the elections for governor in New Jersey and Virginia. In December, voters in Miami elected a Democratic mayor for the first time in nearly 30 years, and she beat a Trump-endorsed Republican by about 19 points. And in January, voters in a Texas district that Trump won by 17 points in 2024 elected a Democrat to the State Senate; that candidate won by about 14 points.

But Democrats' margin of victory in the Virginia redistricting vote last week was only about three percentage points. Recent polls that ask voters which party they generally support or would prefer to have control of Congress show Democrats with a lead of only about five percentage points. That's a smaller advantage than the one they held before the congressional elections in 2018, midway through Trump's first term in the presidency, and it's underwhelming in the context of usual midterm pendulum swings and all the mis-

deeds, messes and melodramas of Trump's current term. Democrats still have plenty of persuasion to do.

The map isn't kind to Democrats. Gerrymandering and the country's polarization in general mean that there aren't that many competitive states or districts, and the Democratic path to a Senate majority allows for few if any mistakes. The party needs to flip four seats, two of which are in states — Georgia and Michigan — that Trump won in 2024. There are only two states obviously ripe for flipping: North Carolina and Maine. If Democrats go four-for-four in Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina and Maine, they still need to score two upsets. They're looking at Ohio, Alaska, Texas and Iowa. The terrain is tough and its real promise unknowable.

There's zero assurance of party unity. The grave stakes of Republican control of Congress during the remainder of Trump's term have not exactly eliminated Democratic infighting and elevated common purpose above individual ambition. In the Senate race in Michigan, the bitterly fought three-way Democratic primary could result in Abdul El-Sayed — arguably the riskiest of the candidates — prevailing over two rivals who are splitting and thus dispersing moderate Democrats' votes. The Democratic primary in the Senate race in Texas, where James Tarlton beat Jasmine Crockett, turned remarkably ugly. The tension between the party's progressive and moderate wings is thick. To succeed in November, Democrats in key places are going to have to put aside potential disappointment with a party nominee who's not a mirror of their preferences. Can they? Will they?

The money picture is mixed. While some Democratic candidates in important races have amassed war chests much bigger than those of their Republican rivals, Republicans have had more fund-raising success than Democrats when it comes to party committees and super PACs, and Trump's super PAC is its own fund-raising juggernaut. The Democratic yawning air control in Washington doesn't show up on the midterm election's balance sheets. The party is in danger on this front.

The redistricting battles aren't done. While Democrats' success with new maps in California and Virginia has arguably neutralized Republicans' success in Texas, North Carolina and Missouri, Florida has yet to speak, and its Republican governor, Ron DeSantis, has pledged action this week to improve the party's midterm prospects there. While it's unclear that he can do so, his maneuvering, along with pending court decisions, underscores the uncertainty about which party will ultimately come out ahead in the frenzy of gerrymandering.

Trump could have some very, very dirty tricks up his sleeve. Let us not forget that he tried to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. He continues to thunder about imposing new restrictions on voting by mail and taking other measures that are obviously intended to suppress the Democratic vote total. And he has shown a willingness to exert executive authority where predecessors didn't and to explode norms that forebears obeyed. We have no clue and can't make any assumptions about what he might do to spare himself a Congress under Democratic control. That's the terrifying truth.

I'm increasingly bullish on Democrats' standing, despite all of the caveats I just laid out. But to protect themselves from Trump's potential schemes, Democrats may have to generate enthusiasm and turnout well beyond whatever burden they'd normally confront. These aren't normal times. Do the old analyses apply?

LETTERS

The Frightening Night at a Washington Gala

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Confusion and Frigh Among Guests" (front page, April 27):

We saw another tragic example of political violence at the White House correspondents' dinner. Oh my God, somehow we need to turn this around. Political differences cannot and should not be resolved by violent assault and killing. Liberals, moderates and conservatives may disagree, but many of us have far more in common than we may recognize in terms of our fundamental perspective on right and wrong behavior.

I hope and pray that Americans can find a way to bridge the political gap and work together more creatively to solve our social, cultural, political and economic problems.

PATRICK FRANK
ASHVILLE, N.C.

TO THE EDITOR:

After all of these years watching our children running and hiding in terror from gunmen, maybe, just maybe, watching the politically powerful crawl and hide under tables in abject terror in the Washington Hilton ballroom will sway these same officials to finally enact gun control measures to help stop this insanity.

JUDITH DOROSIN
LA SELVA, CALIF.

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "After Shooting, Online Rumors Filled the Void of Information" (news article, April 27):

Following the White House correspondents' dinner on Saturday night, the media are not talking about the Iran war, the Jeffrey Epstein files, President Trump's plummeting approval ratings or all the horrible things members of the cabinet are doing.

This makes many wonder. While there is no evidence documenting that the assassination attempt was fake, it is easy to see why some people suggest that it was. Just imagine having a president who would do this.

The fact that we even wonder is a sad commentary on our lack of trust in those in power. Is it possible that Mr. Trump's behavior has made us all conspiracy theorists?

To be clear, my point is not that the assassination attempt was fake, but that this kind of rhetoric abounds, putting us in a dangerous place — believing that a president would do almost anything to avoid accountability.

RICHARD CHERWITZ
CAMAS, WASH.

TO THE EDITOR:

The armed attack on the White House correspondents' dinner must be condemned by every American regardless of political persuasion.

Despite the presence of

many security agents to ensure the safety of the president and guests, a gunman was able to simply run past the security post. While he was stopped before the ballroom door, it was an abject failure of security.

Yet Todd Blanche, the acting attorney general, is on national TV programs claiming that the system worked because the president wasn't harmed. If that's the measure of a successful security operation, President Trump had better never leave the White House again.

ROBERT S. CARROLL
STATEN ISLAND

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "After Security Scare, President Demands Approval for His Ballroom" (news article, April 27):

We have learned to take so many things President Trump says or does with a mountain of salt. We may be forgiven if the lack of public process and planning for a structure not only to replace the East Wing of the White House but also to dwarf the residence makes us highly skeptical, while the edifice complex evident in the sketches released so far ought to repulse not only architects but all citizens as well. That said, the need for some secure and right-sized structure for large public events is overdue.

I produced televised concerts on the South Lawn of the White House for five administrations, of both parties. I was as nervous as the Secret Service was.

Presidents shouldn't be prisoners in their own home, but staging as many large gatherings as possible within a more secure location makes sense. Let's argue the architecture, not the need.

DALTON DELAN
WESTPORT, CONN.

The writer was an executive producer of "In Performance at the White House."

TO THE EDITOR:

During the news conference after the third attempt on the life of President Trump, he and other officials repeatedly and emphatically expressed their gratitude and respect for law enforcement.

While I agree that these jobs are dangerous and require bravery and selflessness, I could not help but recall Jan. 6, 2021, when the president in the United States sat quietly in his dining room watching violent rioters breach the Capitol building and overwhelm, wound and traumatize the vastly outnumbered Capitol Police.

The president not only refused repeatedly to intervene against the mob he had incited, but the clemency he provided to 1,500-plus rioters on the first day of his current term certainly did not reflect support for law enforcement.

DOROTHY THIERNAN
AUSTIN, TEXAS

Visible Abs and the Millennial Midlife Crisis

Jessica Grose

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

WHENEVER I hit the leaderboard at Orangetheory Fitness, I post the triumph to Instagram stories with the same caption: "My midlife crisis is going great!" This is the most mortifying collection of words I have ever written, but it is my truth.

Midlife crises are not the universal experience that they are often made out to be; one needs a pretty high base line of financial and personal stability to have the luxury of a life-altering freakout or a new obsession. But I am now firmly in my mid-40s and have observed that my peers are greeting this decade of our existence in a few specific ways.

The varieties of the millennial midlife crisis according to social media are: spiritual (an ayahuasca journey, getting into near-death experiences or starting sentences with "As an Aquarius ..."), relational (divorce or polyamory), material (throwback crisis and, inadvisable in this economy, fancy car or boat), and physical (running a marathon, getting into power lifting, bragging about your Orangetheory wins).

I can't speak to the first three manifestations of discontent, but I can provide a couple of explanations for why many of us are choosing to spend our free time and precious expendable income battling it out at feats of athletic performance like Hyrox, a punishing fitness competition where the average athlete is a 35-year-old woman.

The biggest one is probably the pandemic hitting just as we were cresting into peak adulthood. Covid forced us to touch the hot stove of mortality. This most likely led some of us to adopt healthier habits. About 50 percent of Americans 35 to 49 met the C.D.C. guidelines for aerobic activity — think run-



ROGER KASSBY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ning, walking or swimming — in 2024. This is above the average for all generations, and greater than for older generations. The federal guideline is defined as at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic exercise or some equivalent combination of the two per week.

It's tough to make an apples-to-apples comparison with Gen X and boomers at the same age because of the broad age ranges the C.D.C. breaks groups into, and I couldn't tell whether it used the same methodology over time, but there are other bits of data that suggest millennials are more into working out, including the popularity of different kinds of ob-

We all have to face the limits of our aging bodies.

stacle course competitions, like Tough Mudder and Spartan Race, and an increased demand for marathons. Millennials also spend a greater proportion of their money on wellness, compared with older generations.

But a quest for better health is not the whole story. The cliché about my generation is that we have no work ethic because we were raised with participation trophies for everything. This has always struck me as incorrect. There are just so many of us millennials, the echo of the baby boom, clawing for what feels like a diminishing set of opportunities. We have always been somewhat cut-throat.

Because we came of age just as social media debuted, we continue to be keenly aware of what our peers are doing. We don't want trophies merely for participating; that's insulting and we're not stupid. We want trophies for crushing the competition. We want to put in maximum, earnest effort and then also be publicly rewarded for that effort.

Being extremely fit as you enter the back half of your life is both a literal and a metaphorical flex. It tells people that you have the leisure time to devote to hours a week at the gym, even if you have other pressing responsibilities. In the past few years, as the use of GLP-1s like Ozempic and Wegovy has become widespread, the body as status symbol has gone beyond thinness. If you are rich enough or have good enough insurance, you can buy weight loss, but defined triceps require work.

And yet. Sometimes when I am sweating it out on the treadmill, closely monitoring my heart rate and speed, I am dragged back down to this mortal plane. What's the point of all this running — what am I running from? Why do I need an audience of thousands on Instagram to applaud my athletic performance? What emotional void is this filling? I still feel vaguely pathetic about sneaking a peek at my neighbor's machine to see how fast she is going, just to make sure I'm slightly faster.

At some point you have to face the limits of your aging body's abilities, and consider whether some of that time and money would be better spent doing something less self-centered. Basic fitness is important for everybody so that our bodies function well, but this is something else.

On the other hand, there's a raffle going on at my Orangetheory studio that would grant the winners entry into the eight-day New York City Hyrox competition starting next month, which involves 50,000 other psychos and is already sold out.

Should I buy a raffle ticket?

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EDITORIALS

Slain police officer would still be alive but for our broken system of enforcing arrest warrants

Chicago police Officer John Bartholomew, shot to death on Saturday by a suspect while he was in custody, should be alive today.

The alleged shooter, 26-year-old Alphanso Talley, was ordered detained Monday by Cook County Circuit Court Judge Luciano Panici. Talley is accused of murder and attempted murder, among numerous other charges, in the death of Bartholomew, 38, and the grave wounding of his 57-year-old partner, who hasn't been identified.

As Assistant State's Attorney Mike Pekara described the scene in court Monday, Talley, who'd been captured and arrested early Saturday in the suspected armed robbery of a Family Dollar store in Albany Park, was taken by police at his request to Endeavor Health Swedish Hospital in the Lincoln Square neighborhood. At the hospital, while in custody and guarded by the two officers, Talley was uncuffed to prepare for a CT scan after which he reached under a blanket, pulled out a handgun and shot Bartholomew in the head and his partner in the face, the prosecutor said.

Talley then fled naked from the hospital and soon was recaptured. But a Chicago police officer was dead and another was critically wounded.

How Talley had access to the gun after being in the custody of officers and subject to a metal-detecting search by hospital personnel remains mysterious. Clearly, he shouldn't have possessed a weapon in those circumstances. Those questions will need to be answered in due course.

But we wish to address another, broader concern underscored by this tragedy. There clearly are far too many like Talley who are subject to arrest and wandering our streets freely for weeks, if not months after warrants are issued. We've raised alarms before about Cook County's apparent systemic



Police officers in the 2600 block of West Winona Street watch the scene where a shooting suspect was located at a building near Endeavor Health Swedish Hospital after he shot two officers on Saturday in Chicago. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

issue with enforcing conditions of release for those charged with violent crimes. Recent horrific tragedies have demonstrated the urgent need to improve Cook County's process for enforcing warrants, too.

In Talley's case, there were three outstanding warrants for his arrest when he allegedly robbed the Family Dollar store with an accomplice, who remains at large. Cook County Circuit Court Judge John Lyke Jr. had issued a warrant for Talley's arrest on March 11 after Talley failed to appear in his courtroom on charges of carjacking and armed robbery, according to the public-safety reporting blog CWBChicago.

That was six weeks before Saturday. We don't know what attempts were made in that inter-

vening period to enforce the warrant for Talley's arrest, but we do know they weren't sufficient.

We really can't think of any decent reasons for Talley to be roaming the city on Saturday. His arrest should have been a high priority. Carjacking and armed robbery aren't minor offenses, and Talley had a lengthy criminal record. Additionally, the Illinois Department of Corrections had labeled Talley an absconder for failing to abide by parole conditions. By virtually any reasonable definition, Talley posed a danger to the community.

Bartholomew isn't the first recent high-profile victim to lose his life to someone with an outstanding warrant. On March 19, Loyola University freshman Sheridan Gorman was shot dead while

at the lakefront in the early-morning hours with friends. The man charged with the killing, Venezuelan migrant José Medina, was subject at the time to an outstanding warrant issued in September 2023 for a shoplifting charge.

Both of these killings are brutal tragedies for the families and friends of those lost.

For Chicago, the shocking crimes are noteworthy contributors to its tattered national reputation — fair or not — for being unsafe and for criminal-justice policies perceived as being concerned more with the rights of those accused than the interests of those victimized.

Cook County Chief Judge Charles Beach II, who took over that office late last year, in late January instituted reforms of

the county's electronic monitoring system, which had become a source of intense controversy after a series of violent crimes committed by those awaiting trial on charges of committing other violent crimes but who were permitted to be confined at home.

Electronic monitoring has become a flashpoint since Illinois' enactment of the 2021 SAFE-T Act, which made us the nation's first state to eliminate cash bail. As it pertains to violent crime, the law made judges' opinions the only real safeguard against the commission of additional crimes while the justice system runs its course after charges are filed. Those who judges deem not to pose a threat to public safety generally are allowed certain times during the week to attend to personal business and otherwise are ordered confined at home, with those conditions enforced via electronic monitors.

The jury is out on Beach's reforms, which is understandable since they've been in effect for not quite three months and he still is hiring more personnel to strengthen electronic-monitoring enforcement.

But what seems absolutely clear in both the Talley and Medina cases is that Cook County's system for enforcing warrants isn't working.

A Chicago police officer is dead and another is fighting for his life as we write. The system failed them, just as surely as it failed Sheridan Gorman.

It's not too much to ask that those who don't show up for court hearings — particularly those like Talley who are accused of violent crimes — face timely consequences for failing to do the bare minimum while the system permits them to walk free among us.

Much as last year's crisis around electronic monitoring called for Beach's rapid intervention, so too must county officials immediately overhaul our process for enforcing court warrants.

Everyone hates taxes. That doesn't mean you can skip them

Maybe you don't like the war with Iran. Perhaps widespread Medicaid fraud has you questioning our massive federal government's ability to manage sprawling budgets. Or perhaps, like many folks in blue cities that faced ICE and Border Patrol surges in Trump's second term, you don't want your tax dollars underwriting these actions.

This is not a new phenomenon. Taxes at nearly every level are painful, and governments — from the city of Chicago to the state of Illinois to the federal government — like to spend. Big.

None of that changes the bottom line: The IRS still expects its check.

We were fascinated by a

broader trend — covered locally by the Chicago Sun-Times and nationally by outlets including CNBC and The New York Times — of people turning the humble 1040 into a form of civil disobedience.

"Taxation is theft" is typically Libertarian-coded, a view that carries deep skepticism about the wisdom, efficiency and trustworthiness of government's ability to spend our money better than we would ourselves. We suspect many folks who voted for President Donald Trump do not like paying taxes. Perhaps they even have this slogan taped to their rear bumper.

But the voices featured in these stories lean progressive — people

who generally support a more active government, but object to how this particular one is spending their money.

One Harvard-educated Chicago attorney profiled in the Sun-Times story said she paid her state taxes but not what she owed the federal government, instead setting aside roughly \$10,000 in a savings account. That's a calculated risk, and one more accessible to someone with financial flexibility and legal expertise than to the average taxpayer. For most Americans, fines, wage garnishment or worse are too big a risk to take.

A representative from the National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee shared

how his group trains people on the best ways to protest taxes, including using loopholes to lower their income enough — "roughly \$16,000 for an individual" — that they won't owe any federal taxes.

Fair enough. But isn't this, at least in spirit, what many on the left criticize when wealthy taxpayers find ways to avoid paying more?

We understand the instinct behind "tax resistance." We've long resisted what we see as bad tax policy, such as the graduated income tax push back in 2020 or the "mansion tax" of 2024, which we opposed as wrongheaded ideas dressed as ways to soak the rich that would in actuality punish

small business and folks across the income spectrum.

We commiserate with those who bristle at funding waste, bloat or policies they oppose. In that sense, this moment is almost clarifying: It's your money, and government spends it whether you like it or not.

You can protest how your tax dollars are used. You can press your lawmakers for a different approach. You can support candidates who reflect your priorities and hold them accountable once they're in office. You can argue about how much should be collected in the first place.

But unless you're prepared for the consequences, you don't get to simply opt out.

ON THIS DAY 116 YEARS AGO GIVE THE DATE

The proposed requirement that foodstuffs placed in cold storage shall be dated seems to worry the warehousemen as much as it pleases consumers. When the views of middlemen and consumers clash about a matter of this kind those of the latter show prevail.

The objection of the warehousemen to this legislation is that it would be mere catering to what they call the whims and fancies of consumers. It is said that they would pass by an egg which had spent restful and improving months in cold storage and give the preference to one just laid; that they would not buy salmon of last year's pack if they could get some put up this year, and that they would be ruled by a silly idea that poultry, unlike wines, does not improve by keeping. The buyers, it is alleged, would slight the more antique goods and take the up to date ones unless, indeed, an inducement were held out to them in the way of lower prices. That is an inducement which sellers are loath to hold out. It would cut into their profits.

The consumer is not the notional fellow the warehousemen would make him out to be. Long keeping does impair the quality of most articles. They lose flavor, and some of them are apt to develop unpleasant peculiarities. A correspondent in yesterday's Tribune told of the physical anguish he underwent after eating sardines which had become morose and enemies of mankind through long imprisonment.

Let us lay down a principle: It is that the person to whom any article is offered by the retailer is entitled to full, accurate information concerning it. If it be a coat, he has a right to know whether it is all wool or part cotton. If it be salad oil, he has a right to know whether it was pressed from olives or cotton seed. If it be a chicken, he has a right to know how much time has gone by since its neck was wrung.

Some of his rights have been secured to him by pure food legislation. A law requiring cold storage goods to be dated would secure him another right. Then if he bought musty eggs and poultry as tasteless because of age as basswood chips he would do it knowingly.

Tribune editorial board, April 28, 1910

EDITORIAL CARTOON



MICHAEL RAMIREZ

OPINION

I was a Chicago police officer. I saw firsthand how arbitrary curfews won't stop teen takeovers

By Louis Martinez
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Back in the day, our version of a teen takeover was the annual egg fights on Halloween. Teens from different neighborhoods roamed the streets to pummel one another using eggs as ammunition. The risks were maybe getting stopped by a police officer or two. The reward was a small taste of freedom and neighborhood pride. As a police officer working Halloween, patrolling in a cruiser splattered in yolk, I found delight in cracking the eggs of the new generation of egg throwers. It was the least I could do.

Today, teens are no different from any other generation, still searching for freedom and the thrill of playing chicken with authority. Egg throwing faded away. Teen takeovers didn't.

The impulse hasn't changed. What has changed are the platform, the scale and sometimes the consequences. That's exactly why the response has to be smarter.

Today's teen takeovers are spontaneous swarms fueled by Instagram and TikTok. The disruptive behavior includes fighting, destruction of property, injuries and sometimes fatalities. Cities are responding. In Atlanta, police increased presence across the metro area, responding to a planned unauthorized gathering that resulted in 14 arrests and the recovery of 10 firearms. In Washington, D.C., officials implemented a juvenile curfew zone near Navy Yard, and the teens simply went elsewhere.

That last detail matters. Because it gets to the heart of what curfews actually accomplish.

Mayor Brandon Johnson won't even call it a takeover. He calls it a "teen trend." Words matter in policy. If you can't name the problem, you can't solve it. But the solution isn't to swing to the other extreme either. The Chicago Fraternal Order of Police president calling the mayor a coward doesn't keep a single teenager off the street. The answer lies somewhere between the dots and outrages, and that's exactly where this conversation needs to go.

When I was a police officer, curfews rarely came up in conversation among officers. When they did, the process was simple: We carried a card, wrote down the violator's information and either drove the younger ones home or filed the card at the station. It was



Chicago police establish a presence on North Avenue Beach after word spread about the possibility of a teen takeover on April 13.
TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

a quota system more than a safety strategy.

Parents were almost never held accountable. And honestly, what would accountability even look like? Impose a fine on a family already living under the poverty line? That solves nothing.

I know this from both sides of the equation. Once, when I was a teenager, a police officer brought me home for being out past curfew. I begged him not to ring the doorbell. He didn't.

And you know what? Even if he had rung the doorbell, I still would have gone out the next night. I still tried to outsmart the police. Because that's what teenagers do. The curfew didn't change anything. The fear didn't change anything. What changes teenagers isn't punishment alone; it's something worth staying home for or someone worth listening to.

Even Johnson acknowledged it: "All of the data indicates that setting arbitrary curfews — they don't lead to any positive results." Charlotte Gill, a crim-

nology professor at George Mason University, confirmed the same, in some cases, crime actually increased during curfew hours. Curfews apply to all minors, including those coming home from work, school events or visits with friends. They risk increasing unwarranted police contact and disproportionately affecting certain neighborhoods. They treat the visible problem, large crowds, rather than the root cause.

The same overreaction that sends young people into the justice system over minor infractions is exactly what cities risk when they treat every teen gathering as a criminal enterprise. I saw this firsthand.

I remember stopping an 18-year-old while in a license plate-reader cruiser. He was driving a stolen car but claimed an acquaintance had lent it to him, unaware it was reported stolen. The keys were in the ignition. I knew immediately this was a misdemeanor. The assistant state's attorney disagreed and

upgraded it to a felony.

In court, the error was obvious to everyone. When the case was called, the defense attorney stunned the courtroom by announcing her client would plead guilty. The judge intervened. Clearly and compassionately, he explained to the young person that a guilty plea would leave a felony on an otherwise clean record.

The courtroom held its breath. Everyone was rooting for this kid to walk out the door.

He pleaded guilty anyway. One bad decision. One overcharged case. One permanent mark on a young life. That is what overreaction costs.

Johnson is right that young people need support. But support without structure isn't compassion; it's abdication. The question isn't whether to punish or support. It's whether we're willing to do the harder work of both.

Chicago already has models that work. Programs such as READI Chicago combine cognitive behavioral intervention with subsidized

employment for high-risk individuals. Cure Violence deploys credible messengers, often former gang members, to interrupt conflicts before they escalate. Communities Partnering 4 Peace puts peacekeepers on the streets precisely when and where they're needed. These aren't theories. They're evaluated by the University of Chicago Crime Lab and credited with reducing violence in target areas. The city doesn't need to invent a solution. It needs to scale the ones already working.

Before we treat every teen gathering as a threat, we should ask: Is this an epidemic or a trend? The response to each should look very different. And getting that wrong has consequences that last far longer than any Halloween egg fight.

Louis Martinez is a retired Chicago Police Department officer and criminal justice professor at Oakland College. He is the author of "The Violent Brain: A Study in Neurocriminology."

Indiana is taking action on foreign influence

By Joe Gebbia Sr.
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Indiana has shown the nation how to protect citizens from foreign adversaries at the state level.

This leadership follows a congressional report showing foreign adversaries are actively influencing American academia — shining a spotlight on Indiana and Purdue University, in particular, as both a model for reform and a case study in risk.

The report, issued in September by the U.S. House Select Committee on China, which focused on the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), commended Purdue for prohibiting funding from foreign adversaries and clearly outlining information security, intellectual property protection and travel restrictions. However, the report also outlined ongoing university risk, warning that Purdue "maintains considerable faculty-level engagement with Chinese institutions." Purdue employs 16 visiting faculty from China, and another six professors are on sabbatical in China. Further, some of these visiting faculty members are associated with the Chinese government agency responsible for developing new military weapons and dual-use — military and civilian — scientific research.

The report underscores a clear reality: Foreign adversaries are active and influencing American academia. But the threat extends off campus. Foreign adversaries such as the CCP use a wide range of tools to project influence inside the United States, from academic partnerships and intellectual property theft to land acquisition, supply chain leverage and political lobbying. This warfare is sophisticated, persistent and often difficult to detect.

For years, much of the responsibility for addressing these threats has been left to Washington. Still, the Purdue example makes clear that many vulnerabilities exist at the state level — in univer-



People move about campus at Purdue University on Oct. 8, 2020, in West Lafayette, Indiana. ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

sities, procurement systems, land markets and even political processes. That is why the Indiana General Assembly's recent passage of Senate Bill 256 is so significant and worthy of recognition.

Senate Majority Leader Chris Gerten, R-Charlestown, authored the bill, and Rep. Matt Commons, R-Williamsport, sponsored it in the House — legislation they described as setting the "gold standard for American sovereignty." Credit is also due to Gov. Mike Braun for his leadership in supporting and signing this bill into law.

With overwhelming bipartisan support, Indiana enacted one of the most comprehensive state-level national security laws in the

country. The legislation recognizes that protecting Hoosiers requires a proactive, state-based response to foreign influence.

The new law establishes a foreign agent registration requirement, ensuring individuals acting on behalf of hostile foreign governments cannot operate in the shadows. This is a foundational protection, rooted in transparency; policymakers and the public deserve to know if foreign agents are attempting to shape decisions in their state.

It also strengthens protections around sensitive technology and state contracts, limiting access for companies tied to foreign adversaries. As China continues to manufacture components embedded in everyday technol-

ogy, the risk of back doors and vulnerabilities grows. This applies to consumer devices such as computers and cameras, but even more critically to government systems that handle sensitive data.

The law also blocks state resources from flowing to entities tied to foreign terrorist organizations, increases oversight in higher education by requiring greater transparency around foreign students and research in sensitive fields — a direct response to the risks highlighted in the Purdue report — and restricts foreign land ownership by adversarial nations, addressing growing concerns about strategic acquisitions near critical infrastructure.

In short, this omnibus state security bill addresses the full

spectrum of threats — both covert and overt — from foreign adversaries.

Passing laws like this is why I started State Shield — legislatures and city halls are the new front lines in the war against foreign adversaries. While Indiana has taken a huge step, the reality is our adversaries continue to adapt their tactics, and other states should take note. The threats we face are not confined to Washington. Protecting America now starts in the states, and Indiana has shown the nation what can be done.

Joe Gebbia Sr. is founder of State Shield, a nonprofit that advances policies to counter foreign influence.

OPINION

Will King Charles' visit help soften the animus between the US and the UK?

Daniel DePetris

King Charles III is Donald Trump's opposite in every way. The former is a master of protocol. Everything he does daily is scripted to a T. The latter despises a script, hates giving formal speeches and prefers to ad-lib in front of his supporters. Due to his bloodline and the role of the monarchy in British life, Charles rises above the fray of Britain's increasingly bitter politics. Trump, meanwhile, relishes partisanship and uses it to his advantage.

This week, the unlikely pair are meeting for a second time in less than a year while Charles is in Washington for a multiday state visit. His itinerary includes the usual goings-on for a head of state — a symbolic speech to Congress one day and a visit to chat with 9/11 families in New York the next. Pomp and circumstance will be on full display as one might expect. Even so, the monarch will have some work to do on this side of the pond. Job No. 1: Use the gravitas of the British royal family to chip away at the animus that has bedeviled the U.S.-United Kingdom relationship since the beginning of the year.

Although it would be an exaggeration to say that the so-called special relationship is falling apart, ties between the kingdom and its former colony are certainly at a low ebb. The U.S. and U.K. have clashed over everything from energy policy and trade to NATO and the status of Greenland, the large ice-covered Danish territory that Trump at one point threatened to seize by force. Trump, who has immense respect for the royals but very little for the British politicians actually running the country, has taken a liking to lumping the U.K. in with "woke" European states that have, in his view, turned a once-great continent into a hellscape overrun by migrants, crime and windmills.

It didn't start out this way. During Trump's first year, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer emerged as one of the few government heads on his side of the Atlantic who could manage the mercurial American president, particularly on Ukraine, where Trump has long wanted to cut a deal with Russian President



President Donald Trump and British King Charles III review the Guard of Honour after arriving at Windsor Castle in Windsor, England, on Sept. 17, 2025. **KIRSTY WIGGLESWORTH/AP**

Vladimir Putin. Trump constantly referred to Starmer as a leader who was doing a good job in a tough position. The two reached a trade agreement last May, a relatively short negotiation that was far less painful than the trade talks the White House had with the European Union.

But the 2-month-old war in Iran has driven the relationship into lower depths. Wedged in between a war in the Persian Gulf that he chose to fight but which he's having trouble extricating from and oil prices 50% higher than they were earlier in the year, Trump has taken to bashing the U.K. for being no better than those hapless Europeans. Trump expected the British to make their air bases in the region available for U.S. bombers, but Starmer's government rejected those requests. London's decision to change tack and allow U.S. military aircraft to use British bases for defensive strikes against Iran along the Strait of Hormuz didn't

satisfy Trump; he apparently believed that Starmer would keep his concerns to himself and follow Washington's lead like then-Prime Minister Tony Blair did in Iraq two decades before.

Things have further devolved. Trump repeatedly has implied that Starmer is a modern-day Neville Chamberlain who really has nothing to offer the United States.

Starmer, now one of the most unpopular politicians in the U.K., has used Trump's bellicosity to his advantage. Standing up to Trump is a surefire way to earn decent ratings from members of the British public, who have a highly negative view of the American leader. Starmer is no longer acting as the amiable pushover; he's now the bold-faced Brit sticking up for U.K.'s national interest. During successive interviews and sessions in the House of Commons, Starmer consistently has argued that he won't bow to Trump's pressure tactics by send-

ing the U.K. armed forces to do battle with the Iranians.

He's also getting louder in his criticisms of U.S. policy. "I'm fed up with the fact that families across the country see their bills go up and down on energy, businesses' bills go up and down on energy because of the actions of Putin or Trump across the world," Starmer told British television earlier this month. It's not an unsubstantiated complaint; the International Monetary Fund has assessed that the U.K. is more exposed to energy supply disruptions in the Middle East in relation to other advanced economies, and it cut its growth forecast for the British economy as a result. For Starmer, whose future as leader of a progressively rudderless Labour Party is now at risk, these projections are about as helpful as a hole in the head.

The negativity surrounding Trump's war of choice in Iran can't be chalked up to simple ideological divides between left and right

either. Kemi Badenoch, leader of the right-wing Conservative Party, at first applauded the U.S. and Israeli bombing campaign against the Iranian regime. But as the economic costs have gotten more pronounced, she has come to criticize the Trump administration for the lack of a coherent plan and for leaving the region in a mess. Even Nigel Farage, who considers Trump a personal friend and whose Reform U.K. Party is the closest Britain has to Trump's MAGA movement, has given Starmer credit for refusing to become an active belligerent in the conflict.

King Charles, therefore, has his work cut out for him. It's a thought that will no doubt linger in his mind as he dines at the White House and poses for pictures with lawmakers at the Capitol.

Daniel DePetris is a fellow at Defense Priorities and a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

Voice of the People

Linking shooting, NYC tax plan

Regarding the Tribune Editorial Board's recent attempt ("New York Mayor Mamdani was wrong to target Griffin," April 26) to connect the shooting at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner to New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani's tax proposal, the board seems to have a blind spot for how public figures operate and how they can be discussed in the public square.

Ken Griffin has gone out of his way to tell us how much he paid/contributed to Chicago while he was here. He is no stranger to telling us how much money he has and complaining about how much money he pays in taxes. He cannot put out this information for public consumption to make his point, then have the Tribune Editorial Board get mad on his behalf when someone uses that same information to make his or her own.

I am curious where the Tribune Editorial Board's outrage is with U.S. Rep. Chip Roy's legislation, known as the MAMDANI ACT? That bill would denaturalize U.S. citizens who have socialist, communist or other Marxist-aligned thoughts, which is a clear attack on the First Amendment's freedom of thought, not unlike the dinner, which was an attempt to attack and intimidate the freedom of the press. This seems like a stronger parallel to make than whatever the editorial board tried to do.

— Kelly Hayes, Chicago

The safer life of a billionaire

I'm still puzzled by the recent editorial linking the shooting at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner with Mayor Zohran Mamdani's push for a pied-à-terre tax in New York City. Can readers expect a follow-up clarifying what that connection might be?

Identically, one doesn't have to believe in "social murder" to



New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani speaks during a news conference at Staten Island University Hospital Community Park on Monday in New York City. **MICHAEL M. SANTIAGO/GETTY**

suppose that a duly elected official such as Mamdani might use a high-rise building that contains one of many homes owned by a billionaire as a backdrop to publicize a mild new tax. The building is on a public street.

The Tribune Editorial Board repeats the line of Griffin's lieutenant that this stunt could "torpedo" thousands of jobs to be created by a proposed Citidel redevelopment project.

Isn't Griffin, not Mamdani, the one with his finger on the red button here? If Griffin is as beneficent as the board takes him to be, why would he threaten to abandon this project so capriciously? Does he really expect us to sympathize with him? Does the board?

The truth is that anyone in Griffin's bracket — the president and Gov. JB Pritzker included — lives an infinitely safer life than the rest of us. It's amazing what even \$1 billion will do for one's health, physical safety and peace of mind. The copays are a peach!

It's unreasonable for billionaires to expect that no one should

with the pied-à-terre tax. Safety first, though, for our wounded wealthy.

— Andrew Holter, Chicago

Faith leaders' leftist ideology

As a longtime lapsed Catholic struggling to regain my faith later in life, I sadly confess that I find it an increasingly difficult task with the likes of radical priest Michael Pfleger and fellow clerics putting their 1960s-bred leftist ideology on full display in columns such as Sunday's "With God on our side, we must fight against this administration's unholy warfare."

It is one thing to criticize the current administration's foreign and domestic policy; it is quite another to claim that God is on one side of the U.S. political spectrum while demonizing another.

To accuse the White House of engaging in "a white Christian crusade" with an "unabashed threat of genocide" for its morally justified effort to rid the world of an unhinged Iranian regime that denies the first Holocaust while promising the second may play well with Pfleger's leftist friends as they retreat to their tax-free citadels to sip their wine and drink their tea.

But it is hardly a way to win over converts to Catholicism or, indeed, even Christianity, much less to encourage or to inspire those of us who first began drifting away from the church in the '70s because of the increasing political activism of leftist priests. (The charge of "opportunism, nepotism and sexual exploitation" plays particularly poorly given the Catholic church's own poor record in these areas this past half century.)

Yes, as Pfleger and his co-writers observe, the devil can quote Scripture for his own purpose. So

perhaps they should take to their own hearts Pope Leo XIV's recent admonition, "Woe to those who manipulate religion and the very name of God for their own ... gain" rather than to invoke aging folk singer Bob Dylan's "with God on our side, we won't fight the next war."

Sadly, the nation witnessed once again Saturday evening at what should have been the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner what happens when unhinged heated rhetoric stirs up hatred for one's political opponents.

Perhaps Pfleger would be well advised to stick to his faith and his flock and to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, rather than to continue to pontificate from the pulpit — or even the paper.

— David Applegate, Huntley

Money raised for Trump library

In Sunday's paper, Clarence Page writes that the Southern Poverty Law Center has been indicted on allegations that it engaged in a massive fraud operation to deceive donors, enrich the organization and hide its deception from the public ("Is the Southern Poverty Law Center indictment about fraud or something more sinister?"). Just last week, news organizations relayed information that a nonprofit fund that has raised money for Donald Trump's future presidential library has faced scrutiny over its closing and the whereabouts of the more than \$60 million that was raised.

Was the money returned to the donors?

There are laws that all citizens need to follow. No one is above the law. The American people deserve to know.

— George Nedic, Mundelein

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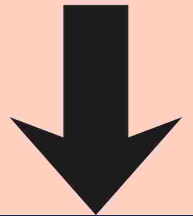
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