

OUR VIEW

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The Iran war puts more than oil on India's radar

A flare-up in crude prices will worsen if lose-lose dynamics set in. Yet, that may be the milder fallout of the US-Israeli war on Iran. Uncertainty hangs thicker over its hard global impact

The American-Israeli attack on Iran raises a number of vital questions for India and the rest of the world, delving into which is necessary to make the best of a bad situation. The prices of oil and liquefied natural gas have begun to rise as Iran attempts to choke the Strait of Hormuz, through which about one in every fourth barrel of all seaborne crude oil moves. If this grip lasts, it will make energy imports dearer, weaken the rupee and give inflation a cost-push. India's central bank would need to keep knock-on effects under watch; likewise, at another level, the volume and direction of capital flows. For now, stockpiles of oil are in focus. If tankers that carry almost a fifth of the world's daily usage cannot exit the Gulf, import-reliant countries could soon run acutely short. The US and China have large reserves. Our strategic storage would easily help us tide over more than a week; plus oil companies have stocks too. Still, we may need to resume shipments from Black Sea ports if US and Venezuelan supplies cannot fill our gaps. Since high fuel costs would not suit US President Donald Trump as mid-term polls approach, his political interest lies in shuffling off the use of Russian oil to plug shortfalls. But then, Iran would need to ship oil out of the Gulf too, so its retaliatory blockade may be short-lived. As with any war, however, lose-lose dynamics risk setting in. The war has already spread around the Gulf and Levant, with Saudi oil facilities targeted too, and if Iran-aligned Houthi forces in Yemen try to clamp the Suez Canal as well, already volatile freight and insurance costs could rise further. With China in the same boat as India, perhaps Asia's big two could exercise some diplomatic clout to minimize sealane disruption. How any

scenario pans out depends on how long hostilities last. Reports suggest that Iran's battered regime is prepared to draw out the conflict and make it as costly for the US and Israel as possible. Whether the US-Israeli attack rallies Iranians in favour of the regime or against it is a matter of conjecture for now. Internally, what began as a rebellion born of economic hardship may turn into a test of the Islamic Republic's institutional frame and its ideological appeal. Given how Iran's alleged push for nuclear weapons led the geopolitical narrative in the war's run-up, all that's certain, unfortunately, is that other middle powers will take away the lesson that in a world whose rules can openly be flouted by the mighty, they are safer with an arsenal of nukes of their own than without one. When Trump began his presidency with rhetoric of ending wars and focusing on America, the world had no inkling that the US would turn violator-in-chief of Pax Americana—the US-set world order based on a consensus of rules. Regime change in Venezuela has swiftly been followed by the same aim in Iran, with fist-waves over Greenland as an interlude. 'Might is right' has been spelt out as the new maxim. This makes an arms race all but inevitable; that too, with nuclear options back on the table. If Germany cannot count on the US defence umbrella, nor can Japan or South Korea. The world has grown fraught with geopolitical dangers we had hoped to leave behind. As the interest of countries in US power declines, so might their stake in its economic dominance. This could impact not just the US economy, which borrows a lot from abroad, but the world of capital as we know it. Uncertainty doesn't just hover over an oil bill. It foreshadows the future. India must prepare appropriately.

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Climate litigation often feels like a distant Western concern, unfolding in American federal courts or European tribunals. Yet, the legal foundations that make such cases possible are now firmly in place in India. The shift has been gradual, almost quiet, but is unmistakable. What began as rights-based petitions against the state are evolving into a framework that can shape corporate conduct through disclosure rules, consumer law and project approvals. One of the landmark climate-focused petitions in India, *Ridhima Pandey's Union of India*, asked the judiciary to direct the government to do more to address climate change. The case relied on the constitutional right to life and India's international commitments. Although it has not produced sweeping orders, it signals that climate change can be framed as a legal duty, not merely a policy preference. In the past 10-odd years, project-level challenges before the National Green Tribunal have also begun to reflect climate con-

cerns. The tribunal, established to hear environmental disputes, is regularly examining whether impact assessments properly consider flood risks, coastal vulnerability and cumulative environmental harm. Courts have rarely halted projects solely because of climate arguments. Yet, they are increasingly questioning the quality and completeness of the project-approval process. The more consequential change for corporate India has come from regulators rather than courtrooms. In 2021, the Securities and Exchange Board of India mandated Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) for large listed entities. In 2023, it introduced BRSR Core, requiring assurance of key sustainability metrics. These disclosures are not voluntary narratives. They require structured reporting on emissions, governance and climate risk. If such disclosures are misleading or incomplete in a material way, the issue moves beyond reputational damage into the domain of regulatory enforcement. Consumer law has moved in parallel. In 2024, the Central Consumer Protection Authority issued Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing. These guidelines clarify that environmental claims must be specific and supported by evidence.

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India Inc mustn't underplay climate litigation as a risk

The Advertising Standards Council of India has also issued complementary guidance for advertisers. General phrases such as 'eco-friendly' or 'carbon-neutral' can no longer stand on their own. Claims must be clear about scope and conditions. The standards are moving from aspiration to proof. International experience shows that once disclosure rules tighten and consumer standards are clarified, litigation follows. The Grantham Research Institute at the London School of Economics has documented a steady rise in climate cases since the 2015 Paris climate pact, which India has ratified. The Network for Greening the Financial System has examined how climate-related litigation can affect financial stability and corporate risk. India's numbers are modest, but the regulatory groundwork suggests that disclosure enforcement, shareholder action and clear-and-act litigation could rise sharply over the next 5-10 years. Disclosure mandates, consumer enforcement powers and an active

environmental tribunal create clear points of accountability. For energy, infrastructure, finance and consumer-facing sectors, litigation risk is now annual-report material. It would be unrealistic to expect a sudden surge in awards of large damages. Indian courts tend to move incrementally. Yet over the next decade, disputes are likely to arise in three areas. One, regulators may test whether climate risks are properly described in annual and sustainability reports. Two, consumer authorities may scrutinize environmental marketing claims. Three, project approvals may face closer scrutiny where climate vulnerability appears to be understated. Each category may produce only a limited number of cases each year. Taken together, however, they can change incentives for Indian businesses. Litigation need not be frequent to be influential. For company boards and senior management, the response does not require any grand gestures. It merely requires discipline. Climate risk should be treated like any

other material risk, with documented analysis and corporate oversight. Disclosures should reflect internal assessments rather than marketing language. Environmental claims should be checked against verifiable evidence before they are published. Impact assessments for major projects should address foreseeable climate risks in a transparent way. These steps are not simply about avoiding penalties. They create a record of reasoned decision-making. In court, that record often matters more than rhetoric. The shift underway is not ideological. It is institutional. Once disclosure rules harden and consumer standards tighten, litigation becomes compliance tool. Corporate India has long viewed climate through the lens of policy and public relations. That lens is narrowing. The next phase will be argued in affidavits and audit trails. Courts rarely set out to design corporate strategy. Yet, through standards and precedent, they shape it. In India, that process has begun in earnest. Climate governance is becoming part of the legal framework within which companies will have to operate and grow. Those who recognize this early may find that careful preparation is less costly than reactive defence.



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India's economy is growing fast. The speedometer looks impressive. The engine, however, is increasingly running on debt. The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) *Financial Stability Report* published in December has a line that ought to cause senior bankers to spill their coffee: retail credit is no longer a tail risk; it has moved to the core. This is the regulatory equivalent of observing that smoke is now a structural feature of the building but evacuation might be premature. Unsecured retail loans account for 53.1% of total retail slippages at scheduled commercial banks, even as their retail gross non-performing assets (GNPA) ratio sits at a comforting 1.8%. This is finance's oldest optical illusion: fixate on the average while the distribution quietly sharpens its knives. It always works—right up until it doesn't. Crises do not arrive waving banners marked 'excess credit' but disguised as innovation. As Adair Turner warns in *Between Debt and the Devil*, credit can grow to socially useless or dangerous levels long before it gets inflationary. Stable prices can end up as camouflage, as they often do. India's household credit boom fits this description. Unsecured retail credit is growing at high double-digit rates, comfortably ahead of nominal GDP. Personal loans, credit cards and gold loans are doing the heavy lifting, while credit that builds

productive capacity jogs behind. Banks have retreated to the retail foxhole not by choice, but because corporate credit demand is anemic. In a world of thin margins, the 'high-yield' siren song of a 24% annual rate personal loan is irresistible to a balance sheet starved of industrial capital expenditure. This does not lead to capital formation. It is economic output in rented clothing. The bill is payable by households. None of this is new. In 1920s America, instalment credit allowed households to buy cars long before incomes could support them. Consumption surged. Growth looked unstoppable. When wages failed to cooperate, debt did what it does: it quit pretending. The collapse was not psychological but mechanical. Fintech has turbocharged India's version of that story. Its share of non-bank consumer loans has jumped to 8.9% from 7.3% barely a year earlier. More than 70% of fintech loans are unsecured. Over half go to borrowers under 35. Such credit is instant, modular and embedded. Borrowing is more of an app feature than a considered decision. And for platforms paid on loan origination, repayment is someone else's problem. The industry hails the 'Account Aggregator' framework as the answer to information asymmetry. Yet, even the best data is a rear-view mirror. An algorithm can predict a borrower's intent based on past UPI swipes, but it cannot forecast the borrower market's capacity to pay if underlying drivers like the gig economy begin to cool off. Household debt has grown at roughly twice the pace of nominal GDP, reaching about \$1.5 trillion. This is leverage, sliced thin and spread wide, reassuring everyone that no single default matters—until millions of them do. Risk has been atomized, which history suggests does not disappear, but synchronises. For young Indians, credit bridges the gap between aspiration and income. Many iPhones, vacations, consumer durables and lifestyle spending are financed upfront. Repayment is

deferred. As financial historian David Graeber noted, once debt is moralized, default becomes a personal failure rather than a design flaw. That is when trouble begins. In Korea before 1997, high leverage was tolerated because growth was strong and defaults were low. When capital flows reversed, balance sheets that looked resilient proved brittle. Digital lending removes friction but preserves consequences. Algorithms trained only on good times allocate capital with exquisite confidence and no memory. Unsecured credit does not fail gracefully. It suddenly drops off a cliff—like America's subprime mezzanine tranches did. We in India are witnessing a 'democratization of distress.' By the time the GNPA ratio moves from 1.8% to 4%, the liquidity bridge will have already collapsed for non-bank financial companies that feed fintech firms. Unsecured credit has thin recovery values and a nasty habit of herd deferrals. A mild shock like a hiring slowdown, higher interest rates and marginally looser underwriting need not be dramatic. It merely needs to arrive. Our regulatory framework treats unsecured retail credit as individually risky but systemically trivial. Risk weights were tightened, partly loosened and broadly remain indulgent. Provisioning is backward-looking. Capital buffers are calibrated for bank-level solvency, not for correlated household failure. Fintech lenders are lightly regulated and banks chase yield. This is macroprudential policy stuck in a microprudential mindset. History suggests the cycle will not wait. Debt is a claim on the future. Credit is useful only up to a point after which it stops feeding growth and starts feeding on it. Regulatory comfort in 'small ticket sizes' ignores a basic law: a million pebbles falling together is still an avalanche. Should the brakes fail, the impact won't be cushioned by 'averages.' It will be felt all at once by a generation that spent its future before it earned it.



JUST A THOUGHT

Moral hazard refers to the fact that people take on greater risks when they are personally shielded from the negative consequences.

DOUG MCGUFF

Sustainability compliance could put companies that fail to act earnestly in the legal dock



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

The Fed's next chief: Can Warsh do what this central bank needs?

If Kevin Warsh wins its staff and management over, he'd have a chance to reform this US institution and return it to excellence



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The Fed has made repeated analytical and forecasting errors in recent years as well as supervisory lapses and monetary-policy slippages. Its excessive data dependency is one reason why; such a posture is fundamentally reactive, making it incompatible with the forward-looking strategic vision needed to devise policies that act with a lag.

Improving the Fed's record and restoring trust in its judgement will require Warsh to address a long list of problems. The FOMC's structure and process make it susceptible to groupthink and the institution has experienced mission creep. Its communication, especially at the press conference that follows each policy meeting, has often generated confusion rather than offering the clarity that effective 'forward policy guidance' demands. It is insufficiently accountable to the public. And its analytical models need a revamp. It does not help that several top policy makers have resigned over unproven allegations of financial irregularities.

Warsh has been vocal about many of these issues, including in his G-30 Spring Lecture last April. Now, he must tackle them head-on. The extent to which he succeeds will determine not only the Fed's future policy effectiveness but also the Fed's political independence at a time when the US economy is caught between the upside of innovation and the legacy of high debt, deficits and inequality.

Another pillar of the Warsh agenda must be the Fed's balance sheet. Since the 2008 global financial crisis, the Fed has sharply expanded its market footprint from roughly \$1 trillion before the crisis to \$9 trillion at its peak in 2022. This has contributed to surging wealth inequality and led to concerns—which Warsh and I share—about the central bank's interference in markets and the resulting inefficiencies overall in the allocation of resources throughout the economy.

This is not to say that Warsh should merely shrink the Fed's ledger. Rather, the Fed must establish a 'balance-sheet theory.' Just as economists debate the 'neutral' interest rate, the Fed needs a clearer framework for what constitutes a neutral or equilibrium level of market intervention via its balance-sheet operations.

I suspect the internal response to Kevin Warsh's leadership will mirror the reception of his G-30 Spring Lecture. After he finished, G-30 Chair Bagharwan G. Rajan, a professor at the University of Chicago who has been International Monetary Fund chief economist and governor of India's central bank, commented that he "pretty much" agreed with everything Warsh said. If Warsh can win over Fed staff and management with similar effectiveness, the Warsh era may well deliver long-delayed reforms and a return to institutional excellence. ©2025/PROJECT SYNDICATE

Kevin Warsh's nomination to succeed Jerome Powell as US Federal Reserve chair has triggered a predictable frenzy of speculation centred on a single, narrow question: How hard will he push for interest-rate cuts? While such conjecture may be entertaining, it misses the forest for the trees. To focus solely on rate cuts is to misunderstand the Fed's situation and the scale of the challenge awaiting its next leader.

Warsh inherits an institution that, by any historical measure, is deeply fractured internally and lacks credibility externally. One need not look far for evidence. The minutes of the most recent policy meeting read like a thesaurus, with a long list of qualifiers—"a few," "some," "several," "a number," "many" and "the vast majority"—signalling an unusually wide dispersion of views within the policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC).

This internal friction reflects a complex American economic landscape, in which both components of the Fed's 'dual mandate,' price stability and maximum employment, are under pressure and FOMC members harbour differing sensitivities to them. It also reflects a certain defensiveness, triggered by US President Donald Trump's attacks on America's central bank, which have escalated during his second term.

Moreover, Fed policymakers are aware of enduring criticisms over their handling of the 2021 inflation surge: by treating it as 'transitory' for too long, they inadvertently contributed to the current affordability crisis. The Fed has lately been receiving some of its lowest-ever scores on trust surveys.

Under these conditions, any incoming Fed chair would need time to establish the chair's authority, build consensus and restore the institution's credibility and standing. Having previously served on the Fed's Board of Governors, Warsh is too seasoned and too savvy to try to push the FOMC into politically motivated rate cuts. But even if he did desire cuts, he could not force the committee's hand, owing to its structure: the Fed chair is 'first among equals' in the FOMC, lacking a formal veto. And there is little reason to think the FOMC would rubber-stamp inappropriate rate cuts.

Warsh might be able to persuade his colleagues to adopt a more accommodative forward-looking posture, such as by highlighting labour-market risks and the promise of an AI-driven productivity surge, which could increase the economy's non-inflationary 'speed limit.' But whether or not he does would answer just one of the key questions about his leadership. Ultimately, the success of the 'Warsh Fed' will be measured not by the Fed funds rate alone, but by whether it includes an overhaul of outdated operational machinery and strengthens the underpinnings of balance-sheet policy.

India's data abundance: Don't squander a valuable resource

It's an asset AI players are keen on and the country could leverage



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India generates plenty of the kind of data that improves AI systems. istockphoto

India is fast becoming one of the world's biggest AI userbases. The question now is how it can turn that scale into superpower status rather than just training Silicon Valley for free.

That will be a tall order for a country largely caught flat-footed by the boom. But let's start with the basics: The three main building blocks of AI are talent, compute (including high-end chips and infrastructure) and data. India doesn't lack engineers, but it currently doesn't have foundational research training at scale or enough advanced processors at public labs and universities. What it has, in abundance, is data. It should treat this like a strategic asset instead of leaking it out as a free export.

It's a key reason US Big Tech is making a blitz for the market. With roughly a billion people online and a massive mobile-first population, India generates a torrent of the kind of human feedback that makes AI systems better on a daily basis. The world's most populous country is the second-biggest user base of both OpenAI's ChatGPT and Anthropic's Claude after the US, while accounting for just a fraction of these platforms' revenue. The dynamic exposes how much more the market matters for training purposes right now than making money.

These free-to-use services and promotions aimed at Indian phone users come with a cost. It's part of a strategy: Silicon Valley grab for Indian languages, voices and behaviours that will make foreign systems smarter first. The South Asian nation risks repeating a familiar historical pattern of exporting the raw materials for pennies then buying back imported models at a premium. Meanwhile, it will be left to absorb a job shock and social impacts at home.

India's linguistic diversity also raises the stakes. If models aren't trained on enough local speech and cultural contexts, they'll misunderstand users and become unreliable in classrooms, clinics, courts and even customer support settings. Closing this language gap sits at the heart of [the Indian government's] promise to democratize AI and make its impacts real for everyone from farmers to small-business owners, rather than just English-speaking elites.

At the same time, the AI future that the likes of Meta or OpenAI are selling—marked by personal agents and voice-powered ambient devices—won't work in India unless they can listen and speak local languages and get the nuances right.

Some startups, including Andreesen Horowitz-backed Poseidon AI and Big Tech-supported non-profit efforts, are already trying to crowdsource and create

local language data-sets. New Delhi should be paying far more attention, not just because data-labelling and collection practices have a global reputation of being exploitative, but also because these efforts could anchor a domestic ecosystem. India can't demand "AI for all" while outsourcing the work of building a linguistic foundation. Done well, though, these data-sets can become infrastructure for its AI economy.

The same logic applies beyond language. India should push hard for the creation of specialized, high-impact and localized data-sets in sectors like health care or finance. AI can improve diagnostics and personalized care, but the most valuable data for accomplishing this still lies in largely inaccessible hospital systems. Privacy fears are real and should be taken seriously, but accessing this data could also mean saving lives. Unlocking and organizing it is the hard, unglamorous work that takes Modi's branding of "AI for good" beyond just slogans.

Ultimately, India's data reckoning should be about who controls this strategic input to AI and who captures the value from it. The answer isn't to wall off user outputs from the world. It's about finding creative solutions and leveraging them to set rules that reflect what's actually being extracted. If its peoples' data is the key ingredient for building advanced AI, the government should demand more than apps and marketing in return.

It can ask for partnerships that build capacity, including public-compute commitments, access to high-end chips, serious training pipelines for AI researchers and collaborations that go beyond token commitments. New Delhi should also set norms that treat local data-sets as a public good and consider revenue-sharing models that maintain the upsides at home. Transparency is crucially important. Policymakers should require foreign model builders to disclose the kind of data that shaped their systems and how it has been evaluated for harms and biases in Indian contexts.

More than building foundation models, setting equitable data policies is where India has the biggest opportunity to truly lead the Global South in the AI era. Otherwise, it risks becoming an open mine and fueling systems that automate local jobs, concentrate power abroad and deepen dependencies. ©BLOOMBERG

THEIR VIEW

Digital addiction: It's time to put safety norms in place

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In Indian boardrooms, 'AI-enabled' could overtake 'digital transformation' in its buzz quotient. It's new, app-based and comes with a valuation expressible in unicorns, it must be good, right? Well, India has always had a muscular pro-innovation bias. From UPI to ONDC, from Aadhaar to account aggregators, it has shown the world that technology can leapfrog infrastructure. But history reminds us that progress occasionally has unintended consequences. The byproduct of a genuinely useful innovation can be harmful. Worse still, creators of successful digital technologies tend to gain an outsized influence over social behaviour. If a business's market cap rivals a state budget, it can subtly script culture.

In 1965, in the US, a young lawyer named Ralph Nader wrote *Unsafe at Any Speed*, accusing automakers of prioritizing style and profits over passenger safety. The outrage that followed led to what became the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Seat-belts, air-bags and crash stan-

dards became industry norms and death rates dropped. Even those allergic to regulation grudgingly admitted that not flying through a windshield was a net positive for shareholder value.

Fast-forward to 2026. Replace tailfins with touchscreens, horsepower with engagement metrics, crash fatalities with spiralling teen anxiety. We may well be at an 'unsafe at any age' moment for social media and tech platforms. In Los Angeles, major addiction trials have begun, with over 1,600 plaintiffs alleging that social-media firms deliberately engineered addictive features that expose children to harm. The legal strategy is clear. Rather than citing content, always shielded by Section 230 in the US, the plaintiffs argue defective product design. The harm, they claim, flows from infinite scroll, auto-play, algorithmic amplification and relentless notifications designed to hijack attention.

India has over 800 million internet users, most of whom access it via smartphones. The median age hovers around 28. Demographically, India is the world's largest behavioural experiment in pocket-sized dopamine-delivery systems. When infinite scroll meets a teenager preparing for board exams, or an 11-year-old in Kota juggling coaching classes,

the stakes are not theoretical. Consider the architecture of choice. Behavioural scientist Eric Johnson, in *The Elements of Choice*, argues that choices are architected. Defaults matter. Friction matters. Presentation shapes decision. A 'choice architect' determines behaviour without issuing a command.

This is why buying subscriptions is effortless but cancelling payments is a maze. Why default settings overwhelmingly favour the company that sets them. Google doesn't pay Apple billions to remain the iPhone's default search engine to buy love. It buys inertia. In the digital economy, it's a revenue model.

Tech giants get it. Infinite scroll eliminates stopping cues. Auto-play abolishes pause. Notifications interrupt family dinners with the urgency of a calamity. Feeder engines learn your preferences faster than your parents ever did. For adolescent minds, this is not neutral design. It is industrial-scale temptation.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Anxious Generation*, has linked rising

mental distress among young people to the smartphone era, sparking movements to restrict access for younger teens. In India, educational and parental conversation is growing around age-appropriate screening limits and gizmo bans. The debate is whether the digital playground has been designed without safety nets, not whether children should 'play outside.'

Indian regulators are not strangers to bold digital policy. The Aadhaar rollout reshaped identity verification. UPI rewired payments. The debate is how to define privacy norms. Will India apply similar strategic clarity to the design of additive digital environments now that the viral-reel debate has moved to what makes them irresistible and the motive behind it?

Regulating choice architecture is not anti-innovation, but pro-resilience. Automakers didn't collapse when seat-belts became mandatory. Safety regulation did not place any carmaker at a competitive disadvantage. Likewise, if all platforms are asked to imple-

ment clear stopping cues, opt-in notifications for minors, algorithm design disclosures and age-gates to keep out the under-aged, innovation would continue. Exploitative success may get difficult, though.

India Inc need not wait for litigation to conduct a digital design audit. Map revenue dependence on cognitive vulnerability. Separate adolescent engagement from adult monetization. Try 'healthy defaults' over addictive ones. Create 'digital afterglows' before Parliament mandates crash tests for algorithms. The country's policy focus must shift from content policing to design standards. The battlefield is not the meme but the mechanism. Rules on addictive features would level the playing field, protect minors and preserve competition.

Regulation need not slow innovation. But every engine needs brakes. As India focuses more on its digital economy, it should opt for platforms that amplify human potential and minimize human vulnerability. The social media trial in the US may be America's Ralph Nader moment. India would be wise not to wait for its own 'Unsafe at Any Speed' headline. Seat-belts did not kill motoring. They made it survivable. It is time we demand the same maturity of the technologies shaping the minds of our youngest citizens.

As with seat belts for cars, the information highway needs minimal safety rules for the vulnerable

Opinion

TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2026

Indo-Canadian reset

Mark Carney visit augurs well for closer relations between two middle powers

THE SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT in Indo-Canadian relations no doubt reflects their strategic compulsion to engage more closely with one another as the rules-based global trading order is being undermined by the tariff disruption of US President Donald Trump.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney—who is on a four-day visit to India—had a productive meeting with his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, and reaffirmed advancing to a Canada-India economic partnership agreement by the end of this year that will double bilateral trade to \$50 billion by 2030. Canada's two-way trade in goods and services with India hit \$23 billion last year. India and Canada are diversifying their trading relationships in a more divided and uncertain world. Both sides have also sealed a long-pending 10-year uranium supply agreement between Cameco Corporation, one of the world's largest publicly traded uranium producers, and India's Department of Atomic Energy. Nuclear cooperation is on the anvil to harness Canada's expertise in building large-scale and small modular reactors. Bilateral agreements have been linked for cooperation in renewable energy, critical minerals, and cultural and technological cooperation.

The Carney-Modi meeting—which follows their earlier ones on the sidelines of a G7 summit at Kananaskis and G20 summit in Johannesburg last year—isa harbinger of a reset in bilateral relations that hit rock-bottom during the last three years. Indo-Canadian diplomatic relations deteriorated after Justin Trudeau, then Canada's premier, stated on the floor of Parliament in September 2023 that his country's security agencies were investigating “credible allegations of a potential link” between Indian government agencies and the killing of a Khalistani Sikh leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, on Canadian soil. India has strongly rejected these charges. The good news is that the calibrated steps to restore normalcy in the bilateral relationship is perhaps being ring-fenced from the judicial process vis-à-vis Nijjar's killing with conversations at the highest levels regarding concerns about criminal activities with possible links to India, continued law enforcement dialogue, and discussions of security matters. In a background briefing to journalists ahead of Carney's visit, Ottawa signaled that India is no longer linked to violent crimes on its soil, according to Toronto Star. This does vindicate India's position.

For such reasons, Carney rightly states that his visit marks the “end of a challenging period and, more importantly, the beginning of a new, more ambitious partnership between two confident and complementary nations”. Both nations are middle powers and have much to gain from a closer engagement that is bound to grow manifold with larger two-way investment flows. Canada has invested \$4.3 billion in India from April 2000 to December 2025, much of it from portfolio investors. Pension funds have invested \$100 billion. India's outbound investments to Canada were more modest at \$2.2 billion. Around 600 Canadian companies have a presence in India, while 30-odd Indian companies have operations in Canada.

However, the deepest link between the two nations is the Indian diaspora with 1.8 million Indo-Canadians and another million non-resident Indians. Currently, there are 400,000 Indian students, which is twice the number in the US and four times of the UK. The Canada-India Talent and Innovation Strategy has launched 13 new partnerships with McGill University, University of Toronto, and University of British Columbia, focusing on artificial intelligence, health sciences, and digital architecture. These people-to-people ties must be nurtured as the bilateral relationship is definitely set to improve.



RENEWED RELATIONSHIP

Canada Prime Minister Mark Carney

There has been more engagement between the Canadian and Indian governments in the last year than there has been in more than two decades combined

POWER DISTRIBUTION

AMENDED BILL'S PUSH FOR MULTIPLE DISTRIBUTION LICENSEES AND OTHER PROVISIONS MAY COMPLICATE THINGS

Heading for a chaos?

THE ELECTRICITY (AMENDMENT) BILL, 2025, is slated to be introduced in Parliament during the ongoing Budget session. This Bill will address several issues such as improving the financial condition of distribution companies (discoms), bringing about competition in the distribution sector through sharing of wires, elimination of the burden of cross-subsidy in respect of certain identified sectors, reducing mass transit cost, improving competitiveness of our manufacturing sector, promoting captive power generation, enabling renewable capacity addition through the market mechanism, setting minimum standards of service, ensuring cybersecurity, and strengthening regulatory accountability.

Some of the provisions of the Bill that will be introduced are not really new and have been mentioned in other policy documents framed in the past. To give an example, gradual reduction of cross-subsidy is mentioned in the Tariff Policy 2016. Similarly, having multiple distribution licensees is mentioned in the draft National Electricity Policy, 2026. The problem, it seems, is that some states do not agree with the fact that the provisions of the Tariff Policy or National Electricity Policy are mandatory—they are of the view that it is merely advisory.

This is despite the fact that the Supreme Court, while hearing a different matter, had stated that the provisions of the Tariff Policy has the force of law (2017). However, there is a lack of consensus in the legal fraternity over whether this order of the apex court is really a dictum or is it an “obiter dictum”—meaning a remark made in passing, which is not meant to be a part of the operative portion of the judgment. Perhaps, the government thought it to be prudent to amend the Electricity Act, 2003, leaving no room for debate on compliance of what is

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mentioned in statutory documents such as the Tariff Policy or National Electricity Policy.

Among all the provisions mentioned in the Bill, I would like to concentrate on perhaps the most important item which relates to having more than one distribution licensee in an area. The objective is to promote competition among discoms so that consumers can get the best price. In fact, the government has been mulling over competition in the distribution sector for the past decade. First, it was the segregation of “carriage and content” where there would be several retailers in an area with one company providing the service to all in a non-discriminatory fashion.

An new concept emerged subsequently, where it was thought that the distribution business could be delicensed although no details were provided. Thereafter, yet another idea emerged—that while there would be several distribution companies in an area, the existing discom will allow non-discriminatory use of its distribution wires. This is what has been proposed in the Bill although there are a few issues here.

First, will the existing discoms which are mostly in the public sector

allow competition in their jurisdiction? They are most likely to raise objections on technical grounds. A final call, of course, will be taken by the state regulatory commission, but let's not forget that the discom, the regulator, and the state government are one team. For a private discom to enter the arena would be a herculean task.

Besides, there are several matters of detail which will only crystallise once the rules are framed. Some questions which need to be answered include the following: How will the existing power purchase agreements be carved out for the new discom(s)? How will the line losses be shared among the discoms? How will the cost of upgrading the distribution infrastructure be shared, and so on?

The present Bill has made things more complicated by adding two more stipulations. First, the new discoms will not have the universal service obligation (USO) of serving customers who need power in excess of 1 megawatt (Mw). The logic is, buying incremental power is always more expensive and it increases the fixed cost of power purchase which will hurt the small consumers. Second, the Bill says that sectors such as manufacturing, railways,

and the metro will pay the average cost of supply after five years from the date in which the Bill comes into force. Thus, they will stop providing revenue for cross-subsidy. If that is the case, why should the existing discoms have such customers in their billing net, especially when the new discoms have no such USO obligation. Thus, we are going to create two sets of discoms with an uneven playing field which is going to be chaotic. The problem does not end here. What will happen in the case where private utilities are functioning like Odisha? They have taken over the business just a few years ago based on open bidding, which takes into account a certain consumer mix for the entire licence period. Are they going to ask for compensation as this can be treated as a “change in law”?

Finally, should we have competition or only privatisation of the distribution sector? The government, it seems, is doing a flip-flop on this issue. Not very long ago (2021), the government said that privatisation is the way forward and went ahead with privatisation of the power sector in the Union Territories. Now, we are back to competition. Going back and forth does not give the right signals. It would be relevant to mention that the pioneer of privatisation of the power sector, that is the United Kingdom, after introducing full retail competition by 1998, has a scenario where about 70% of the power is being sold through vertically integrated utilities and there are six utilities (called the “big six”) which are managing the major part of the business.

There is also available literature which says that competition has not really helped the small consumers. Though it seems that it is too late for a rethink on our part, one cannot stop wondering whether we are heading for a chaos.

Views are personal

A crisis lurks as Asians bring money back home

LAST MAY, THE Taiwan dollar led historic rallies in Asia amid speculation that President Donald Trump would ask exporting nations to lift the value of their currencies as part of trade deals with the US.

The daily moves were so sharp that some investors said they had the feel of the late 1990s Asian Financial Crisis, when capital flight sank currencies from Thailand to South Korea. The big difference in 2025, though, was that the traffic was the other way around—waves of one-sided selling sank the greenback. And it may get even weaker yet. This year, the threat of a disorderly depreciation of the dollar remains, even after the Supreme Court diminished Trump's ability to use tariffs as trade negotiation tools. The catalyst may be different, but the outcome will likely be the same: North Asia's dollar earnings are coming home.

South Korea's exchange rate, for one, should be a lot stronger. Historically, the KOSPI stock index and the won were largely in sync, simultaneously selling off during previous crises. But lately, that relationship has broken down—the KOSPI's blistering rally has been met with a won depreciation.

One explanation is capital outflows. Even though the country's exports are at a record high, retail investors have been wading into the Nasdaq. Last year, they bought \$32 billion in US stocks on a net basis, also a historical peak.

But will this outflow continue? Koreans, who for many years stayed away from domestic blue-chip stocks because of the KOSPI's chronic underperformance, are starting to purchase home-grown tech companies. If they offload their US holdings to fund local investments, the repatriation might cause a sharp appreciation of the won.

In the last two years, global trade imbalances have been on the rise, led by China, South Korea, and Taiwan. US Big Tech's AI infrastructure build-out underpinned rising demand for chips from Samsung Electronics to SK Hynix and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing. Meanwhile, a weak deflationary economy prompted Chinese exporters to seek better customers abroad. As a result, the region's current account surplus as a percentage of their economy is ticking up again.

Until recently, the money that North Asia's exporters earned was recycled into US assets. For instance, as China's trade surplus ballooned, rising from roughly \$820 billion in 2023 to \$1.2 trillion last year, a vast pool of companies' overseas sales were parked in Hong Kong, where dollar deposits grew by about \$320 billion. Dollar-denominated money-market accounts earned higher interest.

But now that the S&P 500 has stopped delivering handsome returns and the greenback is languishing, some treasurers are converting their dollar holdings, betting on a strengthening of their home currencies instead. China's exporters, for instance, are already doing this.

Last week, the yuan notched its longest winning streak against the greenback since 2010. It's a sign that Beijing is warming up to the idea of a stronger renminbi. The government may have realised the glaring imbalance of its own books: A record trade surplus only increases vulnerability to US capital markets and the dollar.

During the Asian Financial Crisis, a sudden stop in capital inflows exposed how unsustainable some of the current account deficits were. Now, the tables have turned. The US has become the deficit nation. According to Goldman Sachs, just to stabilise its net international investment position—a measure of a country's liabilities to the rest of the world—Washington has to halve its current account deficit to 2% of gross domestic product.

Going forward, repatriation, or the Sell America narrative, will be a key theme. For currency traders, the question is whether it might result in an avalanche. Buckle your seatbelt when that happens.



SHULI REN

Bloombergen



JAMAL MECKLAI

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I WAS AT a coffee shop recently and overheard a comment from a young man, who was with, I think, his parents. It was quite an odd and intriguing question so when I was leaving I went up to him and asked him what that was about. He was a bit embarrassed but finally said, “the baby would be the Middle East—a lot of people are moving from London to the Gulf, he said, and China, of course, is everywhere”. Except India, I thought.

China is MENA's (Middle East and North Africa) largest trading partner with total trade exceeding \$500 billion in 2025, having transitioned from being primarily an oil buyer to a major economic, digital, and strategic partner. Further, it is the largest trading partner for more than 120 countries from across the world, including the EU, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and Brazil.

In the US, China, while still a huge trade partner, has recently been pushed to number 2 or 3, behind Mexico and, sometimes Canada; however, the US has been at daggers drawn (and sometimes sheathed) as it tries—and usually fails—to constrain China on trade and, indeed, geopolitics.

In India, we have been spinning our wheels trying to engage with Trump, although the good news is his instability has triggered a wave of negotiating

energy as we have signed trade agreements—some extremely long-pending—left, right, and centre. However, we still appear to be steering clear of the stand red horse, unlike the rest of the world.

I understand we've had difficulties at the border over the past few decades, but the reality is that China is our next-door neighbour, several times stronger than us, a leading force in technology and infrastructure (in addition, of course, to a range of intermediate and finished industrial goods), and, any which way you look at it, it is the future. It is foolishness not to engage with them in as many ways as we can.

As an example, China is having difficulties with their falling numbers of young people, whereas India has millions of young people who desperately need jobs (and, as a precursor, some meaningful training/education)—perhaps, this could be an opportunity to build a win-win for both countries.

I have been pondering the India-China relationship for several months now and, unsurprisingly, I seem to find thoughts about it almost everywhere I look, including the young

man in the coffee shop. Ideas don't belong to any individual but rather when something strikes you it is because it is in the air, so to speak, and several other people are also thinking about it. It also suggests that we are all on to something, which generally means that change is on the cards.

A good friend, R. Gopalakrishnan, an eminent professional who has spent decades with HUL, and the Fatas, has recently published a book (with a colleague, Nirmala Isaac) titled *Chanalya and Sun Tsu: A Business Lens on Trade, Thought and Travel*, in which he points out that for several thousand years the Indian and Chinese civilisations thrived independently and as neighbours, actively trading and sharing ideas with each other, with near-zero tension or any significant interest in conquest. It is only since the arrival of the colonial powers that tensions started to build up from the opium wars to the takeover of Tibet to the incursions at our borders.

While none of this is excusable, perhaps a better understanding of the why and, critically, a clear focus on what India and China can achieve together could—hopefully—set both

China remains a principal trading partner with many countries and blocs, however India still appears to steer clear of an opportunity

countries on a path of more meaningful engagement.

Gopal's book, which uses a business lens focused on trade, thought, and travel, enumerates a wide array of possible synergies, including the need for Indians, at all levels, to think and learn more about China. A Thai friend of mine pointed out recently that when he goes to China, he sees Buddha, an Indian man, everywhere, and India is visible at several levels of life when he comes to India, the only Chinese elements he sees is dozens of Chinese restaurants.

I remember several decades ago, when I lived in New York, a friend of mine (who worked for the *Wall Street Journal*) told me she was starting to learn Mandarin—my reaction was “why?” Now I know.

Importantly, there are more and more people in India who are recognising the need to engage with China culturally—and about time too. Another example is the India China Academy, which is (as yet) the “sole Chinese Learning and Testing Center sanctioned by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) in India”, which has approached Gopal to speak to them on his book.

And, finally, to answer the question in the title of this article (thank you, Gopal), if Europe and China were to have a baby, it would be called Suzie Wong!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Energy security

Apropos of “Strait of Shock” (FE, March 2), the escalating conflict in West Asia is a serious concern for India, given our dependence on oil imports through the Strait of Hormuz. Over 52% of our crude passes through that chokepoint, and any prolonged blockage would hurt ordinary citizens through fuel price inflation and its downstream effects. The government must accelerate what has long

been discussed but slowly executed—strategic petroleum reserves, faster renewable energy deployment, and diversified sourcing agreements. Turning to discounted Russian crude is only a short-term fix. India's diplomatic outreach urging de-escalation is welcome, but quiet back-channel engagement with all parties would carry greater weight. Energy security is national security, and this crisis must finally push us to treat it that way. —A Mylsami, Coimbatore

Destructive forces must be condemned

The superpowers are resorting to destructive diplomacy of polarising nations and vouching for military interventions to solve issues rather than being honest in dialogues. The international community has to rein in powers who tend to destabilise peace and economy in the world. India and all developing nations must also speak against bizarre missile

attacks and killings. The bombing of a girls' primary school in Iran by a US-Israeli military attack is most heinous and condemnable. This is unacceptable and a grave violation of international law. The international community must urgently hold the perpetrators accountable and take immediate action to protect children in conflict zones. —Brij B Goyal, Ludhiana

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New reality

Fiscal targets will now be realigned based on more accurate data

The release of the new series of national accounts data is a heartening improvement to India's key economic statistics, but the data highlights some aspects that merit policy attention. The new series updates the base year of India's Gross Domestic Product and Gross Value Added data to 2022-23 from the earlier 2011-12. This was a long-overdue update, since the earlier data was becoming more outdated and unrepresentative with each passing year. Apart from the updated base year, the new series has several methodological improvements and new data sources for greater robustness. For example, the adoption of the double-deflator approach, which accounts for the effect of inflation separately for intermediate goods and the final product, is a marked improvement in terms of ascertaining the real value added of India's production. Similarly, the new series allocates multi-sector company output proportionately, improving sectoral data accuracy. The data on households will now be obtained from the Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) on an annual basis instead of relying on extrapolations as was done in the 2011-12 series. Notably, the Goods and Services Tax data, a goldmine of consumer data, will be used in the new series. The new series will also include new sources and methods of estimation for sectors that have historically been difficult to quantify such as the agricultural sector and the vast informal sector. All of these should yield a more accurate picture of India's economic size and growth.

The new series predicts India's GDP to grow 7.6% in the current financial year 2025-26, which is faster than the 7.4% predicted for the year in the old series. While the rate might bring cheer, the new absolute size of the economy is somewhat sobering. The new series pegs India's economy at ₹345.47 lakh crore in 2025-26, which is about 3.3% smaller than what was predicted based on the old series. The size of the economy in both 2023-24 and 2024-25 was also revised downward by 3.8% each. Along with the depreciation of the rupee, this has meant that India is currently a \$3.8 trillion economy, with the \$5 trillion target moving further away. A smaller economic size also means the Centre's various commitments to lower the fiscal deficit and debt-ratios that are pegged to nominal GDP – also become that much tougher to achieve. That said, it is better to realign targets based on more accurate data than to blithely forge ahead with decade-old metrics.

The waning sheen

The price relief provided by GST rationalisation may not last long

The February GST mop-up shows an impressive year-on-year rise of 8.1%, with gross collections touching about ₹1.83 lakh crore. Much of this has rightly been attributed to rising consumption expenditure after the GST framework was rationalised into a two-tiered rate structure of 5% and 18% in September 2025. The rate cuts made consumer non-durables cheaper, and helped sustained sales in automobiles, appliances, mobiles and tourism-linked services. Yet, a critical vulnerability has been largely overlooked – the not-so-trivial import IGST numbers, which saw a spike of over 17% this February compared with last year. This must be viewed from a holistic perspective to understand how it affects consumption, prices and the growing disparity in GST collections between States. Import IGST collections in February rose to roughly ₹47,800 crore, up from about ₹40,800 crore a year ago. A five-year comparison of February collections (FY22-FY26) shows a nearly 41% rise from ₹33,800 crore in February 2022. At the same time, the rupee has steadily weakened. The rupee fell about 4% against the dollar between February 2025 and February 2026, and roughly 6.2% from April 2025 to February 2026. This matters as key imports are largely dollar-denominated.

India imports over 90% of its semiconductor requirements and relies heavily on crude oil, copper and aluminium imports – which together made up about 35% of February 2026 merchandise imports. Crude oil accounts for over a quarter of total imports, while semiconductors contribute about 5%, and copper and aluminium together another 3%-4%. Import values for copper and aluminium have risen materially over the past year, reflecting price firming and volume increases. Semiconductor imports have also grown sharply, even as global shortages persist. Meanwhile, crude import reconfiguration – from discounted Russian barrels to the U.S. and West Asia – likely increased India's average import bill. Higher global prices combined with a weaker rupee mechanically inflate the assessable value on which IGST is levied. These rising input costs feed into vital sectors such as automobiles and appliances. There are also signs of unevenness across States. Major States such as Tamil Nadu (6%), Maharashtra (6%) and West Bengal (4%) lagged the national growth rate of 8% in February. This divergence suggests that national GST buoyancy has been disproportionately supported by import-led revenues rather than uniformly strong domestic demand. Import IGST is now roughly 27% of gross GST collections in the April 2025-February 2026 period, up from about 24% in the previous year – underscoring a growing dependence on import-tax revenues. Higher input costs could nullify GST rationalisation price relief, leading to higher costs for consumers.

Israel, the U.S. and a war to build a unipolar West Asia

In February 27, Oman's Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, who was mediating talks between the United States and Iran, told an American channel that a deal was within reach. He said Iran had committed not to make a nuclear bomb "ever" and not to stockpile nuclear material. The next day, the U.S. and Israel began bombing Iran, killing its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and dozens of senior Iranian officials. Israel described the campaign as a "pre-emptive" war to remove "existential threats", while U.S. President Donald Trump urged Iranians to "take over your government," adding, "This will probably be your only chance for generations." It was clear from the way the initial decapitation strike was carried out and the remarks issued by Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu, that what the invading bloc wanted was regime change.

The Iranian government, despite the initial blow, has reorganised itself and is hitting back. West Asia, as a result of the actions of Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu, is witnessing one of its most perilous moments in the post-Second World War era – a conflict whose outcome will define the region for the decades to come.

After the 12-day war in June 2025, Mr. Trump announced that he had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear programme. Mr. Netanyahu declared a "historic victory". So, why did they start another war eight months later? Israel has always wanted regime change in Iran. For Tel Aviv, Iran is the only revisionist country that challenges its supremacy in West Asia. Arab countries, many of them hosting American bases or dependent on American aid, have either established direct ties with Israel or accepted to live with Israel's militarism and its occupation of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories. But Israel sees Iran, a country of 90 million people with enormous economic potential and an advanced missile programme, as an existential threat.

When then U.S. President Barack Obama signed the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, his focus was on addressing Iran's nuclear programme. He believed that a non-nuclear Iran would be good news for West Asia, where a "cold peace" between Tehran and its adversaries would be established. But, Israel had a different understanding. Its problem was not merely Iran's nuclear programme but its conventional might. That is why Mr. Netanyahu opposed the 2015 deal with all his might.

Geopolitics of Iran

In recent times, when the U.S. and Iran were engaged in talks, Israel had repeatedly called for a deal to include Iran's missile programme and its support for non-state militias in the region. What Mr. Netanyahu wanted was a total disarmament



Stanley Johny

of Iran – a demand no Iranian leader, except someone installed by Mr. Netanyahu in Tehran – can accept. A Tehran-based security analyst told *The Hindu* on February 24 in unmistakable terms that Iran would not sign a deal with the U.S. on its nuclear programme. He said, "If Iran agrees to surrender its ballistic missiles today to avert war with the U.S., Israel will bomb us anyway a few months down the line. So, the question Iranians ask themselves is why should they give up their last deterrent?"

The only way Israel could meet all its objectives was to bring about a regime change. Regime change would also be geopolitically rewarding. Saddam Hussein's Iraq is gone. Qadhafi's Libya is gone. Bashar al-Assad is in Moscow while a former jihadist is running Damascus. Hezbollah has been weakened. Hamas has been pushed to the ruins of Gaza. The Arab countries are unlikely to do anything other than issue condemnation letters. Iran is the last revisionist power standing. If the Islamic Republic is taken down, the regional balance of power would shift, setting the stage for a unipolar West Asia, with Israel, fully backed by Washington, at its centre. This is more about geopolitics and Israel's own interests than about giving freedom to the Iranians.

Decapitation strategy

But there is one problem. Iran, ring-fenced by tall mountains and roughly 70 times bigger than Israel, is a geographical fortress. Israel alone cannot bring about regime change. Typically, regime changes are achieved through a ground invasion – even then it is not guaranteed. Israel pulverised Gaza, a strip of land sandwiched between Israel and the Mediterranean Sea for 24 months and killed at least 70,000 of its people, but has still not unseated Hamas. No country, including the U.S., wants to send ground troops to Iran. If an Iraq-style ground invasion is not possible, the other options are Libya or Syria. But in Libya and Syria, there was armed opposition to the regime that led the battle on the ground.

In Libya, it took months-long bombing by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to topple Qadhafi's regime. In Syria, which fell into a disastrous civil war in 2012, it took 12 years for Mr. Assad to fall. In Iran, there is no organised armed opposition. So, what Israel tried to do in June 2025 and February 2026 was to carry out decapitation strikes – give a blow so heavy that the regime would not stand up and fight back.

In June 2025, the Iranians recovered from the initial shock fast and began hitting back. Mr. Netanyahu had said that regime change would be a desirable outcome of the war, but he had to ask for American help and then agree to a ceasefire after 12 days. In February 2026, backed by a more willing U.S., Israel has launched a much broader

and more ambitious strike, killing Khamenei. Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu want a quick, decisive victory. But if they thought the assassination of the "leader of the revolution" would lead to the crowds jamming the streets and taking over the institutions bringing down the regime, that has not happened – not as yet. Iran seems prepared for this moment, and is hitting back at American bases across the region, and Israel, widening the war.

A regional war

During the 2025 June war, Iran's response was mainly focused on Israel. It launched a token strike on the U.S. base in Qatar following an American attack on its nuclear facilities and subsequently agreed to a ceasefire. But this time, Iran is hitting American bases across the Persian Gulf kingdoms and Israel. Iranian missiles and drones have targeted a military base in Cyprus and a French base in the United Arab Emirates. Iran has also announced the shutting of the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea through which a third of the global energy supply flows. This is a risky gamble.

In two days, Iran has regionalised the war. This is the all-out war almost all critics of Mr. Trump's Iran policy had warned him about. The supporters of the war in Washington had said that Iran was bluffing. But it was not. If Iran continues to attack U.S. bases (some of them were hit hard) in the Gulf monarchies, these countries would be pressed to join the war. And if they do, the cross-Gulf conflict could have disastrous implications for energy trade, severely impacting the global economy. A prolonged conflict would also mean that the missile defence shields that are currently protecting these bases, Israel and other American assets in the region, would be exhausted.

This means that the clock is ticking fast for both sides. It is unclear whether Mr. Trump was prepared for a scenario in which the Iranian state survives the assault. Washington and Tel Aviv aim to destroy Iran's ballistic missile stockpiles and its launchers to blunt its firepower. But if Iran retains its strike capability and continues to widen the war, the pressure on Mr. Trump would intensify.

To be sure, there is a vast gap between the conventional strength of the U.S.-Israel alliance and that of Iran. Yet, conventional superiority alone does not guarantee victory, which depends on clearly defined and attainable objectives. If Mr. Trump seeks a swift and decisive triumph, Iran's doctrine is built precisely to deny it. Mr. Trump wants to kill the guerrilla because, as Henry Kissinger would agree, the guerrilla wins if he does not lose.

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UGC reform debate, faultlines in politics of social justice

Recent debates over proposed changes in regulations issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) have triggered wider political discussions on caste privileges, social discrimination and the idea of social justice in institutions of higher academics. A section of upper caste elites has opposed the UGC's regulations even as the higher judiciary quickly put the policy reform in abeyance. Media and social networks pushed for its annulment, calling the regulations discriminatory toward the social elites.

Though initiated by the Union government, the Bharatiya Janata Party has also hesitated to defend the UGC rules. This is only logical for the right-wing party to avoid upsetting its core political supporters, mainly the social elite. Yet, such distancing risks alienating Bahujan groups as they have joined the Hindutva bandwagon hoping to expand their representation in power and gain substantive social and class mobility. In the current debate, though Bahujan groups have remained fragmented and leaderless in promoting their interests, they have the potential to harm the electoral prospects of the right-wing party.

Inclusive subaltern Hindutva

The rise of Narendra Modi as the dominant leader in national politics has led to the social character of the BJP changing considerably. It was suggested that the BJP shift from its visible Brahminical focus to bringing Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi (DBA) groups into the party structure. The BJP's electoral success as a new 'Subaltern Hindutva' party is overly dependent upon the support of the DBA groups, while the social elites have remained its committed support base. The party's new social engineering also checkmates the 'official' parties of the Dalit-Bahujan castes, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar. A sizable faction within the vulnerable castes (especially the lower Other Backward Classes, or OBCs) have trusted



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The BJP's 'inclusive Hindutva' faces challenges as the proposed changes in regulations issued by the University Grants Commission spark debate

the BJP more for their welfare, hoping that an inclusive Hindutva platform would offer them social dignity and equitable participation in the power structures.

The shift of certain DBA sections has made the BJP a formidable force. However, in return for their support these groups have only received some tokenistic presence in the power structures. Their class conditions remain precarious, and they often face discrimination and violence from dominant social groups. The lower OBC groups (mainly the artisanal castes, landless labourers and lower middle-class sections of the urban population) have negligible presence in modern state institutions and the urban market economy. Further, limited access to quality higher education keeps their presence in IT-related and other elite professions minimal.

The OBC question

After the release of the Bihar Caste Survey in 2023, a similar factsheet showed that almost 40% of the State's population is considered Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs), a majority of whom are landless or dependent on the rural economy and an education status that is similar to Dalits and Adivasis. It was expected that the ruling establishments, at the State and Centre, would take cognisance of the grave situation and formulate policy for their welfare. However, there was no such initiative.

It appears that the new UGC regulations were drafted to address the growing problems faced by OBC candidates in academic institutions. The Education Ministry faces constant criticism by the Opposition for failing to meet Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) and OBC quotas in central universities and premier institutes such as the IITs, IITs, and AIIMS. The parliamentary report on the recruitment of professors in central universities has shown that OBCs constitute less than 3% of central university faculty. Importantly, they also face overt discrimination in the recruitment process (by using the 'not found suitable' rubric). Unlike SC/STs, OBC members

have limited institutional support to protect them from caste-based discrimination on campuses.

In the new UGC regulations, the addition of OBCs and other vulnerable groups (like the EWS) alongside SC/STs is an acknowledgment that a vast section in university campuses survive as vulnerable social groups under the dominant presence of the social elites and, therefore, in need of legal safeguards. The new regulations appeared to be crucial corrective measures in making academic institutions more democratic, inclusive and responsible towards the agenda of social justice. However, the reforms have stalled following backlash, leaving the vulnerabilities that DBA groups face unaddressed.

The BJP's dilemma

The BJP's inclusive Hindutva has captivated sections among the DBA and has presented the party as a promising representative of Hindu unity. The UGC debate has challenged this celebrated idea, revealing that caste-based divisions occupy social space. The counter against the new UGC reforms has shown that the social elites have little concern for the inclusive welfare of marginalised social groups. As social justice policies reveal and disturb the control and hegemony of the traditional ruling elites, such attempts are targeted as anti-national, harmful to meritocracy or as an appeasement of identity politics.

The BJP has failed to convince social elite opponents about the political necessity of such a policy framework that would also ameliorate the deplorable conditions of DBA groups.

The uproar by a section of the social elites has become effective because of the BJP's tacit silence and hesitation to defend the policies of social justice. Such a nexus between the right-wing party and conservative social elites may have relegated the agenda of social justice to the periphery. But it also ignites a new consciousness among vulnerable social groups about their expendability within Hindutva politics, resulting in their exit from the right-wing party.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unjustifiable aggression

The Israel-United States war against Iran defies logic and is wholly indefensible. Only if the International Atomic Energy Agency had verified U.S. President Donald Trump's claim that Iran was close to developing nuclear weapons could the conflict even be remotely justified. The helplessness of the

United Nations and the silence of world leaders on this aggression will only embolden Mr. Trump and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Front page, "Iran hits Israel, U.S. bases after killing of Khamenei", March 2). Even Russian President Vladimir Putin's criticisms carry little weight, given his own

record of unjustified wars. Must we console ourselves by claiming that economic might alone makes right? **Shriram Y.K.**, Bengaluru

At a time when the world speaks of peace and human welfare, we are witnessing a devastating war. At its heart, this is a human

tragedy and the loss of innocent lives should concern us all. Reports that children were killed in a school bombing must stir our conscience. Yet, while many nations express concern, there has been no firm condemnation or real commitment to protecting civilians. Public discussion remains focused

on military strategy – drones, missiles, and tactics – while the human cost is sidelined. Such a mindset will never advance world peace. Whatever the claims and counterclaims, we would do well to remember Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche who said, "There are no warlike people, just warlike

leaders." Bunche, incidentally, received the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize for "his role in 1940s work as a United Nations mediator in the Palestine conflict". **V. Nagarajan**, Chennai
Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name.

Rethinking tax searches for the digital age

The Supreme Court in *Vishwprasada Alva vs Union of India* (2026) confronts a constitutional question transcending taxation: the lawful reach of sovereign power into the informational life of citizens. Section 132 of the Income Tax Act, historically authorising entry into premises and seizure of undisclosed assets, now has been extended to "computer systems" and "virtual digital space" such as smartphones, cloud accounts, and communication archives. A search architecture forged for cupboards and ledgers now claims access to devices that contain information beyond tax inquiries.



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jurisdictional conditions only to ensure relevant material exists, as reaffirmed in *Lalitha Mandala* (2022). Technological expansion, it contends, does not alter the statutory discipline. Anticipatory search under clause (b) remains necessary against evasion's digital fragility; electronic devices may be seized, encrypted or transferred before summons endure. This makes *Poornam Mal* opaque as an authority sustaining intrusive search for fiscal enforcement.

Proportional safeguards

The Bench's preliminary observations indicate that the dispute will not turn on the existence of search power but on its constitutional calibration in the digital domain. The Court has recognised that electronic devices may be destroyed if advance notice is given yet has also acknowledged that anticipatory searches under clauses (b) and (c) demand a higher degree of satisfaction and scrutiny. The central question is thus whether a framework designed for physical documents can adequately regulate devices containing the informational totality of an individual's affairs.

A single device contains vast historical data, reveals networks of third-party interactions, preserves years of behaviour, and can be copied in its entirety. The constitutional implications of such digital informational access are correspondingly amplified. While revenue enforcement remains a legitimate and vital state function, its methods must remain proportionate to the liberty of the interests they affect. As investigative capacity expands into the digital space, the safeguards governing that capacity must expand in equal measure.

If digital search powers are to remain constitutionally valid, their exercise must satisfy demonstrable constraints reflecting informational privacy doctrines. A constitutionally calibrated digital tax search should therefore be governed by the

following criteria: firstly, particularised scope, where authorisation should specify the digital accounts, devices or data categories reasonably connected to the tax inquiry, preventing exploratory access to unrelated personal material; second, a necessity threshold, wherein digital search should be invoked only where less intrusive statutory measures are inadequate or likely to fail; third, a temporal and subject limitation where the examination of data should be confined to relevant periods and subject matter linked to the investigation; fourth, ensuring that mechanisms exist to segregate legally privileged or unrelated third-party communications from investigative review; and finally, making sure that search processes are recorded and reviewable in order to prevent misuse.

Such criteria do not disable enforcement; they only work to align its exercise with constitutional proportionality.

A constitutional balance

The case thus presents a classic constitutional recalibration where we need to adapt inherited statutory power to transformed technological realities. The Court may uphold the statutory scheme while reading in digital safeguards or require greater transparency in authorisation. What it cannot ignore is that digital searches implicate a deeper intrusion than their physical predecessors.

The challenge in *Vishwprasada Alva*, therefore marks a constitutional moment in India's fiscal jurisprudence – the transition of tax searches from the spatial to the digital. Whether existing doctrine suffices for that transition or must evolve to preserve the balance between revenue and liberty, will shape the future architecture of state power in the information age. The legitimacy of fiscal authority ultimately rests not only on its capacity to detect evasion, but on the restraint with which it enters the citizen's digital personhood.

From the physical to the digital

The petitioner anchors the challenge in *Puttaswamy's* recognition of informational privacy as intrinsic to dignity. Digital devices differ qualitatively from ledgers. A phone contains years of intimate medical and professional confidences unrelated to tax liability. Unrestricted access converts a specific fiscal search into general exploratory intrusion, disproportionate to its aim. The anticipatory "reason to believe" embedded in Section 132 was historically tolerated against evasion but now authorises entry into entire informational ecosystems. Further, authorisation confined to the executive, and secrecy of recorded reasons impair meaningful review under Articles 14 (right to equality) and 21 (right to personal liberty). The ideas that survived scrutiny in the 1974 *Poornam Mal* judgment, which upheld the constitutionality of search and seizure provisions in the Income Tax Act, demand recalibration in the post-*Puttaswamy* order.

The Union's defence rests on settled doctrine sustaining Section 132 as a structured anti-evasion power. Section 132's authorisation rests on information and a recorded "reason to believe" by senior officers. Courts will review

While revenue enforcement remains a legitimate and vital state function, its methods must remain proportionate to the liberty of the interests they affect

Questions for the church and the State

The Justice J.B. Koshy report reveals cracks in Kerala's social justice programme

STATE OF PLAY

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The publication of the report of the Justice (Retd) J.B. Koshy Commission on Christian Minorities has put the spotlight on reservation, caste and conversion in Kerala. The 357-page report is now available to the public in full after the State Cabinet accepted it in principle on February 24. Among other things, the report recommends that the Christian community be accorded minority benefits proportionate to their share in the State's population. The three-member panel led by Mr. Koshy, a former Chief Justice of the Patna High Court, had submitted its report in May 2023 and ever since, the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government had been under pressure from Christian delegations to publish it and implement the recommendations. Now, with State elections right around the corner, the report is sure to ignite serious debate in Kerala.

Forming the committee

The Kerala government had constituted the J.B. Koshy Commission in 2020 after various groups, including the Syro-Malabar Church, complained that the Christian community faced discrimination among Kerala's minorities. The Muslim and Christian communities are formidable minorities among the numerically stronger Hindus in Kerala. Over the decades, the Christian community has played an exceptional role in developing the educational, economic and socio-political fabric of Kerala. However, more recently, the community

has felt that it has been increasingly short-changed by political and government policies, especially those dealing with representation, reservations and minority welfare benefits. Dwindling numbers (the report places the share of Christians in the State population at 19.05% in 2001 and 14.28% in 2019); growing migration; and increasing ecological problems in Kerala's eastern hill regions and the western coastline, two of the traditional strongholds of Christians, add to the community's concerns.

Through its recommendations, the Commission has sought to address the concerns of the Christian community in general (related to education and employment), as well as specific issues faced by its backward, numerically smaller and less-privileged sections such as the Scheduled Caste Converts to Christianity (SCCC), the Latin Catholics and the Anglo Indians. The Commission's observation on Dalit Christians (SCCC) is especially noteworthy: "As far as the SCCC Christians are concerned, their situation is far more dismal than the Scheduled Castes before their conversion." It notes that their former social infirmities have persisted even after converting to Christianity. These observations place not just modern Kerala society, which takes pride in its social reform movement, in the

dock, but the church as well.

The standing of the church Underprivileged sections of the Hindu community had opted for Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries to escape entrenched casteist aggression, oppression and social discrimination. However, conversion disqualified the SCOCs from SC reservation benefits. The report recommends that, in the interests of natural justice, the SCOC sections too be made eligible for the same benefits. The Commission's observations rekindle the debate whether conversion erases caste or not. Furthermore, they point to the realities of the seemingly invisible social stratas that persist among Christians in Kerala, whose traditions hark back to the Apostle St. Thomas and the much later Portuguese and British arrivals.

Many of the recommendations underline the need for a fair distribution of minority benefits. In its report, the Commission mentions complaints lodged before it questioning the 'skewed' deployment of reservation and welfare measures and the need for fair treatment for the Christian community in this regard. It remains to be seen how the Kerala government approaches these concerns. Announcing the publication of the report, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan had stated that some of the recommendations have already been implemented, but the ones that require deeper study or legislative amendments remain. Such issues demand sensitivity, diplomacy and balanced strategies that look beyond caste or religion-centric politics. They can scarcely be treated in isolation, given the distinctive, interwoven nature of Kerala's social milieu.

How Dalit voting patterns have changed across elections

Post the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, Dalit voters have increasingly been consolidated by the BJP, away from the Congress

DATA POINT

Sanjay Kumar
Vibha Attri

Hindu Dalit voters have long been an important vote bank in Indian elections, shaping party strategies, coalitions, and welfare policies. Their choices influence the outcomes of both national and State level elections, yet their political alignment remains fluid. An analysis of Lok Sabha elections from 1996 to 2024, alongside recent State Assembly trends, reveal shifting loyalties, regional variation, and emerging competition.

In the 1990s, the Congress held a clear advantage among Hindu Dalits (Table 1). In 1996, it secured 34% of the vote, compared to 14% for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This lead continued in 1998 and 1999, with Congress and its allies ahead of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The gap narrowed in the 2000s but remained in the Congress's favour.

A decisive shift was noticeable during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, when the BJP doubled its standalone share from 12% to 24%, overtaking the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which declined to 20%. By 2019, the NDA had consolidated its Dalit support base further, reaching 41%. In 2024, the NDA slipped slightly to 36%, while the Congress-led INDIA bloc climbed to 32%, narrowing the gap. However, State-level patterns remained uneven. In the analysis that follows, BJP and Congress are used throughout but it implies support either for the party alone or the party plus its alliance – depending on how they contested (Table 2).

In Bihar, the BJP's support among Dalits surged in 2019 before declining in 2024, while the Congress rebounded over the same period. In Uttar Pradesh, support among the Dalits stayed relatively stable for the BJP, but the

Congress made notable gains by 2024. Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan saw closely fought contests, with leads alternating between the BJP and the Congress across elections. Haryana, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh moved markedly towards the Congress in the most recent elections. In West Bengal, the BJP's 2019 gains were partly reversed by 2024, whereas Congress support declined sharply. In the south, Congress expanded in Karnataka and Telangana, indicating that Dalit voting patterns are shaped more by State dynamics.

State-level election patterns

Dalit voting in State Assembly elections often diverges from national trends. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP consolidated support after 2017, aided by the Bahujan Samaj Party's decline, while the Congress remained far behind (Table 3).

Haryana witnessed swings: the Congress led in 2014, but by 2024, the BJP made gains, though the Congress retained a slight edge. Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan remained favourable to the Congress, with the BJP trailing modestly. In Chhattisgarh, Dalit vote leaned towards the Congress, though the BJP strengthened its position in 2023. In Gujarat, the Congress led in 2017 but lost ground to the BJP and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) by 2022. Southern States highlight the role of regional dynamics: the Congress expanded Dalit support in Karnataka from 51% in 2018 to 63% in 2023, while the BJP declined slightly. In Telangana, Congress gained, though the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) retained a significant share of Dalit votes. Overall, Dalit voting has shifted from Congress dominance to increasing BJP consolidation. By 2024, no party commands unchallenged support. State-level alliances continue to shape outcomes alongside national trends.

Sanjay Kumar is a professor and political analyst. Vibha Attri is a researcher with the Loknit-ICSDS. Views expressed are personal.

Shifting patterns

The data for the tables were sourced from various Lok Sabha and State Assembly election studies conducted by the Loknit-ICSDS. The figures for all the tables are in %.

TABLE 1: Hindu Dalit votes for BJP and Congress in Lok Sabha elections

Lok Sabha Elections	BJP	BJP allies	NDA	Congress	Congress allies	UPA/INDIA
1996	14	1	15	34	-	34
1998	14	7	21	28	1	29
1999	14	11	25	30	5	35
2004	12	12	24	26	9	35
2009	12	3	15	27	7	34
2014	24	6	30	19	1	20
2019	34	7	41	20	6	26
2024	31	5	36	19	13	32

TABLE 2: State-wise Hindu Dalit votes for BJP and Congress in LS polls

	BJP/NDA			Congress/UPA/INDIA		
	2014	2019	2024	2014	2019	2024
Bihar	43	86	60	11	5	40
Uttar Pradesh	23	27	25	2	3	38
M.P.	43	38	53	42	50	36
Rajasthan	44	43	37	44	51	46
Chhattisgarh	38	61	58	42	27	42
Gujarat	35	28	54	50	66	46
Haryana	19	51	25	39	25	67
Delhi	32	43	49	18	20	48
Himachal	31	65	31	63	32	64
Jharkhand	37	50	29	10	41	69
Uttarakhand	42	44	34	33	53	64
Assam	84	51	69	16	7	11
West Bengal	22	61	48	8	4	2
Odisha	17	35	46	42	8	16
Karnataka	37	44	31	42	47	66
Telangana	20	6	24	20	36	45

Other parties who received significant Dalit votes, but not included in the table are: Bihar-JDU(J) (20% in 2014), Haryana-INLD (17% in 2014), Delhi-AAP (42% in 2014, 22% in 2019), Jharkhand-JMM (24% in 2014), Odisha-BJP (38% in 2014, 53% in 2019, 38% in 2024), Uttar Pradesh-SP (6% and BRS-62% in 2014, SP-BSP-RD-62% in 2019), West Bengal-AITC (41% in 2014, 27% in 2019, 39% in 2024), Left Front (26% in 2014, 6% in 2019, 9% in 2024), Telangana-TRS (30% in 2014, 51% in 2019, and BRS-21% in 2024)



TABLE 3: Hindu Dalit voting patterns in the last two State Assembly elections. Figures in %

	Year of Election	BJP/NDA	Congress/INDIA/MGB
Bihar	2020	33	33
	2025	60	28
Uttar Pradesh	2017	21	8
	2022	28	2
Madhya Pradesh	2018	34	48
	2023	33	46
Rajasthan	2018	34	38
	2023	33	48
Gujarat	2017	50	53
	2022	44	32
Chhattisgarh	2018	25	42
	2023	39	48
Haryana	2014	20	27
	2024	40	42
Delhi	2020	26	5
	2025	35	5
Himachal Pradesh	2017	47	48
	2022	34	53
Jharkhand	2019	35	36
	2024	39	39
Uttarakhand	2017	37	23
	2022	26	47
Assam	2016	70	19
	2021	72	14
West Bengal	2016	11	43
	2021	55	8
Karnataka	2018	27	51
	2023	23	63
Telangana	2018	4	28
	2023	8	38

The table does not include parties, from other alliances than the ones mentioned above, even if they received significant votes in the elections

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 3, 1976

Quick mail service between Delhi and more cities

New Delhi, March 2: Quick Mail Service (QMS) facility will be extended between Delhi and 16 more cities which are accessible by air. They are: Visakhapatnam, Madurai, Tiruchi, Mangalore, Cochin, Aurangabad, Baroda, Indore, Udaipur, Amritsar, Jammu, Kanpur, Ranchi, Silliguri, Bagdora and Silchar.

This was announced by Dr. S.D. Sharma, Minister for Communications, at a meeting of the Consultative Committee of MPs of his Ministry, here today.

Dr. Sharma said by March 31, eighty per cent of the villages in the country would have the daily delivery of the dak. Already over four lakh villages had the facility.

All villages in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala now had daily dak delivery. This had been done more by restructuring of the routes than by increasing the cost of operation.

The committee was informed that all State capitals would be linked to Delhi on STD before December 31 except those of Sikkim, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura, which would have a "no delay service" to start with.

The Minister told Mr. T. D. Kamble (Cong.), it was proposed to introduce no-delay services from all district headquarters to the State capitals. He told Miss Maniben Parel (Cong-O) that special attempts were being made to improve the working of telex. Steps were being taken to popularise the PIN code.

Dr. Sharma informed Mr. Ramachandra Kadamappalli (Cong.) that Trivandrum would be connected to Delhi on STD on March 10 as part of the celebrations to mark the centenary of the telephone service. Another capital, Gandhi Nagar (Gujarat) would also be connected to Delhi that day. Fourteen more STD routes were being added by the end of this month.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 3, 1926

Britain's gold position

London, March 2: Replying in the Commons to a question with regard to Britain's present gold reserves and the export of gold since restrictions were removed, Mr. McNeil said that gold coin and bullion in the issue department of the Bank of England on 24th February was 143,186 thousand sterling which is a net reduction 10-720 thousand since 29th April.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of flight cancellations in Delhi amid West Asian crisis

87 International flights were cancelled at the Delhi airport on Monday as airline operations were disrupted for the third day due to the West Asian conflict. An official said that 37 departures and 50 arrivals have been cancelled at the Delhi airport. Indian airlines cancelled 760 overseas flights in the last two days owing to the escalating conflict. PTI

Prisoners pardoned by Myanmar's military government

10,162 The head of Myanmar's military government granted amnesty to more than 10,000 prisoners and reduced the sentences of others to mark a holiday, state-run media reported on Monday. The amnesty comes two weeks before parliament is set to convene for its first session in more than five years. AP

Budget presented by Haryana CM for the financial year 2026-27

2.23 in ₹ lakh crore. Haryana CM Nayab Singh Saini on Monday presented the Budget for the financial year 2026-27 with an outlay of ₹2.23 lakh crore, up 10.2% from the revised allocation of ₹2.028 lakh crore in the current fiscal. He said 5,000 suggestions were received from various quarters, and these have been incorporated in the Budget. PTI

India's current account deficit in Q3 of 2025-26

13.2 in \$ billion. India's current account deficit (CAD) rose to \$13.2 billion, or 1.3% of GDP, in the December quarter from \$11.3 billion in the year-ago period, mainly due to a higher trade deficit caused by a decline in exports to the U.S., according to RBI data released on Monday. However, the current account deficit moderated to \$30.1 billion. PTI

Death toll from violent weekend protests in Pakistan

25 The death toll from Pakistan's violent weekend protests over the killing of Iran's supreme leader has reached at least 25, according to an AFP tally on Monday. Demonstrations erupted in several major cities in Pakistan. At least 10 deaths were reported and over 70 were injured, the office of the Karachi police surgeon said. AFP

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Rupture across the Durand Line

Pakistan and Afghanistan engage in intense military clashes, signalling a break in political, military, and societal ties across the Durand Line; driven by differences over Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and collapsing strategic trust, the once carefully cultivated Paki-Taliban relationship now lies in tatters on an unequal battlefield

WORLD INSIGHT

D. Suba Chandran

For the second time in six months, Pakistan and Afghanistan have engaged in an intense military clash. Unlike the periodic clashes across the Durand Line during the last two decades when the U.S. was in Afghanistan, the latest clashes—first in October and now again last week—are significant. Pakistan used air and missile strikes deep inside Afghanistan, including in Kabul and Kandahar, while the Taliban targeted multiple Pakistani military posts across the Durand Line. Military and civilian casualties in these two attacks, last year's and the ongoing one, have been high. The latest attacks come despite a ceasefire mediated by Turkey and Qatar following the post-October 2025 clashes.

Following the latest military strikes, Pakistan's Defence Minister declared that it would be an "open war" against Afghanistan. What has happened between Pakistan and Afghanistan during the last six months? After creating the Taliban in the 1990s and nurturing it ever since, even under intense American pressure until August 2021, why is Pakistan's Deep State now going after its creation? Why has the Taliban, despite being supported by Pakistan and taking refuge within Pakistan during the U.S.-led war on terrorism, turned against its erstwhile mentor?

The cross-Durand rupture

The two rounds of military clashes highlight a rupture in the bilateral relationship at three levels.

First, at the political level, between Islamabad and Kabul. Though the two countries had differences during the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan during 2001-21, they were expected to be bridged when the Taliban captured Kabul immediately after the American exit in 2021. Instead, despite multiple rounds of dialogue, the bilateral relationship has only worsened. Pakistani Defence Minister's declaration of an "open war" on Afghanistan signifies a political rupture.

Second, there is a rupture between Pakistan's Establishment and the Taliban leadership. From the mid-1990s, the political and military rise of the Taliban would not have happened without the Pakistan Establishment's support. Successive military and ISI chiefs supported the Taliban. Today, under new military and ISI leadership in Pakistan, that link remains ruptured. Islamabad did not have declared an "open war" without Rawalpindi's approval.

Third, there is a widening rupture between the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. During the last few years, there has been an intense debate over deporting the Afghans, who have arrived in Pakistan during different phases, and made the country their home. Ever since the current Pakistani government began actively pushing them back, there has been an intense resistance from Afghanistan and the Taliban. However, within Pakistan, there was no major societal debate, contrary to the state's position. Though a small section of Pakistan seeks to build consensus on the issue, it remains a minority voice. Beyond the political and military rupture across the Durand Line, the societal divide will haunt the two nations for generations to come, as this alliance was forged over centuries.



Keeping vigil: A Taliban security personnel rides an armed vehicle on the outskirts of Jalalabad on February 28. AFP

Origins of the divide

In August 2021, when the U.S. left Afghanistan and the Taliban took over immediately after that, the ISI chief was among the first foreign leaders to visit Kabul in September. In Rawalpindi, there was a sense of achievement that finally their boys were back in Kabul, and an expectation that the relationship would rapidly improve. Pakistan expected Kabul would control the Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP) and that they would even force its leadership to surrender.

On the contrary, as the data would prove, there was an increase in militant activities in the tribal regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during 2022-25. During this period, Pakistan was divided over how to respond to the TTP threat. Under Imran Khan, the political and military leadership pursued a more carrot-and-stick approach towards the TTP. After his exit, and under the current Army chief, Pakistan shifted to a military approach towards the Taliban and the TTP.

Besides this, Kabul's support, or its inability to control the TTP, is an important factor for the fallout. However, the differences between Pakistan's Establishment and the Taliban started much earlier, when Pakistan's Deep State was under pressure from U.S. Admiral Mike Mullen's hard-hitting statement that the Taliban (the Haqqani network in particular) was the "veritable arm of the ISI." Though the ISI did not give up the top leadership of the Taliban and al Qaeda, several second-rung leaders got arrested or handed over to the U.S. While the U.S. accused the ISI of playing a double game, similar sentiments grew within the Taliban as well.

When the U.S. wondered why Pakistan was unwilling to give up on the Taliban, many within Pakistan would cite sociological reasons for the long-standing ties. In the tribal regions, they would say,

giving refuge and defending that decision was least understood by the West. Perhaps, Pakistan ignores or does not want to appreciate the same reason today. The Afghan Taliban do not want to give up today's TTP members, who gave refuge to them when they were running and hiding before 2021.

Another factor is the Islamic State in Khorasan nor wanting to give up the TTP. The Taliban—whether in Afghanistan or in Pakistan—has never been monolithic. Different tribes and sub-tribes fought along the Taliban and the TTP banner then; today, a section sees the Islamic State as a better banner and ideologically closer. For the Afghan Taliban, an expansion of the IS-Khorasan is a bigger threat, hence it does not want to antagonise the TTP.

Kabul also blames Pakistan for externalising its internal threat. Given the terrorist infrastructure and the ideological support base within Pakistan, it is not going to be an easy task for the political and military leadership to address militancy within. However, blaming Afghanistan and India would be an easy strategy to externalise an internal problem that Pakistan had cultivated since the 1980s. What now lies in tatters is both the Pakistan-Taliban relationship and, more importantly, the age-old societal links, along with Pakistan's carefully cultivated strategic depth narrative. For Pakistan, Afghanistan should now be a strategic trap that it would want to avoid. The Afghan-Pakistan relationship would remain conflict-prone.

An unequal battlefield

There is an inherent asymmetry between Pakistan and Afghanistan in terms of military, economic, and political strength. Militarily, the Taliban is no match to Pakistan's armed forces. Without an air force or navy, it can never fight an "open

war" with Pakistan. While Pakistan's air force and missiles provide the reach to strike deep inside the Afghanistan territory, the Taliban has a limited arsenal to hit deep inside Pakistan. Though there is an expectation that drone warfare would provide a level playing field for the Taliban, it could only cover a limited geography, east of the Durand.

Though Pakistan's economy has also been facing challenges, Afghanistan's is worse. As a landlocked country, it is dependent on the Karachi port for almost everything. On trade, Afghanistan is more dependent on Pakistan and not vice versa. Unless Afghanistan finds alternate routes that could bring goods in substantial numbers, Pakistan can strangle Afghanistan by closing the passes.

The Taliban's global outreach is also limited. Pakistan today has a regional clout, especially in West Asia, and the current leadership has a better equation with U.S. President Donald Trump. Perhaps the new status of Mr. Trump's "good general" in Pakistan provides Rawalpindi with more space to be more adventurous in the region than previous military leaders. This would also mean Pakistan can play tougher in negotiations.

Given these asymmetries, if the Taliban has to respond, it would engage in not-so "open wars" with Pakistan. Besides its willingness to control the TTP, the Taliban's capacity and its strategic calculation would limit its response vis-à-vis what Pakistan wants on the TTP. What would this mean for the future of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and stability across the Durand Line? A tough question for the two countries, and for the region.

D. Suba Chandran is Professor and Dean at the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, and heads NIAS Pakistan Reader

THE GIST

Escalating cross-border strikes between Pakistan and Afghanistan expose a widening political, military, and societal divide between Islamabad and Kabul, despite earlier attempts at dialogue and de-escalation.

Disputes over the handling of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, rising militant activities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Pakistan's shift to a military approach deepen mistrust between the establishment and the Taliban leadership.

With clear asymmetry in military, economic, and diplomatic strength, the confrontation pushes the bilateral relationship into a fragile and conflict-prone phase.

BUILDING BLOCKS



Blue's journey illustrates how colour evolves at the intersection of craft, belief, and administration. AFP

From lapis-laden trade routes to mass armies: the changing value of blue

Blue travelled across empires as a marker of divinity, power, and painstaking labour; over time, its value shifted from rarity, ritual, and resonance to performance, supply, and industrial production, revealing the ongoing dialogue between meaning and utility

Satwik Gade

From the lapis-laden trade routes of the Bronze Age, blue travelled east and west, carrying with it power, devotion, and value. By the Kushan period, between the 2nd and 4th centuries CE, ultramarine pigment was extracted from Afghan lapis lazuli through a complex and painstaking process of crushing it carefully and treating it with beeswax to extract its colour. The famous Kushan Buddha sculptures, known as the Bamian Buddhas, were colossal figures, carved into cliffs and painted with deep, lustrous blue. They were not merely artistic creations – they were cosmological statements. Blue marked divinity, enclosing sacred space, linking material effort with spiritual authority. The pigment was painstakingly prepared, expensive, and treasured; value was precisely tied to measurement.

By the Renaissance, blue had crossed continents and centuries to enter Europe's ateliers. Ultramarine was the most coveted pigment: Michelangelo applied it only sparingly, Raphael and Leonardo reserved it for the Virgin Mary's robes, while Titian used it to heighten divinity in his compositions. Papal and noble patronage dictated its use, and painters could afford it only for top coats

or sacred highlights. In this world, blue carried both economic and symbolic weight: to see it on canvas was to witness power, sanctity, and painstaking labour distilled into a single hue.

In the early 19th century, the Napoleonic Wars transformed this relationship. Blue, still precious, was no longer solely symbolic. The blue of European wood, cultivated locally for centuries, was pale, inconsistent, and labour-intensive. Indigo, imported through colonial routes, yielded a deeper, stable blue and could be scaled to mass armies. In choosing indigo, Napoleon aligned colour with efficiency, durability, and control. Blue had become a matter of supply. European culture came to signify this break from sentimentality to the steadfast pursuit of utilitarian values.

Uniforms were technologies of discipline. They rendered bodies legible, ranks visible, and allegiance unmistakable. Blue functioned less as a bearer of meaning than as an instrument of order. This marks a pivotal moment in colour history: value was judged by performance under pressure rather than rarity, ritual, or resonance. Napoleon's indigo exemplified this separation, as a pigment which gave divine legitimacy to governance became a resource of secular statecraft.

Napoleon's eventual defeat only

intensified this logic. Britain's victory consolidated access to indigo plantations in India and the Caribbean and this coincided with a surge in large-scale historical painting. The Royal Academy of Arts exhibited canvases of battles, regiments, and fleets, skies heavy with smoke, uniforms rendered in precise blue. Painters required volumes of ultramarine far beyond natural supplies. The pigment that had once been reserved for sacred imagery now strained under the weight of national memory and artistic ambition.

Necessity drove innovation. Between 1815 and 1825, the Royal Academy, as well as the French Société d'Encouragement, offered a prize for the creation of a synthetic ultramarine as brilliant as lapis but affordable. Jean-Baptiste Guimet succeeded within four years, with Christian Gmelin independently developing a parallel process in Germany. Synthetic ultramarine entered the market, stable, scalable, and less dependent on distant mines. Its creation marked the first major moment when colour production became industrial, yet motivated by artistic need.

Goethe was the earliest to see the possibility of industrial production of synthetic colours. In 1786, Goethe abruptly left his home in Weimar and abandoned courtly life to ponder some

philosophical problems that were troubling him. As he travelled coastal Italy in 1787, he noticed a blue hue in the smoke that emerged from the chimneys of lime-burning brick kilns. When he examined the walls of the chimney, he noticed that Lazurite, the active chemical which produced the Ultramarine pigment, was being unintentionally created in the quicklime factories.

His colour theory provided the breakthrough which cascaded into broader industrial colour manufacture. By the late 19th century, chemists produced dyes at unprecedented scale; synthetic indigo followed in 1897, ending centuries of local cultivation. Blue, once a marker of divine authority, ritual power, and scarcity, had become widely reproducible. Its value was now linked to economic and utilitarian criteria as much as aesthetic or symbolic ones. Colour had become functional, industrial, and predictable.

Blue's journey illustrates how colour evolves at the intersection of craft, belief, and administration. In tracing its arc, we see not only the material history of a colour but the ongoing dialogue between meaning and utility, between what we reverence and what we rely on.

Satwik Gade is a Chennai-based writer and illustrator. This article is part of a series on the history and development of colours



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What are the metal clips that are found at both ends of a shoe lace called?

(S. T. Venktraman, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu)

The tiny metal clip found at either end of a shoe lace is called an "aglet". The "a" is pronounced like the "a" in "cat", "bat", and "hat". The "e" is like the "i" in "bit", "hit", and "sit". The stress is on the first syllable.

What is the meaning of the expression, "if push comes to shove"?

(T. R. Anantharaman, Porur, Chennai)

This is a slang expression which is normally used to refer to pressure situations; situations which demand an action of some sort. The NTC Dictionary of American Slang defines the expression in the following manner: "when things get a little pressed; when the situation gets more active or intense".

If push comes to shove, the teachers can be asked to stay back all night and finish the work.

The expression "when push comes to shove" means the same as "if push comes to shove".

When push comes to shove, you know I'll be there for you.

Politicians and political parties keep referring to "USP". What does "USP" stand for?

(P. V. K. Murthy, Chennai)

It is an abbreviation for "unique selling proposition".

What is the meaning of "tryst"? How is the word pronounced?

(C. V. Srinivasamurthy, Chennai)

The "tr" is like the "tr" in "train", "truck", and "trip". The "yst" is pronounced like the "ist" in words like "fist", "mist", and "list".

A tryst is usually used to refer to an arrangement between lovers to meet in a secret place at a specific time. The word is not used very often these days as it is considered old-fashioned.

Rajesh walked several miles to keep his tryst with Tina.

The word cannot be used to refer to all meetings. It is usually restricted to meetings between lovers. One does not refer to a meeting with one's boss as a "tryst"; unless of course one's boss happens to be one's boyfriend or girlfriend!

What is the difference between "pushover" and "cakewalk"?

(C. Sandeep, Tirupathi)

Both "pushover" and "cakewalk" are informal words used to refer to things which can be done easily.

Unlike the word "cakewalk", "pushover" can also be used to refer to people. A "pushover" is someone who can be easily influenced or defeated.

The students thought they could get the Principal to cancel the classes. But he was no pushover.

Is it "affiliated to" or "affiliated by"?

(T. Venktraman, Nellore)

The words "to" and "with" usually follow "affiliated". For example: The college is affiliated to Osmania University. The local group is affiliated with Prithvi theatre.

Published in The Hindu on October 5, 1999

THE DAILY QUIZ

On this day in 1923, the first issue of *Time* magazine was published. Here is a quiz on America's first newsweekly

Mohammed Hidayat

QUESTION 1

Who was named Time's inaugural Man of the Year in 1927?

QUESTION 2

Which of these is a stylistic trademark of the magazine? Is it the prominent red border, the vibrant yellow back cover, or the centre-aligned typeface?

QUESTION 3

One among these famous/infamous figures has never been on the cover of Time: Adolf Hitler, Mahatma Gandhi, Joseph Stalin, Che Guevara

QUESTION 4

The magazine is also known for its annual list of the world's most influential individuals. What is the name of this list, which also indicates the number of honourees?

QUESTION 5

Which female star became the first Indian actor to appear on the magazine's cover?

QUESTION 6

The 1966 cover of the magazine featured nothing but bold red text on a black background. It remains one of the most complained about issues. Name the cover title. (Hint: The issue appears briefly in the classic horror film *Rosemary's Baby*)

QUESTION 7

Breaking from tradition, the magazine listed a non-human entity for the 'Person of the Year'. Which machine received the honour in 1982?

QUESTION 8

1937 marked the first time that the magazine's Person of the Year honour went to more than one person. Name the political couple who were elected in 1949 after a coup?



Visual Question: The 2019 cover triggered intense political debate. Who wrote the cover story?

- Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:**
- How many different teams prior to J&K have won the Ranji Trophy? **Ans: 18 teams**
 - Which bowler finished the season with 60 wickets? **Ans: Aaquib Nabi (J&K)**
 - Which team made it to the semifinals for the first time in its history? **Ans: Uttarakhand**
 - Who won Plate Championship? **Ans: Bihar**
 - What feat did Arjun Sharma and Mohit Jhangra achieve for the first time? **Ans: Two different bowlers from the same team took a hat-trick in the exact same innings**
 - The highest individual score in the 2025-26 Ranji Trophy season was the 299. **Ans: Bengal's Sudip Kumar Gharami**
 - Who was named Player-of-the-tournament? **Ans: Aaquib Nabi**
 - Visual: Name this batter. **Ans: R. Smaran Early Birds: Piyali Tuli | K.N. Viswanathan | Erfanally Oosmany | Tito Shiladitya | Sudhir Thapa**

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

Word of the day

Reticent: temperamentally disinclined to talk.

Synonyms: restrained, secretive, cautious

Usage: She felt reticent about sharing her opinion.

Pronunciation: renowth.live/reticentpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /retsənt/

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

{ OUR TAKE }

What the SIR exercise meant

India's electoral rolls are statistically more robust now, but State capacity and institutional trust were stretched

When the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise last June, conspiracy theorists cried wolf about fears of widespread disenfranchisement. The first data to emerge from the process, Bihar's draft-roll, should have allayed such fears. Deletions were numerically significant but proportionally far from alarming, and they did not seem to correlate with expected political markers, such as Muslim population or closely fought constituencies. The absolute turnout too increased in the 2025 Bihar elections, which should have laid to rest fears about mass disenfranchisement.

Eight months later, after the exercise was conducted in nine states (excluding Assam, which had only Special Revision and not SIR), we are wiser about what the exercise entailed as a detailed analysis in Hindustan Times showed. Deletions have been higher in districts that have seen higher migration and also high voter growth in the past two decades. This suggests that India's pre-SIR rolls did have a duplication problem as migrants registered as voters in their new locations without necessarily deregistering from their hometowns (and villages). Perhaps many of them chose to retain the latter when SIR forced them to make a choice. To be sure, it is extremely unlikely that the share of those actually voting in both places is numerically significant. This suggests that SIR might have made India's electoral rolls statistically more robust on an *ex-ante* than an *ex-post* basis.

While useful on this count, the exercise has not been without its limitations, procedural frictions and political acrimony. Most states struggled to complete the process on time, forcing their already hard-pressed lower bureaucracy to exert extra effort. In extreme cases like West Bengal, a very high number of voters earmarked for further adjudication are now being handled by judicial officers. A lot of these issues have seen the apex court mediate disputes between non-NDA state governments and political parties on one side, and ECI and the Union government on the other. It is this friction that has turned SIR into a political theatre despite the ultimate result not lending itself to conspiracy theories.

Is there a larger lesson to be learnt here? Perhaps, yes. State capacity and institutional trust are key in shaping narratives about the state of democracy in India. When they are found lacking, alarms itself always sound more credible than they are.

OPS in DMK adds spice to TN contest

Ottakarathar Panneerselvam (OPS) was the quintessential loyalist of the late J Jayalalithaa. Twice, the AIADMK supremo trusted him with the Tamil Nadu chief minister (CM)'s office (in 2001 and 2014) when she had to resign following court orders. However, the mild-mannered OPS could not hold his ground or assert his eminence within the AIADMK after Jayalalithaa's demise in 2016, though the party made him the CM a third time. In the leadership battle, OPS lost out to Edappadi Palaniswami, who expelled him and his associates from the AIADMK. Last week, he joined the DMK after his attempts to find an honourable re-entry into the AIADMK failed, despite his closeness to the BJP. In the presence of DMK chief and CM of the state, MK Stalin, OPS said that he was returning to the *thai kazhagam* (mother outfit), the DMK.

OPS is a big catch for the DMK, which has been aggressively expanding its coalition in order to win a second consecutive term in Chennai. The party recently welcomed the DMDK, the late actor Vijayakanth's party, into the fold of its larger secular progressive alliance and is in talks with a host of smaller groups, who will contest under the DMK flag and symbol. OPS, however, has no organisation to boast about, and his influential associates have moved away. But the three-time CM could add left to the DMK in southern Tamil Nadu, where the party has been historically weak. He belongs to the Mukkalathor group — an OBC community of three politically significant rural castes — which is relatively underrepresented in the DMK leadership. The loss of OPS could come back to haunt the NDA (and the AIADMK), especially if the election, due in the summer, turns out to be a close contest.

OPINION

A new West Asia disorder is born

The death of Ali Khamenei has not resolved Iran's crisis; it has internationalised it

On the morning of February 28, a coordinated US-Israeli airstrike — codenamed Operation Epic Fury — reduced decades of carefully constructed Iranian theocracy to rubble, both literally and figuratively. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader for 37 years, was killed in his office in Tehran along with top military commanders, including the commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This is not merely a leadership transition; it is the violent unravelling of a geopolitical order that has stood since 1979. Khamenei never publicly named a successor — a deliberate choice that has now produced a constitutional crisis at the worst possible moment. While Iran's 88-member Assembly of Experts is constitutionally empowered to elect the next Supreme Leader, the interim leadership has fallen to a three-member council consisting of reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian, hardline judiciary chief Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejeli, and Ayatollah Alireza Arafai of the Guardian Council.

Ayatollah Mojiaba Khamenei, the 56-year-old second son of the late Supreme Leader, is widely regarded as the leading contender. His concerns about hereditary succession

could complicate his candidacy, potentially triggering internal power struggles. The State appears to be transitioning from a clerical theocracy to a military-led "garrison State". The IRGC — a sprawling economic and political machine controlling roughly 60% of Iran's economy — may be tempted to assume direct control, making Iran more aggressive, less diplomatically nimble, and far more dangerous.

The US military operation signifies a strategic shift. The larger objective appears not only to be regime change in Iran but also the establishment of uncontested Israeli hegemony in the region. By decapitating the Iranian leadership and neutralising nuclear and missile infrastructure, Washington and Tel Aviv are pursuing a "decisive edge" doctrine aimed at establishing an unchallengeable major regional adversary.

The goal appears to be to permanently dismantle the "axis of resistance". Israel has pressed the Trump administration to expand its demands to include Iran's total withdrawal of support for proxies such as Hezbollah and the Houthis. The strategy gambles that overwhelming force will create a regional vacuum where Israel remains the sole security hegemon, while rivals are too degraded to respond conventionally.

The timing of the attack is particularly striking, launched just 10 days after the annual meeting of US President Donald Trump's Board of

Peace in Davos. Officially tasked with overseeing the security and reconstruction of Gaza, the Board has emerged as a "bait-and-switch" mechanism — a rival to the UN Security Council under Trump's personal control. The Board of Peace paradoxically allows the administration to invoke "demilitarisation and technocratic governance" for Gaza while providing political cover for military action against Tehran. Trump has effectively used the promise of peace in one theatre to justify war in another.

West Asia now stands on the brink of a multi-front escalation. The IRGC targeted numerous US military bases across Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Jordan alongside Israeli residential areas. Iran also struck Dugm Port in Oman, causing minor damage despite Oman's established role as mediator. The most feared scenario — a closure of the Strait of Hormuz — is now a tactical reality. The waterway carries 20% to 25% of the world's oil and LNG.

While Saudi Arabia and the UAE possess bypass infrastructure such as the East-West Pipeline (5 million bpd capacity) and the Fujairah terminal (1.5 million bpd), these routes are insufficient to offset a full blockade. Analysts warn that if flows are significantly impacted, global oil prices could rise to \$120 to \$150 per barrel. For New Delhi, there is no comfortable corner in this conflict, as approximately



The larger objective appears not only to be regime change in Iran but also the establishment of uncontested Israeli hegemony in the region. 49P

50% to 52% of its monthly crude imports — roughly 2.6 million barrels per day — transit the Strait of Hormuz. A sustained disruption would send India's import bill spiralling, widen the current account deficit, and put immense pressure on the rupee.

The safety of the 10 million-strong Indian diaspora in the Gulf is equally critical. Remittances record a record \$125 billion in FY25, forming a vital pillar of the Indian economy. Meanwhile, the Chabahar Port project — India's gateway to Central Asia — has effectively stalled. Following the re-imposition of US sanctions and Trump's threat to impose a 25% tariff on countries doing business with Iran, New Delhi has slashed its allocation to the port to zero, marking a painful retreat from a decade-long investment.

Moscow and Beijing have responded with unambiguous condemnation. Russia declared Iran was "stabbed in the back" during the meeting, while China framed the US as an imperial aggressor to rally the Global South. The US, however, has a US-sponsored resolution endorsing the strikes.

At home, Trump faces a fracture within his MAGA base. Isolationist figures such as Tucker Carlson have called the strikes a betrayal of voters seeking an end to "foreign wars". Marjorie Taylor Greene and Thomas Massie have similarly accused the administration of abandoning America First. Trump is waging his legacy on a war he once vowed not to start, gambling that a decisive victory will silence critics.

The death of Ali Khamenei has not resolved Iran's crisis; it has internationalised it. The world now watches a national of 93 million people, a heavily armed and leaderless Revolutionary Guard, and a global economy hanging by a thread at a narrow maritime chokepoint. The post-1979 order has died in Tehran's rubble, but the new West Asia disorder that replaces it may prove far more volatile than the one it succeeds.

Ausaf Sayeed is a former secretary to the ministry of external affairs, Government of India, and former ambassador of India to Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and high commissioner to Seychelles. The views expressed are personal.



Ausaf Sayeed

{ INCIDENTALLY }

Gopakrishna Gandhi

Two leaplings who nearly changed India's history

If this were a leap year, there would have been a February 29, instead of March 1 following February 28. And leaplings, as those born on February 29 are called, are regarded by popular belief to be "rare, due to the rarity of their birthday". This belief about leaplings is pure and simple imagination. But two of the type did have those qualities — a coincidence.

On February 29, 1896, in an obscure village of the Bulsar (now Valsad) district of Bombay Presidency, arrived a boy, the first of eight children, born to Vajaiaben, the wife of a somewhat poor Brahmin school teacher called Arvindar Singh Nagari Desai. He was named Morarji. The parents could not have guessed in their most audacious dreams that the teacup-handle-eared boy would become a deputy collector, an MLA and minister in the same Presidency under the British Raj, and then with India winning Independence, be Bombay's chief minister, India's finance minister, home minister, deputy prime minister and then, prime minister (PM). If also an opinionated, conservative, dour moralist, annoying more people than he impressed, but at the end of the day, respected for his acumen as an administrator and probity, Morarji Desai was capable of doing some unexpected things. In prison during the Emergency, his biographer Arvindar Singh tells us, he observed prisoners scrupulously, declining to talk to a friend who had managed to smuggle himself into the premises, as his name was not among those permitted to meet Morarji. And as prime minister he held secret parleys with Israel's defence minister Moshe Dayan, in the interests of India's security. But I can say this with total confidence: Today, he would have roundly rebuked Israel for its violent action in Iran.

On February 29, 1904, in the temple town of Madurai, Madras Presidency, in the home of Neelakantha Sastri, a stoic and scholarly Brahmin engineer in the public works department, his young wife Seshamma gave birth to their daughter, who was named Rukmini. Famed for its shrine to Meenakshi, the town was host to musicians and dancers, little Rukmini imbibing Madurai's culture of dance and music. Her parents could not have guessed the daughter's art would win national and international fame, founding Madras' highly respected Kalakshetra school for culture, the arts, especially the classical dance form Bharatanatyam, of which she was an exemplar, get nominated at PM Jawaharlal Nehru's instance to the Rajya Sabha, the first woman to be so honoured in recognition of her stature as an artist and also of her pioneering interests in the fostering of animal rights. If also a severe vegetarian, a severer art-choreographer, difficult to impress, easy to irritate. I will fast-forward to 1977.

As India's PM, Morarji Desai heads a government with coalition partners who have, each one of them, a sense of their own self-importance. But his own sense of that quality is a tad higher than that of the others, and he believes that he can identify a suitable name for the office of the President of India and "swing it". He is not wrong.

Rukmini Devi, a Theosophist, is relaxing in her abode in the Theosophical Society, in

Madras' Adyar suburb, a sylvan sanctuary to peacocks, mongooses, jackals, serpents and perhaps the city's largest concentration of mosquitoes. She is perhaps more tolerant of those flying syringes than of sub-par artists. The telephone rings. Her colleague, the septuagenarian scholar Sankara Menon, answers it for her. Coming to where she is, a few seconds later, he says, "The Prime Minister wishes to speak to you." The following ensues, more or less, as I describe it, gleaned from a conversation I had with her:

"Who? Morarji? What?"
"Yes."
"Whatever for?"
"It seems important."
"Hello."
"Good morning, this is Morarji Desai."
"Namaskaram, Morarji? To what do I owe this honour?"
"I am phoning to ask you if you would agree to be President."
"President?...Of what?"
"India."
"President of India?..."
"Yes, we are looking for a suitable name. No one can be more suitable than you, who is non-partisan, in fact, non-political and non-controversial. No one will oppose your candidature. I am confident on this, you will be the first woman to hold that office."
"Morarji, I am honoured...but let me please think over it...This is all too sudden..."
"Sure, think it over...But there is not much time to be lost..."

Rukmini Devi turned the offer down. "I could not have accepted," she told me. "For one thing, as a vegetarian, I just could not have non-vegetarian food served to guests...Then, I do not use footwear all that much. I am used to going around in a sari, trapati Bhavan unshod...But more than anything else...I hate arms and armaments...How could I have had men wielding guns following me around, surrounding me, all the time...No...I am happy to be here...my world is with my trees, my pet cats...my music, my dance..."

Rukmini Devi would not have crossed the PM's — or the Cabinet's — path, but, having been an independent MP for a decade, would have shown the Opposition due consideration. She would have nudged the government to be more active globally in the matter of disarmament and human rights, would have counselled against bellicosity while being mindful of security imperatives. She would have been a part of the natural environment and the arts. And yes, she would have made the Cabinet reconsider all recommendations for the death penalty.

India lost out on not just a great first woman President, but a great President.

Hand it to the leaping Morarji Desai that he tried.

History's pages are enriched by those whose leaps do not traipse to status, but repose in stature.

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

MARK CARNEY | PRIME MINISTER, CANADA

This ambitious agreement will reduce barriers, increase certainty, unlock opportunity for exporters, investors, and workers in both our countries, with the aim to double trade by the end of this decade

On the ongoing talks regarding the Canada-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement

Reviving the message of Western supremacy

There are good reasons to take a close look at US Secretary of state Marco Rubio's Munich speech, delivered two weeks before the attack on Iran. It provides some explanation for President Trump's roller coaster approach to international relations. Secondly, it is a window into the mind of Trump's top diplomat, supposedly a savvy MAGA voice, and a hopeful for the next Republican nomination. The speech, which evoked a collective sigh of relief — and a standing ovation — is packaged to save the wounded self-esteem of European leaders after Trump's consistent sniping at their "free-loading" and Vice President Vance's barage of a year ago. All that comes, Rubio asserts, from a place of deep caring because the transatlantic bond is essentially spiritual and cultural. It is rooted in their "shared inheritance" of "the greatest civilisation in human history". By this, Rubio means the Western civilisation, the same elusive notion which Gandhi famously thought "would be a very good idea" much, I am sure, if it were founded on culture, heritage, language, ancestry. The US being just 250 years old, the civilisation burden falls to the usual European suspects, all born within the last thousand years: Mozart and Michelangelo, Dante and Da Vinci, Beethoven and Beethoven. This civilisation is what Trump wants to defend, restore and renew.

But for this latter-day renaissance, much baggage has to be shed. A globalised world, free of national and global supply chains are debunked as "dangerous delusions". The "new Western culture" needs a self-dependent reindustrialisation based on "a Western supply chain for critical minerals". Mass migration must be resisted as it is an "urgent threat to the fabric of our societies and the survival of our civilisation itself". Missing the irony, Rubio, whose parents migrated from Cuba in 1956, declares that America was built by migrants: English, Scottish and Irish settlers; German farmers; French fur traders.

The West must rebuild its collective strength, casting aside the "fear of climate change, fear of technology, fear of war" and "resisting the forces of 'civilisational erosion'". There is a signifier for the post-1945 Western domination when the "West had been expanding — its missionaries, its pilgrims, its soldiers, its explorers pouring out from its shores to cross oceans, settle new continents, build vast empires extending out across the globe". It was only "godless communist revolutions" and "anti-colonial uprisings" that unfortu-

nately stemmed this supposedly benevolent imperial charge.

There is more, but this is enough to read the writing on the wall. This is a dark, dangerous statement based on a selective understanding of political realities. It references 5,000 years of recorded history but mentions no other civilisation except the "free and distinctive and irreplaceable" Western civilisation. The West is painted as a hapless victim of globalists, immigrants, ineffective international institutions and "abstractions of international law". Rubio fails to note the culpability of the veto-wielding powers for the hobnobbed United Nations. Nor does he address the causes of mass migration, most glaringly the wars engendered by the West; further, he ignores the science behind the climate crisis and scoffs at the "climate cult".

Most shockingly, the statement laments the passing of empires and romanticises imperialism; it ignores the massacres and loot of colonialism. It denigrates self-determination and anti-colonial movements, of which India's was the most remarkable. While worrying about the West's civilisational erasure, Rubio ignores the civilisational erasure of the colonies. Just when some reluctant recognition of colonial excesses was emerging, Rubio wants the West to stop stonoring for "the purported" (wins of past generations) and to drop all "guilt and shame". Instead, he becomes a supremacist and wants to drop "the polite pretence that our way of life is just one among many".

Recent events form unmistakable patterns in this narrative: The defunding of international institutions; the ending of life-saving humanitarian aid; the disregard for international law; the grab-bag approach — Gaza's real estate, Venezuela's oil, if not Greenland, at least Diego Garcia. The vision promotes a Fortress West guarded by modern-day crusaders against the world's unwashed masses. Unsurprisingly, the only reference to the Global South is to its markets. It is uncertain how much Europe will buy into Rubio's message of Western supremacy. The initial relief has already subsided: Eroded trust cannot be fully recouped by sweet talk. Our concern should be closer home. We should smell the passing whiff of this bitter coffee and recognise this approach for what it is: Narrow and self-centred, imbued with civilisational superiority and impelled by imperial ambition.

Navtej Sarna is the author, most recently, of *A Flag to Live and Die For*. The views expressed are personal.



Navtej Sarna

the hindu businessline.

TUESDAY - MARCH 3, 2026

Strong base

New GDP series affirms growth robustness

The new GDP series released for this year and the preceding two fiscals — with the base year shifted from 2011-12 to 2022-23 — provides some reason for cheer in these war-torn, deeply anxious times. The second advance estimate under the new series pegs real growth rate at 7.6 per cent this fiscal, against 7.4 per cent in the first advance estimate under the old series. The new dataset not just confirms the essential soundness of the economy, but also reaffirms faith in the reliability of our statistics.



The Centre has responded well to criticism on the accuracy of India's growth numbers (from the IMF in particular), by making methodological changes, incorporating high frequency data, such as GST collections, and weaving in survey findings with respect to employment and consumption. A real growth rate of 7.6 per cent for FY26 implies the same growth rate in Q4 as well. However, Q4 growth might dip on account of global headwinds; some analysts put it at 7.3 per cent. Likewise, the Centre's expectation of 7.4 per cent growth in FY27 might need to be calibrated, if the war carries on. A feature of this fiscal year's growth story has been the 11.5 per cent growth in manufacturing GVA, against 9.3 per cent in FY25 and 12.3 per cent in FY24. Agriculture has not fared too well, with GVA growth coming in at 2.4 per cent, against 4.2 per cent last year. Services GVA growth at 9 per cent marks an impressive rise over 7 per cent and 7.9 per cent, respectively, in FY24 and FY25. This could take a bit of a knock on global turbulence.

That said, the new GDP series does generate some food for thought. Real growth rates are up over the old series, but the actual size of the economy, or the nominal GDP, is down in each of these years. Nominal growth rates are not significantly different, but the new series' estimates are less volatile. But the smaller size of the economy itself seems curious, given that the inclusion of new data, such as GST collections to bolster the corporate data base, the unorganised enterprises survey as well as diverse data sources for agriculture, should have had a contrary effect. Nominal GDP is down by about 3.5 per cent in each of the three years in question. Private consumption is down by even more, while government expenditure and net exports are up. It is noteworthy that agriculture estimates have been bolstered by the inclusion of new data on fisheries, fodder and milk products. Yet, if the nominal GDP is lower, it perhaps suggests that the earlier process of extrapolation was not free of problems.

Besides including more datasets, the introduction of double deflators for output and input, respectively, to derive real GDP is a welcome improvement. It would reduce the distortions of using a single deflator with a WPI bias. Our GDP estimates, both real and nominal, should serve as accurate indicators for policymaking. India's statistical system has been regarded as among the best. The latest changes will bolster this reputation.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

EUROPE

It's too soon for Iran 'off-ramps'

The first two days of the US-Israeli attack on Iran have been a striking success, but the response of the Iranian regime has also revealed the reason it was necessary. The biggest mistake President Trump could make now would be to end the war too soon, before Iran's military and its domestic terror forces have been more thoroughly destroyed. The precise targeting of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and some 40 regime leaders is a remarkable demonstration of US and Israeli intelligence capability. It underscores how much last June's attack had degraded Iran's capacity to compete in the skies or mount a major retaliatory response. Three Americans were killed and five wounded on the weekend, but the risk of casualties would be greater had the President waited to let Iran rearm. (NEW YORK, MARCH 1)

GULF NEWS

The Gulf at the heart of global shifts

The regional as well as the global scene is no longer merely drifting towards conflict; it is accelerating into a new and dangerous phase of open confrontation. The military strikes launched by the United States and Israel against Iran on 28 February 2026 marked a watershed moment in an already fragile regional regime and international order. What had previously been a shadow confrontation — managed through deterrence, proxies, and calibrated escalation — has now shifted into direct and overt military engagement, with profound implications not only for the Middle East but also for the global system at large. This escalation unfolded at a time when the international environment was already strained by economic fragility. (DUBAI, MARCH 2)

Easing key bottlenecks in cities

WAY FORWARD. Delegating financial and planning power to locally elected officials can improve urban governance



ASHIMA GOVAL

Many Indians say it does not feel their country is growing at 7-8 per cent. Growth creates its own tensions, with both concentrated in cities, which lag in facilities, in air quality, in resources and in governance. Overcrowding, congestion, constant construction, pollution — all reduce the quality of life. Animals freely roam the streets threatening themselves, local populations and livelihoods. Shelters and neutering, even if mandated, are not implemented.

The Centre and major regulators have embarked on a drive to simplify regulations. But business does not find life getting any easier since the local officials it has to deal with are largely untouched by change.

The key bottleneck is governance more than resources. It has its genesis in the over-centralisation and control mechanisms inherited from the British. Independence added planning or developmental institutions to the Constitutional, Central and State agencies to be found in every city. There is no clear coordination or hierarchy across multiple agencies. It is the State, not city governments, that control vital functions such as water supply and some types of transport.

Politicians respond to numbers and the majority of population was rural. As the belief that India lives in its villages became ingrained, the bulk of resources were directed to rural areas. The fear of losing these has prevented budding urban clusters from declaring themselves as cities and providing the required services. But the belief lags reality. The last census was only in 2011 and measured 31 per cent of India's population as living in cities. Private estimates that include satellite data and night-light imaging, suggest it may be above 70 per cent, if peri-urban areas are added. Even so, there is no policy framework to ease the ongoing transition from rural to urban. The absence of adequate data compounds the problem.

Even so, large amounts have been spent on city infrastructure, but results remain inadequate in the absence of coordination and attention to user needs. For example, if congestion is



GAP. Indian cities' own source revenue is only 20-40 per cent of municipal expenditure

alleviated on one stretch, it springs up in another in the absence of planned city-wide expansion. Even if public transport improves, its use is not enough to ease congestion since last mile connections are not thought through. While low income housing is being created, large slum areas are demolished there, displacing people from their places of work rather than staggering so that some rebuilding is completed and rehousing in the same area is possible.

The smart city initiative has designed many digital systems to improve public services, but operational silos continue. One department does not share data with another, let alone train own use-based AI on the data.

RESPECTING THE CONSTITUTION In 1992 the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments did lay the framework for decentralisation, recommending the transfer of funds and **Large amounts have been spent on city infrastructure, but results remain inadequate in the absence of coordination and attention to user needs**

functionaries to local governments based on awards of State Finance Commissions. But most States either do not set up the commissions regularly or do not listen to them. It is difficult to give up funds and power and there are always excuses such as local corruption or lack of capacity. But the latter cannot survive for decades, as they have done, if strong local systems are in place for accountability and there is sincere training.

There are signs, at last, that the critical bottleneck is being recognised and acted on. Both NITI Aayog and the Economic Survey have flagged the necessity of a master plan for cities. The latter gives the example of Noida in UP where a single authority has delivered much better outcomes than Gurugram, Haryana, where there are three overlapping authorities. But how is this to be achieved?

In the OUP Handbook I had edited 10 years ago I had suggested that constitutional institutions should have priority and coordination authority. Today technology can enable coordination, once a clear hierarchy is established. In East Asian countries decentralisation is incentivised since local authorities, as residual claimants, benefit from prosperity. In most global cities an empowered mayor is elected and responsible for outcomes. In Indian

cities the elected mayor tends to be a ceremonial head while the Municipal Commissioner, an IAS officer appointed by the State Government, is the real executive. Financial and planning power is not delegated to the locally elected official, who is more likely to be responsive to voter needs.

USING FINANCE

While governance, not finance, is the real constraint, financial powers with constitutional bodies can be used to improve delegation to local authorities. Executive power follows financial power.

The latest Budget does focus on city economic regions, with an allocation of ₹5,000 crore per region over five years based on reform-cum-growth results. Coordination worsens as peri-urban areas expand with their own authority structures. A single elected authority, with incentives aligned to development, could be imposed as a pre-condition for the region.

The 16th Finance Commission (FC) has a number of initiatives for urban areas. While tax devolution is a State right and has to be formula-based, conditionalities can be imposed on grants. The FC has made liberal use of this freedom. The overall allocation to urban local bodies has doubled and the united commodity gone up to 50 per cent giving them more freedom to respond to local needs, but the rest is tied to sanitation systems and audit requirements, including for parastatals, to improve capacity, transparency and accountability. An urbanisation premium of ₹10,000 crore will reduce the incentive to remain rural and deny urban services.

Indian cities' Own Source Revenue (OSR) varies between 20 and 40 per cent of municipal expenditure. Property tax at 0.15 per cent of GDP is much below the 0.3 for low-income and up to 3 per cent for high-income countries. The FC has linked performance grants to OSR growth, and State transfers of at least 20 per cent of the FC basic grant to local governments, thus delinking devolution from underperforming State FCs. Own revenues create natural residual claimants with decision powers.

There is a beginning in relaxing the vital choke points and aligning incentives to improve urban governance and delivery. These changes may also help reverse the underperformance in actual Central spending on urban development over the last three years.

The writer was a member of the previous MPC

What the smoke signals from Dubai portend

Wars begin when multiple strategic clocks — political, nuclear, regional, and monetary — strike at once

Chocko Valliappa

For the past 24 hours, I have been confined indoors in Dubai, watching smoke hang near the horizon from the 63rd floor of an apartment overlooking the Burj Khalifa. The sounds in the distance are not cinematic. They are unsettling. When geopolitics moves from headlines to skyline, theory becomes personal.

In four decades of working with global CEOs through YPO (Young Presidents' Organization), EGO (Entrepreneurs' Organization) and in building businesses across seven countries, I have learned one thing: wars rarely begin because of one event. They begin when multiple strategic clocks strike at once.

The first clock is political: In the US, elections shape foreign policy narratives. Iran has been an unresolved strategic chapter since 1979. Any administration that can project strength towards Tehran gains domestic credibility. As electoral cycles tighten, leadership signalling becomes sharper.

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has operated under sustained political pressure. The October 7 attacks transformed national security from policy debate to existential urgency. In such moments, political consolidation around force is not unusual. Leaders under strain rarely choose passivity. But politics alone does not start wars.

The second clock is nuclear: Israel's doctrine has always been clear: prevent

adversaries from crossing irreversible nuclear thresholds. The concern is not incremental enrichment but the narrowing window towards weaponisation capability. If decision-makers believe that window is closing, diplomacy begins to look slow and uncertain. Pre-emption begins to look decisive. Timing clock of diplomacy slows time, technology accelerates it. When those trajectories diverge, escalation becomes more probable — even if talks in Geneva or Vienna are technically ongoing. In fact, military action during negotiations is often about leverage, not abandonment.

REGIONAL INSTABILITY The clock of regional instability: Iran sits in a volatile arc: Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions, unrest in Balochistan, proxy alignments across West Asia, and increasing Chinese and Russian strategic presence. In my years of expanding operations across jurisdictions — from Asia to the Middle East to North America — I have learned that risk is rarely linear. Instability in one node amplifies vulnerability in another.

Energy and currency clock — quieter, structural, and perhaps the least discussed: Since the mid-1970s, global oil trade has largely been denominated in US dollars — the so-called petrodollar system. This architecture has underpinned American monetary primacy for decades. Oil-exporting nations earned dollars and recycled them into US assets, reinforcing global

\$120 billion annually. The juxtaposition of multiple fronts simultaneously: Strategic petroleum reserves should be reviewed and topped up without delay. Diplomatic quiet but urgent attention. And the RBI must remain watchful of both inflation and the rupee.

A Mylisami **Commodore**

Sweet victory I read the article 'J&K scripts history



UNCERTAINTY. More unnerving than hostility

dollar demand. In recent years, that architecture has shown stress. India and China have expanded purchases of Russian oil through alternative settlement arrangements. Iran has traded outside traditional dollar channels. BRICS discussions have increasingly referenced reducing dollar dependency in cross-border trade. Energy is not just a commodity. It anchors financial power.

If meaningful oil flows migrate away from dollar settlement, the implications extend to foreign exchange reserves, sovereign debt markets, and long-term monetary influence. No major power treats such shifts casually.

Viewed through this lens, economic tools — sanctions, tariff pressures linked indirectly to energy trade patterns, strategic engagement with producers such as Venezuela — take on a broader meaning. They are not merely punitive; they are structural.

This does not mean the current

conflict is "about the dollar." Wars are never monocausal. But power structures are layered. Political survival, nuclear thresholds, regional instability, and monetary architecture can converge. And when they do, action accelerates.

Watching the Dubai skyline, normally defined by commerce and ambition, one is reminded how fragile global integration really is — think of the nine million Indians that are affected in the region. In 40 years of conversations with global business leaders, one recurring lesson stands out: predictability is stability. Market function when red lines are understood and decision hierarchies are clear.

Uncertainty is more dangerous than hostility. If leadership structures become opaque, if nuclear timelines compress, if domestic political clocks tighten, and if monetary architecture feels threatened — the strategic equilibrium shifts. The present moment may not be the result of a single provocation. It may be the product of converging clocks: political, nuclear, regional, and monetary.

History suggests wars often begin not when diplomacy collapses entirely, but when leaders conclude that time itself is working against them. Hold up in Dubai for more than 30 hours the lesson feels immediate. Geopolitics, like business, is about timing. But unlike business, the cost of miscalculation is measured not in capital — but in stability itself.

The writer is Founder and MD, Ve Technologies, and Vice Chairman, The Sona Group

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

Unjustified attack on Iran

Apropos 'Challenges for the Khamenei era' (March 2), the US President Donald Trump has this habit of shifting his positions and the reasons for the attack on Iran have also similarly shifted — first it was nuclear weapons programme and later regime change. For a President who claimed that he has prevented stopped seven wars around the world after coming to power the second time, starting a war with Iran, that too while negotiations were going on, is ironic.

This war being waged by the US and Israel will not only bring large-scale destruction to the region, but may also destabilise Iran for a long time.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

Securing oil supplies

Apropos 'Fresh pain' (March 2), the Iran-Israel conflict is a timely reminder of how vulnerable India's economy remains to West Asian instability. Nearly half our oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz, and our Gulf diaspora sends home over

\$120 billion annually. The juxtaposition of multiple fronts simultaneously: Strategic petroleum reserves should be reviewed and topped up without delay. Diplomatic quiet but urgent attention. And the RBI must remain watchful of both inflation and the rupee.

A Mylisami
Commodore

Sweet victory

I read the article 'J&K scripts history

and how' (March 2) with interest. Jammu and Kashmir's first Ranji Trophy win against Karnataka should be the sweetest because it has come after six decades or so for the team. Its captain Paras Dogra's remark after the match that he can't explain it, says it all. One hopes the national selectors would take note of the exceptional performances of some of the players of J&K, and give them opportunities to play the longer version of the game for the country.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Exporters face the heat

Apropos 'Exporters face the heat' (March 2), prolonged war could increase freight rates, transit time' (March 2). Just when Indian exporters were on the cusp of recovery, overcoming the US tariffs, the Iran-Israel conflict has emerged as a destabiliser. Apart from raising freight and insurance costs, there is the risk of order cancellation.

The duration of the current conflict is hard to guess.
Rajiv Magal
Halekere Village, Karnataka

Reforming domestic work

Towards a model that lends dignity and security

Prabir Kumar Bandyopadhyay

The Supreme Court's recent refusal to entertain a PIL seeking minimum wages for domestic workers has triggered strong reactions. The Chief Justice's oral observations — warning that enforcing minimum wages in private households could lead to widespread litigation and reduced hiring — may sound harsh at first glance. Yet this concern reflects a real problem.



DOMESTIC WORKERS. Fight for dignity MURALI KHANNA

Domestic work is informal, which makes strict legal enforcement hard and sometimes counterproductive. But the Court also acknowledged that domestic workers are frequently exploited. Hence designing reform without destabilising employment or overwhelming the legal system is the challenge.

GOA EXPERIENCE

In Goa domestic services are outsourced by the employer to a registered service provider. Individual households did not hire workers directly; instead, they pay a fixed monthly fee to the organisation that supplied domestic staff.

Apart from convenience for households, it also led to a perceptual change about the workers. The work had not changed — but the social framing of the work had.

Several workers also indicated that they were paid better than typical informal arrangements and had clearer expectations regarding hours and responsibilities.

One practical factor that enabled this arrangement to function smoothly was spatial concentration. The residences served by the organisation were located within the same housing complex, reducing travel time, coordination costs, and scheduling uncertainty for workers.

This geographical compactness made regular employment viable and predictable. Such conditions may not exist everywhere at the outset, but they point to a realistic pathway for replication.

The core difficulty with enforcing minimum wages in domestic work lies in the employment relationship itself. When millions of households become de facto employers, compliance monitoring becomes impractical and adversarial. Litigation, as the Court noted,

could overwhelm both families and the justice system.

Organised domestic service providers by acting as employers can: Standardise wages and working conditions; provide workers with identity, predictability, and grievance mechanisms; shield households from legal uncertainty; enable the state to regulate a manageable number of institutions rather than individual homes.

In effect, this shifts domestic work from a personal dependency to a contractual relationship, where dignity is institutional rather than negotiable.

This approach does not require abandoning labour protections. Instead, it reframes them. If policy were to encourage professional domestic service organisations — through easier registration, skill certification, access to social security schemes, and light-touch regulation — market competition could gradually lift wages and standards.

India's domestic work sector is too large, too intimate, and too informal to be transformed solely through judicial mandates. Courts are right to be cautious. The future of domestic work reform may lie in building institutions rather than filing petitions — in creating professional pathways where dignity, protection, and economic viability coexist.

This model is different from gig work or nursing and care service where workers are treated as independent contractors rather than employees, often without protection.

This model rests on the principle of direct employment, where domestic workers are recognised as employees of the service organisation, with defined salaries, predictable working hours, and access to basic benefits. The objective is to build accountable institutions that assume employer responsibility.

The writer is a retired management professor

MACROSCAN.



CP CHANDRASHEKHAR, JAYATI GHOSH

It is well known that the actual supply of climate finance is well below the evident requirements, both for mitigation and adaptation. There is some talk of how the rich countries that promised \$100 billion annually for the developing world to meet its climate change alleviation targets, finally managed to achieve and even cross that number in 2022. But since there is no clear definition of climate finance that is internationally accepted and the available estimates also depend on self-reporting by donor countries and multilateral institutions, even that relatively small sum is open to question.

However, despite the paucity of publicly provided funds and very inadequate resources provided by rich country governments, trends in climate finance have changed quite significantly in the past few years, with newer sources of financing emerging, albeit with mixed effects.

A recent report from the Climate Policy Initiative (The Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2025) shows that globally, total climate finance (in all countries, including public and private sources) increased to nearly \$2 trillion by 2023.

Of this, mitigation finance made up the most significant chunk, estimated at \$1.78 trillion in 2023. Adaptation finance was much lower at only \$65 billion, although the report cautions that this could be an underestimate because of tracking challenges. Dual-benefit finance — pursuing both adaptation and mitigation objectives — reached \$58 billion.

Figure 1 indicates that there was a significant increase in mitigation finance especially since 2021 — and that this was mainly private sector-led, as publicly provided finance actually fell slightly between 2022 and 2023. Private climate finance contributions crossed \$1 trillion for the first time in 2023, increasing by more than 50 per cent compared to 2022.

HOUSEHOLDS' SHARE

What is particularly of note is that within this, households were the largest private contributors, rather than corporations. Households — most of all in North America and Europe — invested in electric vehicles, solar water heaters, and renewable-energy-powered HVAC systems in response to rising energy costs.

Such responses were also evident, albeit on a much smaller scale, in lower income countries like Pakistan.

Of course, this is still well below the actual global needs, as indicated in Figure 2. The largest part of mitigation finance was for energy, at \$831 billion, but even that provided less than 30 per cent of the estimated requirement. Meanwhile, while AFOLU (Agriculture, forestry and other land use) and fishery are estimated to require more than \$1 trillion of spending annually, the actual spending was only 1 per cent of that in 2023.

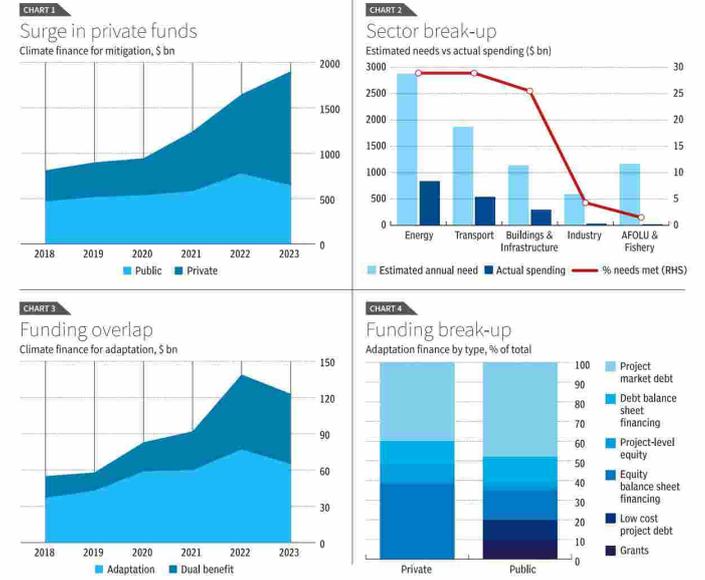
What makes matters much worse is that such spending is largely concentrated in the advanced countries and China. Seventy-nine per cent of all climate finance was concentrated in just three regions: East Asia and the Pacific (largely China), Western Europe and the US and Canada.

In the developing world (excluding China), the pattern was reversed, with most climate mitigation finance (78 per cent) coming from public rather than private sources. In 2023 it was estimated at \$196 billion, which represents a nearly threefold increase from 2018.

Most of this (nearly 80 per cent) was from national sources, with only \$42 billion coming from cross-border flows of finance. Once again, even this relatively small amount was regionally concentrated, with the bulk going to Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, and Central Asia and Eastern Europe, largely in the form of clean technology investment.

What's really happening with climate finance?

Climate finance has been increasing, but mostly driven by private payers, including households



Source for all figures and table: Calculated from Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2025, Climate Policy Initiative, <https://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/publication/global-landscape-of-climate-finance-2025/>

DEBT FACTOR

Another concern relates to the type of financing. Table 1 provides a sense of the relative importance of debt, equity and concessional financing by mitigation sector. It is striking to see that concessional finance is effectively non-existent for energy, buildings and infrastructure and waste management, and provides a relatively small proportion of finance for transport, industry and AFOLU (agriculture, forestry and other land use) and fishery. Instead, debt flows dominate in most sectors.

This huge reliance on debt for climate finance may appear to be positive because it enlarges the potential pool of investible resources. Indeed, it was the presumption of the "billions to trillions" slogan at one time beloved of the multilateral financial institutions. But the accrual of debt, especially for investments that do not generate the monetary returns expected by financial markets, comes with its own problems, which are now too well known to require further elaboration here.

These problems are particularly important for lower and middle income countries that have experienced debt stress in the past decade. In a way it is ironic that the same multilateral institutions that have been unable to address the massive debt repayment problems faced by many such countries are also advocating for more debt to be taken on by these very countries for purposes of climate change alleviation.

Simple trends are evident in Households — most of all in North America and Europe — invested in electric vehicles, solar water heaters, and renewable-energy-powered HVAC systems in response to rising energy costs



TABLE 1: Funding pattern
Share of mitigation finance by sector in 2023 (%)

	Debt	Equity	Concessional	Unknown
Energy	53	46	1	0
Transport	47	46	7	0
Buildings & infrastructure	68	30	0	1
Other/cross-sectoral	39	6	54	0
Waste	100	0	0	0
Industry	68	20	12	0
AFOLU & fishery	85	1	13	1
Water & waste water	71	0.5	27	1.5
ICT	50	12	36	2

adaptation finance. Since it is more difficult to make a commercial case for many aspects of climate change adaptation, there has been growing reliance on "dual benefit" financing, which cover both mitigation and adaptation needs. This is shown in Figure 3.

This is when adaptation finance effectively overlaps with development finance, on the grounds that investments aimed at reducing communities' economic or social vulnerability often also enhance resilience to climate change, in addition to other benefits. (For example, road or

building construction that is undertaken with deliberate consideration of climate impacts and the needs of vulnerable people in mind, to provide greater resilience in periods of climate stress.)

Nonetheless, much adaptation is necessarily not commercially profitable. This is why the significant reliance of not only private finance, but debt-based finance by both public and private sources, can become a problem. Clearly, a much greater emphasis on public provision — and therefore public finance — is essential if the needs of climate alleviation are to be met more effectively.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 3, 2006

India, US seal nuclear deal

India and the US today crossed a major milestone in civil nuclear cooperation after the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, and the visiting US President, Mr George Bush, reached an understanding on the implementation of the July 18, 2005 agreement on this issue. I have conveyed to the President that India has finalised the identification of civilian facilities to which we had committed," the Prime Minister told the media at a joint press conference with Mr Bush.

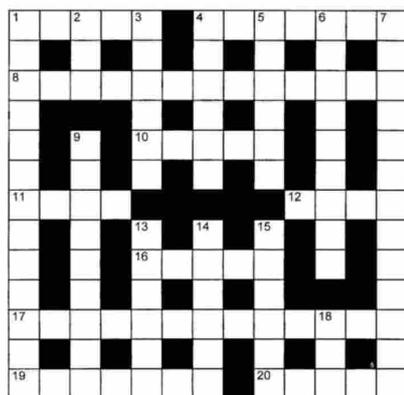
SC bars States from imposing sales tax on telecom services

In a huge relief to telecom consumers and operators, the Supreme Court today held that States cannot impose sales tax on the service provided by the telecom companies. The decision is likely to bring down the burden on telecom operators by as much as Rs 10,000 crore annually.

IOC offloads 50 pc of its stake in GAIL

Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (IOC) has made a profit of close to Rs 430 crore by selling half of its stake in GAIL (India) Ltd. IOC has been suffering a pinch on its bottom line primarily due to non-realisation of market-related prices for petrol, diesel, kerosene under PDS and domestic LPG during the current fiscal.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2628



EASY

ACROSS

01. East European rye beer (5)
04. Produce point on pencil (7)
08. Comprehension (13)
10. Awash with ale (5)
11. Hard, black (from the wood) (4)
12. Fibber (4)
16. Plain, non-verse, writing (5)
17. Unmoved by feelings (13)
19. Have regard for (7)
20. Lees, sediment (5)

DOWN

01. Bows down, submits to authority (8,5)
02. Assistance (3)
03. Washes with hard brush (6)
04. Long seat with a back (6)
05. Aggravates (6)
06. Lack of the necessities for comfort (9)
07. Large earthworms appearing during darkness (5-8)
09. Pretends to, claims to be (9)
13. Sleep-inducing drug (6)
14. To fondle, pamper (6)
15. Put on tape (6)
18. Mimic, imitate (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. Asks maybe for a rye beer when it's about five (5)
04. Get a keen edge on her pans like this (7)
08. Informal agreement to be sympathetic (13)
10. Smelling of ale or rye, be confused (5)
11. Hard black bone gets broken (4)
12. Some peculiarity of the story teller (4)
16. Page got up in plain writing (5)
17. Unprejudiced pianist does as necessary for it (13)
19. A particular deference is shown (7)
20. They're left, exempli gratia, among doctors (5)

DOWN

01. Finger the joints below as one yields to authority (8,5)
02. Help in some Canadian uprising (3)
03. It hardly washes at Wormwood prison (6)
04. A seat to test out with ease, one is told (6)
05. Is aggravating as any son can be (6)
06. Tommy Atkins almost took one on due to lack of necessities (9)
07. Worms that during darkness become abject and obsequious (5-8)
09. Claims to be in favour of bands on shields (9)
13. For a drug to work, I consumed it (6)
14. Pamper one like a hand-reared lamb (6)
15. Trace a curve on a disc (6)
18. Mimic a primate (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2627

ACROSS 1. Diced 4. Bolland 8. Task-force 9. Bis 10. Reliant 12. Trip 14. Ceramic 17. Agree 18. Trailer 20. Ink 21. Condition 23. Name-day 24. Nudge

DOWN 1. Determination 2. Castle 3. Deflated 4. Bar 5. Leek 6. Auburn 7. Disappearance 11. Trait 13. Citation 15. Bunkum 16. Allied 19. Acid 22. Nay



Free Press FOR FREE FLOW OF TRUTH

Need assistance, not sympathy

It is heartening that Kerala has rolled out an emergency response mechanism to protect its vast expatriate workforce in the Gulf. The urgency of the move cannot be overstated. As the military confrontation widens following coordinated strikes by the U.S. and Israel on Iranian targets, the tremors are being felt across West Asia. Retaliatory missile launches and the temporary suspension of air traffic by countries such as Qatar, Kuwait and the U.A.E have created deep anxiety among millions of migrant workers. For Kerala, this is not a distant geopolitical spectacle but a lived reality. An estimated 2.2 million Malayalees live and work in the Gulf, forming the backbone of the state's remittance economy. From construction sites in Dubai to service establishments across the region, they labour quietly, sending home modest sums that sustain families and local markets. Studies indicate that remittances account for more than a third of Kerala's domestic product. Prolonged instability in West Asia, therefore, threatens both household incomes and the broader state economy.

History offers a sobering reminder. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, thousands of Indians—mostly Malayalees—were forced to flee with little more than what they could carry. The massive airlift organised by the Government of India remains one of the largest civilian evacuations in history. The memory of that trauma still lingers in Kerala's collective consciousness. Already, the first casualty of the present conflict has been the disruption of air services. With flights suspended or reduced, thousands are stranded and uncertain about their next steps. Work in several Gulf countries is likely to slow or halt if tensions escalate further. A sudden return of workers is no longer a remote possibility. Back home, anxiety is palpable. Whenever there is trouble in the Gulf, religious places in Kerala witness noticeably larger gatherings than usual. Temples, mosques and churches see families praying for the safety of their loved ones abroad. This spontaneous turn to faith reflects both the depth of emotional ties to the region and the vulnerability felt by households dependent on remittances. It is a reminder that this crisis is not merely economic but deeply personal.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has done well to activate control rooms and helplines through the Non-Resident Keralites Affairs department. Coordination with embassies and community organisations is essential. Yet preparedness must go beyond information-sharing. If large numbers return, they will need assistance to reach their villages, temporary relief and avenues to earn a livelihood until normalcy returns. The state may not be able to restore lost overseas jobs. But it can ensure that those who land on Kerala's shores feel supported and respected. In moments of crisis, that assurance of solidarity can mitigate suffering in ways statistics cannot measure.

Amid escalating West Asia tensions, Kerala has activated emergency measures to safeguard its 2.2 million expatriates in the Gulf, whose remittances remain vital to the state's economy

History offers a sobering reminder. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, thousands of Indians—mostly Malayalees—were forced to flee with little more than what they could carry. The massive airlift organised by the Government of India remains one of the largest civilian evacuations in history. The memory of that trauma still lingers in Kerala's collective consciousness. Already, the first casualty of the present conflict has been the disruption of air services. With flights suspended or reduced, thousands are stranded and uncertain about their next steps. Work in several Gulf countries is likely to slow or halt if tensions escalate further. A sudden return of workers is no longer a remote possibility. Back home, anxiety is palpable. Whenever there is trouble in the Gulf, religious places in Kerala witness noticeably larger gatherings than usual. Temples, mosques and churches see families praying for the safety of their loved ones abroad. This spontaneous turn to faith reflects both the depth of emotional ties to the region and the vulnerability felt by households dependent on remittances. It is a reminder that this crisis is not merely economic but deeply personal.

Cost of firecracker negligence

As many as 21 people, mostly women, died and eight others were critically injured in yet another incident of a firecracker manufacturing unit in Andhra Pradesh's Velapalem village on Saturday. The impact was so intense that, according to local reports, the explosions were heard nearly five kilometres away and cracks developed in the slab of a school nearby. Worse, body parts of the dead were found scattered across the area and rescuers had a difficult time controlling the blaze and smoke. The owner was reportedly among the dead but his son was absconding. While the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and AP Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu condoned the deaths and announced compensation, the issue goes deeper than offering immediate salve alone.

Every year, there are reports of fires in firecracker manufacturing units across India with Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu, one of the key centres of fireworks units, not being an exception. A series of fire incidents, explosions and deaths over the years. Last year alone, there were three incidents reported which left nearly 18 dead and several injured. Fire incidents and explosions leading to at least seven deaths were reported from Bhiwadi industrial area in Rajasthan in February this year; explosions in Kalyani in West Bengal took four lives and left many injured; a major fire in a unit in Baitargah in Madhya Pradesh in 2024 left 12 dead and 60 injured.

The dead are often children who, according to law, are not supposed to be working or women whose labour comes cheap. Their deaths do not shake the social conscience or rattle state governments to look beyond the immediate causes and compensation amounts. However, terrible fires in firecracker manufacturing units cannot be treated as random episodic manner with perfunctory and standard responses. The cause of fires every year in some of these units, and loss of lives, points to the structural and systemic failure from granting permits without adequately following fire safety norms to local administrations turning a blind eye to the flagrant violation of the rules and norms—till an incident occurs.

Investigations into some of the affected units have shown a pattern of illegal operations, excessive storage of inflammable materials, small and cramped spaces without appropriate escape routes, and improper handling of raw materials and explosives. These must be true of several other units too and some of them may be illegal too; they are unlikely to be brought till they break out. While the onus lies on the owners to follow rules, it must be recognized that greater responsibility rests on the local administrators—enforced by state governments—to ensure stricter enforcement of safety rules at all times, without shortcuts. Accident prevention and disaster management must be made part of regular inspections and awareness programmes too. No life is worth a firecracker, after all.



State of the Nation

ASHUTOSH

America's attack on Iran is proof that the world has become a big jungle, where rules no longer matter, and might is right. The rule-based global world order, which ensured the most peaceful era in human history, has completely collapsed, and the USA has ceased to exist as a moral leader of the world.

If one asks one simple question, why the USA and Israel, together, attacked Iran, I am sure together they have to concoct a fiction that Iran was about to make a nuclear bomb, which could be a threat to the Middle East region in particular and the world in general. Like the USA's attack on Iraq when George Bush invaded Saddam Hussein's country, armed with a lie that Saddam was assembling WMD, weapons of mass destruction. The idea was to teach the Muslim world to seek revenge for 9/11. Similarly, Donald Trump is lying.

The world has to understand that at the time when American missiles flew from their military bases, Iran was engaged with the USA to find a solution for a nuclear deal. On Thursday itself, represen-

tatives from the USA and Iran had completed the third round of talks in Geneva. It was reported that Iran had agreed in principle on three things. It was ready to suspend uranium enrichment for nuclear purposes for three to five years; to join a regional consortium for uranium enrichment for civilian use; and to allow international inspectors to inspect its nuclear sites. It is also a big lie as spread by the propagandists that Iran was a few months away from making a nuclear bomb. As reported by the New York Times, Iran was not months but many years away from achieving nuclear capability. According to one report, Iran was almost 10 years away from that capability.

It was also propagated that Iran has acquired long-range missiles that could hit inside America. Therefore, for the security of American citizens, it was imperative to neutralise Iran. This is also a lie. Iran has hundreds of missiles, which it has used in June during the 12-day war last year, and also this time. Its missiles had flown over and damaged American military bases in several Middle East countries and also crossed Israeli borders, but these are medium and

short-range missiles, not long-range missiles. Anyway, to send missiles to the USA, Iran does not need long-range missiles but ICBMs, that is, intercontinental ballistic missiles, which it does not possess. If it had, it must have been used after the assassination of its supreme leader, Ali Khamenei.

Let's not forget that Iran entered into an agreement with the USA on nuclear issues when Barack Obama was the president. A deal was signed between the USA and Iran. When Trump became the president, he refused to acknowledge the deal. So, to say that Iran was unwilling to accept a nuclear deal is not right. Even in his second term, Iran showed its willingness to reach a compromise with the USA with the help of Oman and Qatar. Three rounds of talks did take place, one in Oman and the other two in Switzerland.

So, a question that needs to be asked: what are the real reasons for the attack? At the time of the attack, both leaders, Trump and Netanyahu, were in deep political trouble. After the peace in Gaza, the corruption cases had again stared at Netanyahu, and there is a real possibility that not only will he lose

his seat as a prime minister but also end up in jail. Whereas Trump is getting unpopular in the USA. No Supreme Court has just ruled that the imposition of random tariffs globally is null and void. The Supreme Court has been categorical that it cannot execute the economic emergency provision of 1977 without Congress's approval. Then, Epstein's files have also made his life hell. He has also failed to improve the economic conditions of American citizens. His election-time promise of providing jobs has proved to be a big hoax. Jobless Growth and economic uncertainties due to the mindless imposition of tariffs have made his own social base very uncomfortable.

Now his MAGA base is also deeply divided about his penchant for war. In his first year, he has launched seven wars in different regions of the globe. He had just attacked Venezuela, captured its head of state, Maduro. And in the second term, he attacked Iran twice. Trump had criticised other presidents for indulging in military

exercises beyond US borders. He projected himself as a peacemaker during his campaign and thereafter. But it seems he loves war games more than any other president.

The fact is, Trump himself has become a threat to global security. He has no respect for any institution. Every time he sent his armed forces for an attack, he refused to take US Congress into confidence. He has refused to take his NATO allies into confidence. He has refused to take the UN route. It is only he who decides. He has dismantled the rules-based world order. He is behaving like an emperor with enormous power, able to do anything. For him, other sovereign nations are his vassals, with no option but to listen to his dictates and follow his orders. He has made the world a dangerous place to live. He has not made the USA great again. He has made the American dream a nightmare where every section of society is vulnerable and uncertain. He has made America a nightmare.

The writer is Co-Founder, SatyaHindi.com, and author of Hindu Rashtra. He tweets at @ashutosh38B



Guest Column

K.S. TOMAR

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi met his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu and elevated bilateral ties to a 'Special Strategic Partnership,' the gesture went far beyond diplomatic symbolism. The announcement of 16 structured agreements across defence, digital architecture, emerging technologies, agriculture and innovation reflects a decisive shift in the character of India-Israel engagement. What was once largely a discreet, defence-driven relationship has now evolved into a multi-sector compact with long-term strategic intent. In a geopolitical climate defined by technological rivalry, regional volatility and contested supply chains, the breadth of this framework signals that both nations are preparing for a more uncertain Asian century.

BEYOND DEFENCE PURCHASES: INSTITUTIONALISING STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE: For decades, India's engagement with Israel was anchored in defence procurement—efficient, quiet and purposeful. The new framework alters that template. The sixteen agreements create an institutional lattice that integrates research collaboration, digital infrastructure co-ordination, fintech connectivity, artificial intelligence partnerships, cyber security mechanisms, industrial R&D, agricultural modernisation and defence co-production. The transformation lies not in any single memorandum but in the ecosystem being constructed. By moving from buyer-seller equations to co-development and joint innovation, the partnership acquires structural resilience.

This matters because contemporary power is increasingly measured not merely by hardware inventories but by technological ecosystems. Al-

gorithms, secure digital payments architecture, cyber resilience and precision agriculture are as central to sovereignty as conventional weapons platforms. By embedding cooperation in these domains, New Delhi and Jerusalem are effectively synchronising elements of their national transformation agendas.

TECHNOLOGY AS THE NEW STRATEGIC CURRENCY: At the core of this expanded partnership lies technology. Israel's reputation as a start-up powerhouse and India's scale in digital public infrastructure create a complementary dynamic. Collaboration in fintech integration pathways and payment systems could facilitate smoother cross-border innovation flows. Joint work in artificial intelligence and dual-use technologies has implications not only for civilian industries but also for defence modernisation.

Equally significant is cyber security. As state and non-state actors intensify operations in digital space, building interoperable security frameworks becomes indispensable. The agreements suggest recognition on both sides that technological dependence without security safeguards creates 'vulnerability.' By coordinating cyber architecture and information protection systems, the two countries seek to pre-empt such risks.

In agriculture and water management, the dividends are practical and immediate. Israel's advances in drip irrigation, desert farming and water recycling align closely with India's need to improve productivity amid climate stress. These partnerships move beyond theory into domains directly affecting livelihoods, rural resilience and food security.

A MESSAGE TO WASHINGTON WITHOUT CONFRONTATION: The timing of the partnership's elevation carries layered diplomatic meaning. Under President Donald

Trump, Washington has favoured sharper strategic alignments among its partners. A visibly strengthened India-Israel axis can be read as complementary to American interests, given both countries' close ties with the United States. Stronger technological and defence capabilities in two democratic states arguably reinforce a broader stabilising architecture.

Yet there is also a subtler undertone. By expanding cooperation on its own terms, India reiterates its doctrine of strategic autonomy. The relationship with Israel is not framed as an adjunct to any larger bloc disengagement strategy. It stands as an independent, interest-driven partnership. In doing so, New Delhi underscores that even as it converges with major Western powers in several theatres, it retains sovereign latitude in shaping bilateral engagements.

ISLAMABAD'S CALCULATED CONCERN: For Pakistan, the implications are neither abstract nor rhetorical. The deepening of India-Israel defence collaboration, particularly in joint production and technological transfer, will be viewed through a security prism. Enhanced cooperation in unmanned systems, electronic warfare, air defence integration and surveillance technologies could alter tactical balances over time. Even if specific platforms remain undisclosed, the architecture of co-development signals long-term capability accretion.

Pakistan's strategic community may interpret this as a gradual narrowing of its operational space, especially in emerging theatres such as drone warfare and network-centric operations. However, the broader impact is psychological as much as material: a reinforced India-Israel axis suggests durability in technological collaboration, complicating Islamabad's calculus in future escalatory scenarios.

BEIJING'S QUIET APPRAISAL: China, too, will observe developments with measured interest. Beijing maintains substantial defence ties with Pakistan and has expanded technological and infrastructure influence across South Asia. An India-Israel compact centred on AI, cyber systems and advanced manufacturing intersects directly with sectors in which China seeks primacy.

While Israel and China share economic linkages of their own, Beijing is likely to assess whether this upgraded partnership strengthens India's resilience in sensitive technological domains. Increased innovation reduces India's dependence on external supply chains, it indirectly limits avenues for strategic leverage. Thus, even absent overt rivalry, the partnership subtly reshapes the regional technology equation.

STRATEGIC GAINS FOR NEW DELHI: For India, the dividends are layered. First, defence-industrial collaboration aligns with the drive for indigenous manufacturing and co-production. Technology infusion, rather than outright imports, enhances domestic capability and employment generation. Second, digital and AI cooperation complements India's ambition to position itself as a global technology hub. Third, agricultural and water initiatives offer tangible socio-economic returns in a climate-constrained future.

Importantly, this partnership bolsters deterrence without binding India into a treaty-based alliance. The absence of formal military alignment preserves diplomatic flexibility even as capability deepens. In a multipolar environment, such calibrated strengthening of bilateral ties enhances leverage rather than constraining it.

POLITICAL CAPITAL FOR JERUSALEM: For Prime Minister Netanyahu, the expanded engagement

carries strategic and symbolic weight. Amid persistent regional volatility, a robust embrace from India—one of the world's fastest-growing major economies—reinforces Israel's international partnerships. It signals that Israel's diplomatic space extends well beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

Economic cooperation with India offers access to scale, investment and collaborative research ecosystems. Politically, the partnership can be presented domestically as validation of Israel's enduring global relevance. In turbulent times, strategic diversification becomes both shield and signal.

A PARTNERSHIP DEFINED BY STRUCTURE, NOT SENTIMENT: Ultimately, the significance of the 16 agreements lies in their architecture. They transform a historically defence-heavy engagement into a multi-dimensional strategic compact. By interlinking digital economies, innovation corridors, cyber frameworks and defence industries, India and Israel are institutionalising cooperation in sectors that define 21st-century power.

In Asia's shifting strategic theatre—marked by technological rivalry, contested supply chains and fluid alignments—the India-Israel partnership emerges as a case study in calibrated convergence. It strengthens autonomy rather than diluting it, enhances capability without formal alliances and projects stability amid uncertainty. The move from transaction to transformation may well prove the defining feature of this new chapter—one that resonates far beyond the bilateral axis and into the broader architecture of Asian geopolitics.

(The writer is a senior political analyst and strategic affairs columnist based in Shimla)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Wisdom Over Martyrdom

A televised interaction showed an Iranian child expressing desire for martyrdom. Iran's leader advised him instead to study, grow and contribute as a scientist, suggesting purpose before sacrifice. This message valuably stresses education, patience and nation-building over premature extremism, offering a rare example of responsible leadership guiding youth toward constructive paths.

Lalit Dube, Ratlam

Village-Led Discipline

Mendki village's Gram Sabha in Chhattisgarh has set exemplary rules to curb

disputes and social evils. Fines for gossiping, drunken misconduct and illegal liquor sales promote harmony and fund development. Such collective responsibility can transform villages and cities alike, reducing dependence on police and government alone.

Hema Hari Upadhyay, Khachrod

Trust Fights Terror

Counter-terrorism succeeds through force alone but through public trust. Transparent policing, swift justice and community confidence weaken extremism more effectively than intimidation. Addressing unemployment,

misinformation and marginalisation is equally vital. A strong democracy defeats terror by expanding trust, opportunity and lawful freedoms.

Insivya Raj, Ujain

Growing India-Israel Ties

The Prime Minister's visit to Israel reflects strong personal rapport and deepening diplomatic ties. Cooperation in defence, trade, technology and security has steadily expanded. The visit outlined a roadmap for future collaboration, signalling a mature partnership built on shared interests and long-term strategic vision.

Anushka Joshi, Ujain

Historic Honour Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first Indian PM to receive the Speaker of the Knesset Medal, Israel's highest parliamentary honour. It recognises his personal leadership in strengthening India-Israel strategic relations. The award underscores growing bilateral trust and reflects India's expanding global stature on the diplomatic stage.

Dimple Wadhawan, Kanpur

Small Aircraft Safety

Recent crashes expose dangerous gaps in regulation of small aircraft. The absence of mandatory flight data and cockpit voice recorders below a weight threshold is indefensible. Pilot oversight must be preventive, not reactive. Uniform standards are essential across all aircraft categories. Passenger safety cannot depend on aircraft size or ownership model.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

BSNL Order Shame

The BSNL office order detailing lavish arrangements for a director's visit rightly drew punitive outrage. Its cancellation saved taxpayer money at a critical time when BSNL is undergoing revival. Ministerial intervention and the show-cause notices were

necessary. Such extravagant reflects administrative inefficiency and must not recur in public sector functioning.

S. Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

Defend Kerala Model

There is a deliberate attempt to discredit Kerala's public healthcare to favour private interests. Despite massive investments, job creation and rising hospital usage, isolated incidents are magnified. With high per capita health spending, corporate players eye profits. Undermining public healthcare is a betrayal. The Kerala Model must remain a public right.

S. Padmanabhan, Kochi



Editor's TAKE

Can Carney's visit melt the ice?

After nearly two years of diplomatic frost, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's visit to India signals a carefully calibrated attempt to restore strained ties

India and Canada have been two nations that have enjoyed cordial relations for long though that spell was abruptly broken in 2023 when Canada accused Indian agents of killing Hardeep Singh Nijjar, a Sikh separatist and a Canadian citizen; allegations which India vehemently denied. That was the time Justin Trudeau was the prime minister but after the elections when Mark Carney took over Canada has constantly tried to improve ties with India and leave the incident behind. Before the Mark Carney's visit it even declared that India no longer posed a threat to Canadian security. In this context Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's visit to India is more than just a routine state visit. It is a carefully crafted diplomatic move to mend fence with India. Canada as the rest of the world is coming to terms with the Trump's erratic moves which have led Canada to seek partnerships outside of US ambit for which India is an ideal candidate. For nearly two years, ties between Ottawa and New Delhi deteriorated following former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's assertion of pointers to Indian agents involved in Nijjar's killing in Canada in 2023.

This led to diplomatic expulsions, suspended trade talks and political disengagement. Carney's mission is therefore to put back the ties on track while improving trade relations to cement the relations and also hedge against the US tariffs. The agenda signals pragmatism: discussions on a strategic partnership, revival of trade negotiations, cooperation in energy, critical minerals, innovation and strengthening people-to-people ties. It is diplomacy and economic realism rolled into one. Under Carney, Ottawa has sharpened its Indo-Pacific focus, in line with Canada's 2022 strategy to diversify trade and security partnerships beyond its overwhelming dependence on the United States. India's vast and fast-growing market has acquired renewed importance for Canada's petroleum, liquefied natural gas and technology sectors. For India, Canada is a potential long-term partner in energy security and a reliable source of critical minerals essential for the green transition. For over 15 years, India and Canada have intermittently negotiated a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), with little to show. Talks were effectively frozen after the 2023 diplomatic rupture. But the geopolitics has changed in past two years. India has recently advanced trade frameworks with the UK, the European Union and the United States. Canada, notably, remains the only G7 country without a preferential trade agreement with India. Canadian Prime Minister has deliberately avoided the issues concerning Sikh community in Canada. Even a visit to Punjab is not in his itinerary. The omission underscores the visit's economic focus and an attempt to avoid domestic political optics overshadowing strategic goals. Given Canada's large Sikh diaspora, this balancing act is delicate. Carney must reassure his domestic constituency that, even as he rebuilds trust with India, he will not compromise their concerns to please New Delhi.

India's balancing act in the West Asia

At a moment when geopolitical calculations intersect with religious sensitivities, New Delhi faces the delicate task of safeguarding national interests abroad while preserving communal harmony at home



BHOPIINDER SINGH

To assume that there is no sectarian angle to the attack on Iran is to live under a rock. What started as dispute over leadership after the death of the holy prophet, soon evolved into an irreconcilable theological divide of Shia-Sunni framework. First signs of the violent divide within the Ummah (Islamic World) came with the First Fitna (656-661 CE). Since then the sectarian dissonance got institutionalised within the respective sects.

In majority Shia Iraq, the Sunni leader Saddam Hussein had a predominantly Sunni Military and he diminished his Shia populace. Recently deposed Bashar al-Assad led Syria, had majority Sunni populace which was ruled by a predominantly Shia (Alawite) clique. In Sunni majority Yemen, the Shias were outliers. In majority Shia land of Bahrain, the Shias are kept under tight control by the minority Sunni monarchy of the House of Khalifa. In countries like Lebanon who have almost equal number of Sunnis and Shias, each side has had its own protective militias and turfs. In other countries like the Sunni-majority Pakistan or Afghanistan, the Shias have been routinely suppressed and openly discriminated against.

Unsurprisingly when Iran was coming under threat from Israel and the United States of America, the predominantly Sunni Arab Sheikhdoms chose to either remain silent or played meaningfully plattitudes. In many ways these Arab Sheikhdoms actually supported the Israeli cause (beyond pursuing the Abraham Accords), but without officially saying so. On 13th-14th June, when Iran was retaliating to Israeli strikes on Iran by launching drones at Israel, the Jordanian Air Defenses actually intercepted and shot down the Iranian drones from hitting Israel. Coincidentally, Jordan was the second Arab country (after Egypt) to normalise relations with Israel following their Israel-Jordan Treaty of Peace, as way back as 1994!

In recent times, it has only been Iran and its co-sectarian militias like the Hezbollah (Lebanon) or the Houthis (Yemen) who have offered any modicum of opposition to Israel following the pummeling of Gaza Strip and the killing of nearly 70,000 Palestinian Gazans - ironically predominantly Sunnis. The Arab Sheikhdoms and other major Islamic powers like Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia or even Pakistan have remained content to "express concern", "call for calm", and suchlike mealy-mouthed inanities. Therefore the recent frus-



IRAN UNDER THE AYOTOLLAH REGIME HAD OFTEN TAKEN KASHMIR IN THE OIC MEETINGS, WORKED TOGETHER IN AFGHANISTAN, AND WAS HOME TO THE GEOSTRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHABAHAR SEAPORT

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trated Iranian counter-attacks on Arab Sheikhdoms like UAE, Qatar or Saudi Arabia (all with American Military bases), elicited sharp anger against Iran, which itself was reeling under attacks by Israel and the USA, simultaneously. Today the sectarian divide in the Middle East theatre is clearly visible.

In the Indian narrative, the early signs of such divisive sectarianism came during the rule of the 17th Century under Aurangzeb, who was less accommodating and tolerating of the Shia sect. In independent India, the first Shia-Sunni violence came with the 1969 Lucknow Riots, after which the phenomenon of tensions surrounding the Muharram procession, became commonplace.

While the sectarian tensions have come down significantly in the last couple of decades, it is still delicate e.g., an offensive social media post had led to sectarian tensions in 2025 in Kanpur. For the 25 million odd Shias in India, certain enclaves like Lucknow, Karfil or Budgam are Shia dominated, but 200 odd million Sunnis are the clear majority. It is in line with the global Shia population estimated at 10-15% of the Ummah, with about 300 million globally.

For Shiite faith worldwide, Iran has a special, emotional, and psychological significance as the centrality of their faith, even though many other places like Najaf and Karbala (both in Iraq), Sayyida Zeinab Shrine (Syria) etc, are very important. This is especially so, for the "Twelver" Shias. Therefore the institution of Ayatollah (Persian for Sign of God) is rooted in the seminary system (hawza) where the Grand Ayatollah or Marja is the top faith authority whose rulings are widely followed.

It transcends borders and resonates in the far-flung by-lanes of Srinagar, Lucknow, Lahore, Kabul etc., wherever the Shias reside.

With this backdrop, the recent killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's death by bombing conducted by Israeli jets has led to an outpouring of grief, protests, and mourning rallies.

Sentiments of many Indian Shias could understandably be wounded and it is imperative to handle the same with utmost dignity, care, and maturity. Dialogue with the Shia leaders to assuage their grief without pandering to politics of divide-and-rule, or of inelegantly celebrating the moment, must be ensured. Many politicians and the so-called "fringe elements" are prone to making provocative statements and the government must disallow any such vituperative outpourings, especially in its name.

India has had illisational relations with Iran, and more recently with Israel. Iran under the Ayatollah regime had often taken India's side on Kashmir in the OIC meetings, worked together in Afghanistan, and was home to the geostategic development of the Chabahar seaport. Indeed, it also worked increasingly with Israel with the Indian Prime Minister having concluded a trip to Israel, days before the attack on Iran.

But it must delink the sovereign's geopolitical moves from the treatment of its "own", especially in a sensitive and emotional moment like now.

India's track record on sectarian rift within communities has been amongst the best in the world, and therefore care to ensure that it remains so, going forward, is critical.

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An artist works on a painting of Lord Krishna and his divine consort Radha amid preparations ahead of the 'Holi' festival, in Nadia.

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Women in science: Beyond celebration, towards equity



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

2ND OPINION

Every year, we celebrate National Science Day on 28th February to commemorate the discovery of the 'Raman Effect' by the eminent physicist Sir C.V. Raman while working in the laboratory of the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, Kolkata. For this discovery, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1930. On National Science Day, these-based science communication activities are held across the country. This year's theme is 'Women in Science: Catalysing Viksit Bharat', which underpins the role of women in our journey towards Viksit Bharat. It's really time to introspect on the lives of women in science. Since time immemorial, women have been facing discrimination from society, which is reflected even in today's science.

For many girls, the journey towards science begins with conditional encouragement. Curiosity is welcomed, but

ambition is carefully moderated. A boy aspiring to be a physicist or wildlife biologist is seen as committed; a girl with the same aspiration is frequently advised to "balance" her goals with future domestic responsibilities. Science demands long years of training, uncertainty, and professional risk-conditions that society still hesitates to extend to women without scrutiny. For a girl to succeed in science, she needs her family's support.

When women do enter scientific institutions, the challenges do not disappear; they merely change form. Male chauvinism, though rarely spoken aloud today, remains evident in many laboratories, research centres, and academic spaces.

These can be seen in the authorities' work designation. The areas where they can perform well and make it to the limelight are usually not assigned to them. Another insidious activity is workplace gossip, which targets women scientists. In many national institutions, women are forced to work in silence, fearing repercussions from the higher-ups. There are also disturbing instances where exceptionally brilliant women scientists are deliberately targeted.

Complaints are discouraged in the name of "institutional harmony," and resilience is praised when it really means endurance of unfairness. Such a culture does not merely harm individual careers; it weakens science itself by suppressing dissent, ethical courage, and diversity of thought.

Until very recently, even basic infrastructural needs of women scientists were overlooked. It is startling that in some premier laboratories there were no dedicated restroom facilities for women, not decades ago, but until recent years.

The situation is equally challenging for women at the earliest stages of their research careers. Many male scientists hesitate to take women students, particularly married scholars, fearing maternity leave and perceived "interruptions" to research timelines.

Motherhood is thus treated as a professional liability rather than a social responsibility that achievement is especially significant given the support. Ironically, such prejudices persist even in environments that pride themselves on rationality and evidence-based thinking. As National Science Day 2026 is observed, the theme must serve as more than a ceremonial slogan. It should prompt institutions, policymakers, and the scientific community to confront uncomfortable realities alongside celebrating success stories. Recognising women in science cannot be limited to awards and anniversaries; it must involve sustained efforts to remove structural bias, ensure dignity at the workplace, and create systems where merit is not filtered through gendered expectations.

(Dr Biju Dharmapalan is the Dean - Academic Affairs, Garden City University, Bengaluru)

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COURT REBUKE EXPOSES FLAWED INVESTIGATION

Court Rebuke Exposes Flawed Investigation: In the bribery case linked to the alleged liquor policy scam, the Central Bureau of Investigation's claim of a 12 per cent wholesale profit margin was dismissed by the court as erroneous, economically unsound and legally untenable. The Rouse Avenue Special Court observed that criminal liability cannot be constructed by stitching together disparate allegations based on assumptions rather than evidence.

Accordingly, 23 accused, including former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and former Education Minister Manish Sisodia, were acquitted. The court also criticised the CBI for venturing into auditing election expenditure - a function reserved exclusively for the Election Commission. In the absence of

concrete proof, the court ordered departmental action against investigating officers for wrongly implicating public officials.

The judgment concluded that the case lacked a factual foundation capable of surviving judicial scrutiny.

Yet the political ramifications had already reshaped Delhi's landscape. The episode has intensified scrutiny of investigative agencies such as the CBI and ED, raising concerns about their autonomy and credibility in politically sensitive matters. The verdict underscores the primacy of evidence over assumption and calls for safeguarding institutional integrity to restore public trust in the justice system and democratic accountability.

DATTAPRASAD SHRODDHAR | MUMBAI

Grave escalation demands restraint

The reported targeted killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, by U.S. and Israeli forces, if true, represents a deeply troubling escalation. The extrajudicial elimination of a sovereign head of state would mark a serious breach of international norms and diplomatic conventions that underpin global order.

Regardless of political differences, sovereignty and established legal frameworks cannot be discarded in favour of military action. Such steps risk normalising force over dialogue and could trigger retaliatory violence, destabilising an already volatile region.

History shows that cycles of vengeance only deepen conflict and suffering. At this critical juncture, responsible nations must call for immediate de-escalation and a return to diplomatic engagement.

The international community cannot remain silent if foundational principles of international law are undermined.

Preventing further bloodshed and containing the conflict requires urgent restraint, dialogue and adherence to global norms before the crisis spirals into a wider conflagration.

VJAYAKUMAR H K | RAICHUR

Rising tensions threaten global stability

The escalating conflict involving the United States, Israel and Iran has taken a deeply alarming turn. Reports that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has warned of grave consequences, even hinting at nuclear retaliation with possible backing from Russia, China and certain West Asian nations, underscore the dangerous trajectory of this crisis. Such developments risk pushing the world toward an unprecedented catastrophe, with devastating consequences for many nations, including India.

Global leadership demands restraint and foresight. Any action that heightens tensions without considering its long-term implications places humanity at risk.

Military adventurism and unilateral decisions cannot substitute for diplomacy. It is imperative that all parties step back from confrontation and engage in constructive dialogue.

The world cannot afford a slide into a wider war driven by brinkmanship and power politics. Leaders must prioritise peace, stability and collective security over aggressive posturing. Failure to do so would leave history to judge them harshly for the consequences that follow.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

A historic triumph for Jammu and Kashmir

A Historic Triumph for Jammu & Kashmir: No praise can suffice for Jammu & Kashmir's remarkable maiden Ranji Trophy triumph over Karnataka, secured through a commanding first-innings lead of 291 runs. The victory marks a watershed moment in the region's 67-year cricketing history.

Led by the inspiring Paras Dogra and powered by Aaquib Nabi's exceptional tally of 60 wickets - the highest in the tournament - the team also benefited from steady contributions by Shubham Pundir, Abdul Samad, Qamarul Iqbal and others. Their achievement is especially significant given the region's limited representation in national cricket, barring rare standouts like Parvez Rasool and Umran Malik.

At a time when Jammu & Kashmir often makes headlines for regional and communal divides, this united team has demonstrated the power of shared purpose beyond religious, ethnic or geographic differences.

Their success mirrors underdog triumphs such as Leicester City's 2015-16 Premier League win and Aizawl FC's 2016-17 League title - a testament to belief, resilience and collective spirit.

KAJAL CHATTERJEE | KOLKATA



The new grammar of fiscal federalism

By recalibrating distribution criteria, tightening fiscal expectations, and linking devolution more closely to performance, the Commission signals a gradual movement away from a purely redistributive framework toward one that rewards growth, discipline and governance capacity

FIRST Column



PRAVIN KUMAR SINGH

India's Finance Commissions are often viewed as technical exercises in tax sharing. Yet they are far more than accounting mechanisms. Every Commission reflects a deeper constitutional conversation about equity, efficiency, and the evolving balance between the Union and the states. The 16th Finance Commission (FC), whose recommendations cover the period 2026-31, is no exception. While the headline number, retaining states' share in central taxes at 41 per cent, suggests continuity, the report signals a subtle but important recalibration in India's fiscal federalism.

The real significance of the 16th FC lies not in dramatic structural changes but in the quiet rewriting of incentives. The Commission appears to move India away from a purely redistribution-centric model toward a framework that simultaneously rewards economic contribution, fiscal discipline, and governance performance. This shift, if interpreted correctly, may define the next phase of cooperative federalism.

Stability masking structural change

At first glance, the Commission appears cautious. The continuation of the 41 per cent share for states in the divisible pool of taxes maintains predictability and avoids reopening contentious debates between the Centre and states. Yet fiscal federalism is shaped less by aggregate shares than by the criteria through which those shares are distributed. Here, the 16th FC introduces notable changes. The weight assigned to income distance, the principal equalisation parameter, has been reduced, while a new weight has been given to states' contribution to national GDP. This seemingly technical adjustment marks a conceptual shift in incentives. Finance Commissions emphasised horizontal equity, ensuring that poorer states received greater support to provide comparable public services. By introducing a GDP contribution parameter, the new formula incorporates an efficiency-oriented logic: states that drive economic growth are also recognised in the distribution mechanism. In effect, India's fiscal framework is gradually evolving from pure equalisation toward incentive-compatible federalism.



THE 16TH FINANCE COMMISSION DOES NOT RADICALLY REDRAW INDIA'S FISCAL ARCHITECTURE. INSTEAD, IT QUIETLY ALTERS ITS GRAMMAR

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Equity versus efficiency

The tension between redistribution and growth incentives has always defined fiscal federalism. Too much emphasis on equity risks weakening incentives for revenue mobilisation and economic expansion; too much emphasis on efficiency can widen regional disparities. The 16th FC attempts to walk this tightrope. Income distance remains the largest criterion, ensuring continued support for lower-income states. At the same time, recognising GDP contribution acknowledges that high-growth states sustain national revenue capacity.

This dual approach reflects a maturing federal economy. India today is no longer a uniformly low-income federation. States differ sharply in demographic profiles, industrialisation levels, and governance capacity. A transfer formula designed for a more homogeneous economy may no longer serve emerging realities. The Commission's recalibration implicitly recognises this structural transformation.

However, the shift also raises important political economy questions. Will richer states view this as long-awaited recognition, or merely a modest correction? Will poorer states perceive it as a dilution of redistributive justice? The durability of the new formula will depend less on its mathematics and more on the political trust underpinning federal negotiations.

Demography and the politics of population

One of the most sensitive areas of previous Finance Commissions has been the use of population as a criterion. The 16th FC revises the demographic performance parameter, moving from fertility-rate based measurement to population growth between 1971 and 2011. This change is more than methodological. It represents an attempt to balance competing narratives: states that successfully controlled population growth seek recognition for responsible policy choices, while states experiencing higher growth argue that fiscal needs follow demographic reality.

By shifting the metric, the Commission tries to depoliticise the debate. Yet demography remains deeply embedded in India's federal politics. The question of whether fiscal transfers should reward past policy success or respond to present expenditure needs is unlikely to disappear. The new formula postpones rather than resolves this tension.

The end of fiscal cushioning

Perhaps the most under-discussed aspect of the report is what it removes. The Commission discontinues revenue deficit grants, sector-specific grants, and state-specific grants that were part of the previous framework. This signals a philosophical shift.

Earlier Commissions often acted as fiscal shock absorbers, cushioning states with persistent deficits. The new approach appears to favour harder budget constraints, nudging states toward fiscal self-reliance rather than continued dependence on compensatory transfers. In public finance theory, this reflects a movement away from "soft budget constraints," where subnational governments expect rescue, toward a system where fiscal responsibility becomes a structural expectation. For states, this implies greater pressure to expand their own revenue base, rationalise expenditure, and improve efficiency.

Decentralisation with conditions

The Commission's recommendations for local bodies further illustrate its governance-oriented approach. Significant grants are allocated to rural and urban local governments, but access is conditional upon institutional reforms such as timely accounts publication and functioning State Finance Commissions. Performance-linked grants and targeted components, such as urban infrastructure and wastewater management, suggest that devolution is increasingly tied to outcomes rather than entitlement. This is a notable evolution from earlier phases where transfers were primarily formula-driven and less conditional. In essence, the Commission recognises that fiscal decentralisation without administrative

capacity risks inefficiency. The emphasis is now on accountable decentralisation.

Fiscal discipline as constitutional signalling

Beyond transfers, the 16th FC offers a clear fiscal roadmap. It recommends bringing the Centre's fiscal deficit down to 3.5 per cent of GDP by 2030-31, maintaining a 3 per cent deficit limit for states, and crucially ending the practice of off-budget borrowings by bringing them onto formal balance sheets.

This may prove to be one of the most consequential recommendations. Off-budget liabilities have increasingly blurred the true fiscal position of governments. By advocating uniform accounting and transparency, the Commission seeks to restore credibility to fiscal metrics. Seen in historical perspective, this could represent India's second-generation fiscal reform after the FRBM framework, an attempt to institutionalise transparency alongside discipline.

The emerging federal compact

Taken together, the report reflects a broader transformation in India's federal compact. The message is clear: redistribution will continue, but it will coexist with incentives for growth, transparency, and fiscal prudence. States are expected not merely to receive transfers but to demonstrate governance capacity and economic contribution. This shift mirrors global trends in intergovernmental fiscal design, where transfers increasingly reward performance rather than merely compensate for structural disadvantages. Yet India's diversity makes such transitions politically delicate. Federalism here is as much about negotiation as it is about formulae. The 16th Finance Commission does not radically redraw India's fiscal architecture. Instead, it quietly alters its grammar. By retaining aggregate stability while modifying incentives, it signals a gradual transition toward a more performance-oriented federal system. Whether this evolution strengthens cooperative federalism or deepens inter-state contestation will depend on implementation and political consensus. Fiscal formulas alone cannot sustain federal harmony; they require trust, transparency, and shared developmental purpose.

What the Commission ultimately offers is a constitutional nudge, urging India's states to move from a paradigm of entitlement toward one of responsibility and growth. The success of this shift will shape not just fiscal outcomes, but the future character of India's Union itself.

Jamsetji Tata and the power of purpose



RAJESH SETH

On March 3, as India marks the birth anniversary of Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, it is worth reflecting on a question that remains strikingly relevant more than 150 years after he laid the foundations of the Tata enterprise: Why do some companies endure for generations, while others fade despite early success?

Jamsetji Tata did not build businesses merely to manufacture goods or generate profit. He believed enterprise was a means to strengthen the nation, advance science and education, and improve the lives of people. That belief—a deeply held sense of purpose—continues to shape the Tata Group more than a century later. It also offers a powerful lens through which to understand corporate longevity.

Purpose is often spoken of today, but rarely with clarity. In his book *Deep Purpose*, Harvard Business School professor Ranjay Gulati argues that purpose, when genuinely embedded, becomes an organization's operating system—guiding decisions, shaping culture, and sustaining performance over time. Larry Fink, co-founder, Chairman and CEO of BlackRock, reinforces this idea, noting that purpose must act as both a strategic compass and a guide for everyday behaviour, not a symbolic slogan.

It helps to distinguish between three layers of purpose, a distinction that is often blurred but critically important. At the most basic level is the functional purpose. This is operational in nature and answers the question: How do we run the business efficiently? It focuses on processes, productivity, and execution. Every organization needs this layer, but on its own it rarely inspires loyalty or longevity.

The second layer is strategic purpose, which supports competitive advantage and medium-term goals. It aligns teams, strengthens brands, and builds customer trust. Strategic purpose asks: How do we create and sustain advantage? Many successful companies operate effectively at this level, yet it remains largely instrumental.

The deepest layer is core purpose—the organization's raison d'être. It is enduring, values-driven, and largely stable over time. Core purpose answers the fundamental question: Why should we exist at all? For Jamsetji Tata, that answer lay in using enterprise to advance national self-reliance, scientific capability, and social progress—not merely commercial success. It shapes culture, ethics, leadership behaviour, and an organization's responsibility to society.



Crucially, it guides decision-making in moments of crisis and transition.

This layered view helps explain why some business groups endure for decades—sometimes over a century—while others struggle to survive leadership transitions or environmental shocks. Functional and strategic purposes can deliver performance; only core purpose delivers permanence.

This idea of purpose-driven endurance is not confined to an earlier era or to Indian enterprises alone. Contemporary examples from global business echo the same logic. The American outdoor apparel company Patagonia, for instance, has explicitly placed environmental stewardship at the heart of its existence, declaring that "Earth is now our only shareholder." Founder Yvon Chouinard embedded this belief not merely in brand messaging but in ownership structure and governance, ensuring that the company's profits are channelled toward environmental causes. Patagonia's success demonstrates that when purpose is treated as a governing principle rather than a marketing slogan, it can guide strategy, shape culture, and sustain relevance even in intensely competitive markets.

Jamsetji Tata's life offers a compelling illustration. He did not establish textile mills in Nagpur merely to manufacture cloth. Beyond demonstrating Indian industrial capability and promoting self-reliance, he pioneered organized worker welfare—introducing provident fund-like schemes, along with measures such as gratuity and accident compensation, long before these became the norm. Business success and social responsibility were inseparable in his worldview.

His commitment to nation-building extended well beyond industry. Believing education to be the foundation of progress, he established the J N Tata Endowment in 1892 to support "the best and the most gifted" Indian students for higher studies overseas. Since then, the Endowment has supported more than 5,700 scholars, including former Presidents K.R. Narayanan and renowned astrophysicist Jayant V. Narlikar.

Jamsetji's vision for scientific advancement was equally bold. In 1893, during a chance meeting with Swami Vivekananda aboard SS Empress of India from Yokohama to Vancouver, he discussed his dream of establishing a research university. He later pursued this idea with Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India. Jamsetji did not live to see its fruition, but in 1909—five years after his death—the Indian Institute of Science was established in Bangalore, fulfilling one of his most enduring aspirations.

Other Indian business founders articulated similar deep purposes. Ghanashyam Das Birla, influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of trusteeship, viewed wealth as a social trust. His enterprises aimed to develop sector-specific grants, generate employment, and help build an independent India free from poverty and disease.

The Godrej family's business philosophy was grounded in equally firm beliefs: that business must serve society, ethics are non-negotiable, national self-reliance is a moral obligation, and wealth carries responsibility rather than entitlement.

It is therefore no coincidence that groups such as Tata, Birla, and Godrej—operating across different industries and eras—have endured for over a century. Nor is it accidental that other long-lived Indian groups such as the JK Organisation, the Kirloskar Group, the Murugappa Group, the TVS Group, and the Wadia Group were founded on a shared conviction that enterprise is a form of stewardship. They did not merely pursue profit; they pursued purpose.

Globally, the pattern is similar. The longest-surviving companies—including Brailex, Coca-Cola, DuPont, HSB, Mitsubishi, Nestlé, Procter & Gamble, Siemens, Toyota and Unilever—tend to share three characteristics: a core purpose beyond profit, an ability to adapt strategy without losing identity, and strong institutional values transmitted across generations.

In the long run, deep purpose is not a slogan; it is the most reliable multiplier of organisational longevity. Companies that define their purpose beyond profit do more than just survive—they become institutions.

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Protecting the living heritage



ANJALI PATHAK

Every year on March 3, World Wildlife Day is celebrated by wildlife enthusiasts and nature lovers with much fanfare. It is indeed a day to ponder over how we can conserve the wildlife for posterity. Given that that hundreds and thousands of species have become extinct, and many more are on the way to becoming extinct, it is proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2013, the date commemorates the signing of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1973. It is both an occasion to honour the planet's extraordinary biodiversity and a moment to reflect on our shared responsibility to protect it.

Wildlife sustains life in both visible and invisible ways. Forests regulate climate and replenish the air. But deforestation, habitat fragmentation, poaching, pollution, unsustainable consumption and climate change are accelerating species loss at an alarming pace. Global assessments warn that nearly one million species face the threat of extinction in the coming decades. World Wildlife Day is a warning bell echoing across continents. India's situation reflects both urgency and hope. Despite occupying only 2.4 per cent of the world's land area, India hosts nearly 8 per cent of global biodiversity, a remarkable concentration of life. From Himalayan ecosystems to coastal mangroves, from arid grasslands to tropical rainforests, the country's ecological wealth is immense. The landmark Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 laid the legal groundwork for conservation, establishing protected areas and safeguarding endangered species. Over the decades, India has expanded its network of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and biosphere reserves, with more than 5 per cent of its geographical area now under protected status. Among India's most celebrated conservation efforts is Project Tiger, launched in 1973 as one of the most successful projects. India today has over 3,000 tigers—nearly 75 per cent of the global tiger population. Project Elephant, focused on securing elephant corridors and mitigating human-elephant conflict. Yet challenges remain formidable. As human settlements expand and infrastructure projects multiply, forests shrink and wildlife corridors fragment. Human-wildlife conflict has intensified, particularly in ecologically fragile regions such as the Sundarbans, where the delicate coexistence between the Royal Bengal tiger and local communities is under severe strain. Climate change compounds these vulnerabilities, threatening coastal mangroves and Himalayan habitats alike. Wildlife



tourism adds another complex dimension. When conducted responsibly, eco-tourism can generate livelihoods and foster conservation awareness. However, unregulated safaris, intrusive construction of resorts, excessive noise and artificial lighting can disturb animal behaviour and degrade habitats. It is not to suggest to prohibit tourism, but to align it with ecological sensitivity. Community-based models offer a way forward. The wildlife tourism adds yet another layer to wildlife protection. Often, wildlife safaris do not conform to the standard protocols and become a menace to the wild life. Besides the construction of guest houses, lodges and resorts often become scary for the animals. Loud music and bright colours distract the animal and change their behaviour. It is not to suggest that wildlife tourism should be banned but we have to chalk out a policy in which the interests of tourists and well as animals, are kept in mind. Through various efforts have been made in the country.

For instance, in the Gir Forest, Laurent Guiraud, the brain behind Woods at Sasam experimented

with a regenerative tourism model that goes beyond sustainability to actively restore the local ecosystem. Drawing on traditional ecological knowledge, the biophilic design uses local stone, bamboo and wood, and a developing food forest that mimics a natural woodland system. With floor-to-ceiling windows blending into the landscape near Gir National Park, the resort emphasises harmony with nature. "We have drawn heavily from the local population and experience as they are the keepers of this place who have a wealth of knowledge about the forest and wildlife around and are committed to preserving it which is sustainable and rewarding," says

Culturally, wildlife is woven into civilisational memory and spiritual symbolism. In India, the tiger, elephant and peacock are not merely species; they are emblems of identity and heritage. Local communities must be recognised as stakeholders and partners, not passive observers. Conservation is not a choice between development and environment—it is the only credible path to sustainable development.

The writer, a wildlife conservationist is consultant for sustainable wildlife projects

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The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India - founded 1818

Decapitation Gamble

The killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a joint US-Israeli strike marks the most dramatic escalation in West Asian conflict in decades. For nearly four decades, Khamenei was not merely Iran's head of state but the embodiment of the Islamic Republic's ideological core.

There is also the legal and diplomatic dimension. Targeted killing of a sitting head of state during peacetime - absent a formal declaration of war - will ignite fierce debate over international law, an aspect that has never unduly concerned President Trump.

For Washington, the gamble is that removing Khamenei weakens Iran's strategic coherence and accelerates internal fracture. For Tehran's surviving leadership, the imperative is to demonstrate resilience and deterrence without triggering overwhelming retaliation.

This is no longer about centrifuges or enrichment thresholds. It is about whether West Asia is entering a short, violent spasm - or the opening chapter of a broader regional war.

Ballots after bullets

On 5 March, nearly 19 million citizens of Nepal will vote to choose a new House of Representatives. The campaign rhetoric is full of promises - clean governance, jobs for the young, a reset for a restless republic.

The general election comes barely five months after police opened fire on anti-corruption protesters near parliament, killing 19 people in a single day. The collapse of the government led by KP Sharma Oli followed within hours.

Among those killed was 17-year-old Shreyam Chaulagain, shot while moving away from the confrontation, still in his school uniform. His death has come to symbolise something larger than a single tragedy.

It represents the point at which public distrust hardened into fury - fuelling the unrest that brought down a government and forced the country back to the polls. The scale of the September unrest - 77 deaths in total over two days, torched police stations, and the army deployed onto the streets of the capital - underscores how quickly institutional miscalculation can spiral into national trauma.

The BNP's victory

Bangladesh has proved that its unity is not merely tribal but like India, symbolic of unity in diversity. One reason for the youth not performing well was the general perception that Gen Z is not prepared to play long-term principled politics.



gets largely negated by 59 per cent voting which is enough to make the present regime legitimate. The Awami League's call for a boycott proved to be its second defeat.

wishes to restrict women to the domestic sphere, primarily child-bearing responsibilities - an anathema to educated middle class and self-reliant women who have savoured economic and social freedom because of rapid expansion of textile and pharmaceutical sectors and the extensive work done by Gramscian Bank.

whom won. The new parliament will not be very different from the old ones with many familiar faces, insignificant numbers of youth, and only seven women, six of them from BNP. During voting there were few charges of manipulation or malpractice. It is expected that all parties would accept the results.

Mohammad Yunus formed the interim government after the July 2024 revolution and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's escape to India. He had three important functions to perform: (1) to suggest reforms of the existing constitution, (2) trial of the guilty and (3) holding elections. It is to his credit that elections were held within 18 months.

The impressive victory of BNP defies the media projection of the Jamaat coalition gaining power or even projection of a hung parliament. Social media, mainly Facebook, used disruptive methods extensively to propagate against the BNP.

The BNP's historic comeback was earned and not given. BNP suffered immensely during the last two decades but the organization remained intact. Khaleda's decision to stay on, and suffer humiliation and suffering made her more popular.

The election was conducted peacefully with both the law administering authorities and the army playing a significant role in maintaining law and order through quick action against miscreants. They worked as a team efficiently and responsibly.

The election had positive implications for all the sections of the population and even in the stronghold of the Awami League, Gopalganj, 43 per cent voted. Tarique Rahman by his moderation, even hinting that Awami League in future would function as a normal political party, and his quick action in expelling 7000 members of BNP for extortion proved he is a man of action.

However, BNP's performance would have been more impressive had it not been for rebel candidates in the fray, triangular contests that allowed Jamaat to win with narrow margins and the eclipse of Ershad's Jatya party in North Bengal. The latter, a supporter of Hasina, was wiped out without any meaningful presence.

The NCP became a pivot following the July Revolution but was an eventual loser. It used novel tactics of social media and enjoyed substantive government support but the fatal mistake was its alignment with the Jamaat. It was short sighted and, in a hurry, it lost the opportunity of filling the vacuum created by the exit of the Awami League.

Whether participation of Awami League in the election would be preferable or not was a moot point because the party's top brass was either in exile in India or elsewhere, a large number were in jail and many were underground. It was in a dysfunctional state and its offices were shut.

Many analysts attribute the election as a victory of the Jamaat as its representation rose from a paltry 3 in 1996 to 70 in 2026. Jamaat is at the opposite pole of the BNP. Despite having well-organized, efficient, and dedicated cadre it exists at the fringe. The absence of the Awami League and the events of July 2024 propelled it to play an important role, though purely situational and transitional.



SUBRATA MUKHERJEE The writer is a retired Professor of Political Science, University of Delhi

CHINADAILY

How AI keeps creativity short and animated

It has become clear that artificial intelligence isn't just automating tasks - it's democratizing creativity. In China, AI-powered animated shorts are doing for content what the printing press once did for ideas: opening a new frontier where anyone can create, share and, potentially, go viral.

scripts into works with higher visual fidelity and smoother motion. By 2025, AI animated shorts had become the dominant force in the short-form animation space. Douyin alone reported over 75.7 billion cumulative views of more than 30,000 titles, while platforms worldwide established dedicated hubs for these productions.

co-launched by RedNote and the FIRST Fantastic Film Festival, was produced by a team of just 20 people. They combined seven days of live-action shooting with two weeks of AI scene enhancement and style testing, drastically reducing both cost and time compared with traditional methods.

Since 2024, creators have leveraged AI to transform novels, comic IPs or original

content: Greedy Snake, an AI short drama

after a lapse of enormous time, they turn out to be false and most of them are acquitted for want of evidence.

Restored

Sir, The recent 4K restoration of Aranyer Din Ratri (Days and Nights in the Forest) has brought Satyajit Ray's 1970 classic back into global circulation, reaffirming its stature within the canon of world cinema.

presence rather than a passive backdrop. As the film plays to renewed audiences from Kolkata to New York, its resonance lies not in nostalgia but in recognition.

after a lapse of enormous time, they turn out to be false and most of them are acquitted for want of evidence. The timing of these agencies' actions gives us more reason to believe they are subjugated. The nation expects them to be loyal to the Constitution.

Now candidates promise reform. They speak of tackling corruption, generating employment, and restoring stability. Yet stability imposed without accountability is brittle. If voters are to believe that March 5 marks renewal rather than reset, they will need more than manifestos. They will need credible answers about who gave the order, under whose authority, and why. A republic proves itself not by avoiding crisis, but by responding to it lawfully.

False cases

Sir, The CBI court acquitting those implicated in the excise policy case of the erstwhile government in Delhi should sensitise all those who are involved. The entire country is witnessing central agencies like CBI and ED, which have supposed to function impartially, stating selective targets, who are mostly the political rivals of the ruling party, lodging them in prisons to cause damage to their image and mar their political career.

Tasteless

Sir, The shrillness demonstrated by Congress workers at Bharat Mandapam - the AI global summit venue - was tasteless. They were protesting over issues like the India-US 'Pax Silica' trade deal, possible data compromise of Indian citizens, showcasing of Chinese products and technologies at the summit despite the professed claim of 'Make in India', the reference to a Union Minister in the Epstein files and the looming spectre of youth unemployment with the advent of AI. No doubt, an opposition party has the right to criticise and demonstrate

potent. And yet, the supply remains insufficient. The demand from young audiences is massive, but the market has barely scratched the surface. The AI-generated hit has made the role of 'creator' accessible to anyone with an idea. Individual life moments, imagined worlds, or personal interpretations of reality can now be visualized in days instead of months.

Notably, even Congress allies like the leaders of Samajwadi Party and RJD have expressed the view that the grievances of the demonstrators may be valid, the semi-nude method at an international summit was "inappropriate", bringing shame to the country. One hopes, instead of defending the indefensible, the Congress party leadership expresses regret over the unseemly spectacle, which must have been staged with its approval.

Yours, etc., V Jayaraman, Chennai, 23 February.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Nukes alone can deter Trump

HARSHA KAKAR

The United States and Israel launched coordinated air attacks on Iran. The build-up by the US, including moving two carrier groups into the region, alongside relocating dozens of aircraft from Europe to Israel, all at a cost of billions of dollars, was never intended solely for application of pressure. Talks were a formality and aimed at enabling the build-up to be complete.

President Trump had hinted at striking Iran for some time. His hatred for the regime stems from the incident when Iranian rebels seized the US embassy and held its 52 staff members captive from November 1979 to January 1981. An added cause for his dislike has been Hamas's actions of 7 October 2023, armed and backed by Iran. Tehran was also aware that the US would strike and had prepared accordingly, though it hoped dialogue would find a solution. In all likelihood, initial strikes were launched based on intelligence inputs that a meeting of the top hierarchy was taking place, hoping for immediate success and it worked. It is always the first strike which is most effective.

Trump termed the operation as 'Epic Fury' and Israel as 'Lion's Roar', implying both had different objectives, though they operated in sync. Netanyahu's objective was destruction of Iran's nuclear facilities while Trump sought regime change. Steve Witkoff, Trump's special envoy, mentioned last week that Iran was weeks away from developing nuclear weapons. This conveys that the much-hyped strike of June last

year, termed as 'Midnight Hammer', by the US had failed to achieve its objectives.

It is also possible that Trump was pushed to act as a condition for Netanyahu to accept his plan for Gaza. Netanyahu must have demanded an end to the Iranian regime thereby stopping support for Hamas, securing Israel during the occupation of Gaza by the International Stabilization Force under Trump's proposed Board of Peace.

Logically the end state for both Israel and the US should have been similar. How they will ensure its achievement is to be seen. Neither nation has plans for placing boots on the ground. Trump hopes that Iran would go the Libyan way where airstrikes on military targets enabled the revolution to succeed, resulting in the overthrow of Gaddafi. This may not happen in Iran and instead there could be further brutality in case there is an uprising.

It has been confirmed that Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has been killed. Khamenei was aware that he was a target of the US and Israel and hence had established a multi-layered system of succession. Hence, hoping for a regime change by eliminating the hierarchy may not work, though degradation of oil assets, ports and other economic facilities would happen.

Israel's MOSSAD and the CIA have penetrated deep within Iran, armed and funded anti-regime groups, whom they now hope would rise. Whether these groups have the ability to overthrow a regime, which has crushed protests brutally, is to be seen.

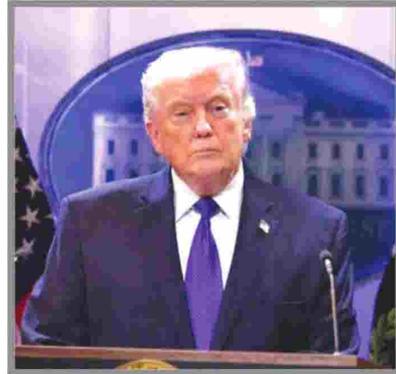
For the people of Iran neither overthrow of the current regime nor a pro-US regime in Tehran is

ideal. The country's economy, under the current regime and facing a host of sanctions, is at rock bottom. An uprising could make it worse. If the regime does survive, even with a change of guard, sanctions would continue. Destruction of its oil refineries and oil fields would only add to economic woes. If the uprising succeeds, it is unsure whether Iran would remain one state or be splintered like Iraq or Libya.

If a pro-US regime comes in, the US would extract its pound of flesh, demanding oil production be managed by US companies. This would not benefit the populace. Further, the US would place terms and conditions which may not be palatable to the populace at large. Venezuela is a prime example of the US behaving as a colonial power, albeit from a distance.

Iran in retaliation has struck the US's bases in the Middle East and Israel. It had already announced them as legitimate targets. There is bound to be collateral damage as its missiles lack accuracy. While Middle East nations had not permitted their bases to be used for targeting Iran, they did host US troops on their soil. Iran, which lacks capability to hit mainland US, targeted these bases.

Saudi Arabia was the first to criticize Iran's missile strikes on the Middle East. Though it had normalized ties with Tehran and also assured it that it would not permit its bases and airspace to be exploited for the strikes, it was reported that the Crown Prince called Washington multiple times requesting it to target Iran. It is now again an avowed Iranian enemy. In retaliation to Iranian strikes, Riyadh has announced support for Middle East nations. Iran's action, including targeting Qatar and Oman,



will divide the region for a long time.

Iran is aware that US strikes are unlikely to end soon. It will be some time before Trump announces culmination of the operation. Tehran has currently only retaliated with missiles. It has the ability to block the Straits of Hormuz, which dominates global oil movements. Whether it will also target Middle East oil infrastructure is unknown. Any of these actions would impact global oil prices.

For the US, which does not import oil from the Middle East, the impact would be less, while for the rest of the world, especially nations like India, there would be an economic cost. Most telling would be the impact on China which imports 15 per cent of its oil from Iran. This attack is also an indirect economic

war on China. The world is already facing communication woes with closure of Middle East air space and major airports.

The US action on Venezuela and now Iran suggest that weaker nations on Trump's hitlist are heading for regime change. Trump, who claimed to have stopped eight wars, and terms himself a man of peace, is busy pushing regime change. Cuba is possibly his next target. Whether this would be done militarily or through economic coercion is unknown. The only nation which will remain untouched is North Korea because it possesses nuclear weapons. The secret to survival from US-pushed regime change is to possess nuclear weapons.

(The writer is a retired Major-General of the Indian Army.)

100 Years Ago

News Items

FUTURE OF THE COUNCIL FREEDOM AT GENEVA

LONDON, MAR. ADDRESSING the League of Nations' Parliamentary Committee, which re-cently unanimously passed a resolution urging the Government strenuously to oppose the proposal to make fundamental changes in the constitution of the Council of the League, Sir Austen Chamberlain reiterated that the Government had not yet decided on the course to adopt. He declared that there was a real case for the consideration of the composition of the Council, and the demand that the practice of re-electing non-permanent members year after year should be abandoned, was growing. He immovably opposed the suggestion that any State should be brought on the Council as a counterpoise to Germany, but there was sound argument for increasing the permanent membership, since under the Locarno Agreement possibly Germany and all the present permanent members except Japan would be regarded as interested parties, and would therefore be unable to vote if a dispute under the Locarno Treaty was submitted to the Council.

FRENCH DEBT TO BRITAIN EARLY RENEWAL OF NEGOTIATIONS

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.) RUGBY, MAR. IT is expected that the French Finance Minister, M. Doumer, will come to London next week to take negotiations with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Auston Churchill, regarding France's war debt to Great Britain. The provisional agreement reached in last year's discussions between M. Caillaux and Mr. Churchill was on the basis of an average annual payment of 12.5 million pounds. Replying to a question on the French debt in the Commons, last Thursday, Mr. Churchill said the British Government regarded the bargain made with M. Caillaux as binding on both parties.

WORLD LABOUR INDIA'S REPRESENTATIVE AT GENEVA

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.) RUGBY, MAR. LORD WINTERTON, Under-Secretary for India, announced to-day that it was the intention of the Government of India to nominate an Indian to represent India at the eighth and ninth sessions of the International Labour Conference, at Geneva, on May 26 and June 9.

ARMY AIRMEN'S DELHI TRYING JOURNEY TO CHAHBAR

Three big air flights are now in progress, and the attempt of Flight-Lieut. John Oliver, A. F. C. to reach Croydon from Karachi in five flying days has created much interest. Lieut. Oliver, who is accompanied by Flying-Officer Brooks, left Karachi on Monday, and a special cable to the Statesman announces the arrival of the airmen at Chahbar yesterday. They were delayed at Pasni, on Monday night following to petrol failure, and on resuming the flight yesterday encountered strong winds and sandstorms. The first stage of the 11,000 miles flight by the Royal Air Force to Cape-town has been completed by the safe arrival of the airmen at Assuan. On his return journey to England from the Cape Mr. Alar Cobham has been delayed in Rhodesia owing to tropical rains.

JAPANESE STRIKE MILL OPERATIVES KILL FOREMAN

SHANGHAI, MAR. A CRITICAL situation has arisen as the result of the strike of 3,400 employees of the Japanese Cotton Mills. The strikers attacked one of the mills and killed a Japanese foreman and damaged the plant. Indications point to the spread of trouble to other foreign mills. Foreign and Chinese police are co-operating in maintaining order.—Reuter.

SIMLA COOLIE CASE APPEAL FILED IN LAHORE HIGH COURT

LAHORE, MAR. AN appeal against the judgment of the Sessions Judge in the Mansel-Pleydell case, has been filed in the High Court here to-day by Rai Bahadur Moti Sagar, advocate on behalf of the accused. An application for bail, which was also put in to-day, will be headed by the Chief Justice to-morrow.

Naxal terror vanquished

TUHIN A. SINHA

3 March 1967. By any historical yardstick, the date carries weight. On this date, a peasant uprising in Naxalbari lit a fuse that burned through India's internal security landscape for nearly five decades. On 3 March 2026, that fuse is finally sputtering out, as it is set to be consigned to the flames of Holika Dahan. Forty-nine years on, India stands on the verge of eradicating Naxalism — not by drift or accident, but by the force of political will, clarity of doctrine, and relentless execution under PM Narendra Modi and HM Amit Shah.

This has been a long war — ideological, kinetic, and moral — waged across jungles and courtrooms alike. Its endgame tells a story of what happens when a state finally decides to call terror by its name. What began as an armed agrarian revolt transformed into a militant insurgency with a pan-Indian footprint by the late 1990s. The merger of extremist streams under the banner of CPI (Maoist) in 2004 created a vertically integrated terror apparatus — complete with area committees, people's militias, extortion networks, and propaganda wings. The Red Corridor expanded exponentially as governance retreated. Yet the decisive inflection point was not merely the insurgents' brutality. It was the state's ambivalence. The United Progressive Alliance years saw Naxalism peak in violence,

geography, and confidence. The toll is seared into memory. In April 2010, the Dantewada massacre wiped out 76 security personnel in a single ambush, exposing lethal gaps in intelligence and leadership. Three years later, in May 2013, the Darbha Valley attack in Chhattisgarh murdered senior Congress leaders and party workers, shattering the myth that appeasement buys immunity.

And yet, the response remained curiously constrained. The UPA refrained from defining Naxalism unequivocally as terror, preferring sociological euphemisms and fragmented remedies. When the Supreme Court terminated Salwa Judum in 2011 — however contentious the judgment — the Union government neither challenged its premise nor offered a robust replacement doctrine. The outcome was predictable: security forces were asked to fight with one hand tied, while the insurgents adapted, rearmed, and expanded.

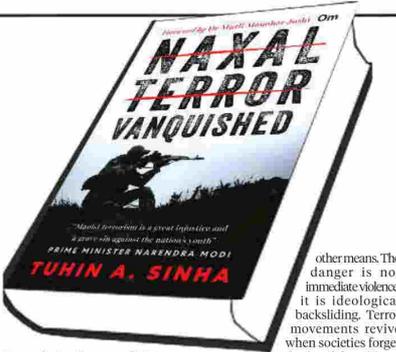
This was not restraint. It was abdication. A state uncertain of its own moral authority chafed initiative to men with guns and manifests. Everything changed after 2014. The Modi government re-anchored internal security around three non-negotiables: clear political backing, unified command, and relentless follow-through. Under Amit Shah, the Ministry of Home Affairs moved from episodic responses to a theatre-wide strategy — combining intelligence fusion, area domination,

infrastructure push, and surrender-cum-rehabilitation policies.

The results are not abstract. They are measurable. Districts once written off as "liberated zones" saw roads, towers, banks, and polling booths return. Cadres splintered. Leadership ranks thinned. A series of high-impact operations decapitated the movement's operational core — most notably the elimination of dreaded field commanders and the steady unravelling of logistics networks. Reports through 2025 pointed to the neutralisation of top commanders, including the much-feared Hiden and high-profile surrenders led by Devuki, signalling not just battlefield success but ideological fatigue within the ranks.

Most crucially, the government set a deadline. HM Shah's declaration of 31 March 2026 as the outer limit for ending Naxal terror injected urgency. Welfare delivery followed armed control, not the other way around. Developmental projects were initiated diligently. Tribal rights were mainstreamed without romanticising violence. The state re-entered spaces it had long abandoned.

This is why today's assessment is sober, not triumphalist. Naxalism is not being "managed", it is being eradicated. Yet history warns against premature closure. As the jungle network collapses, a subtler challenge persists — the Urban Naxal mindset that launders violence through vocabulary. It is a politics that condemns the state reflexively, rationalises insurgent coercion, and litigates away the moral clarity required to fight terror. Recent political signalling has sharpened this concern. The opposition's choices — projecting figures associated with the legal dismantling of Salwa Judum, including former Supreme Court Judge Sudarshan Reddy, and elevating lawyers like Menaka Guruswamy, who fought the case against Salwa Judum — are read by many as more than coincidence. They suggest a continuing soft corner for a worldview that treats armed revolution as grievance politics by



is not being "managed", it is being eradicated.

On this March 3, the arc from Naxalbari to near-eradication offers a hard lesson. Insurgencies do not die from analysis; they die from resolve. India's experience shows that when the state is confident, the Constitution firm, and policies aligned with security, even a five-decade-old terror movement can be brought to heel. The full credit for the successful vanquishment of Naxal Terror should go to PM Modi and HM Shah who have shown they are exemplary "finishers" in India's politics. From abrogation of Article 370 to Operation Sindoor to ending Naxalism, their actions do the talking. Forty-nine years after it first reared its ugly head, Naxal terror stands vanquished today not by chance, but by choice.

other means. The danger is not immediate violence. It is ideological backsliding. Terror movements revive when societies forget why they defeated them.

When societies forget why they defeated them, they are more likely to relapse. The full credit for the successful vanquishment of Naxal Terror should go to PM Modi and HM Shah who have shown they are exemplary "finishers" in India's politics.

From abrogation of Article 370 to Operation Sindoor to ending Naxalism, their actions do the talking. Forty-nine years after it first reared its ugly head, Naxal terror stands vanquished today not by chance, but by choice.

(The writer is a national spokesperson of BJP, besides being an acclaimed author.)

Crossword | No. 293393

Crossword puzzle grid with 'Yesterday's Solution' and clues for Across and Down.

Crossword clues and solutions for Across and Down.

In AI Race, Ethics Collateral Damage?

Anthropic case could be lighthouse ruling

Should AI be allowed to power killer robots? Anthropic, which has developed software that can be used to target weapons autonomously, thinks it should not. Pentagon, which has contracted the San Francisco-headquartered AI company to work with classified data, thinks it should. Trump has sent Anthropic packing, threatening to place it in the same national security risk bucket as Chinese tech major Huawei. His argument is that law, not company morals, will dictate how the US prosecutes its wars. Pentagon used Anthropic's code during the latest Iran strike, even as US Department of Defense negotiated more acceptable terms with Anthropic's rival OpenAI. Anthropic says it will sue.

There is a troubling ethical dimension to the development. Typically, lawmakers get to decide the limits of technology development, or its dispersal. But the law is still some way behind AI's development. The ethical burden, thus, must be shared by producers and consumers until voters decide on the matter. This was how human cloning for reproductive purposes was halted long before it was widely banned. Tech companies share reservations over AI safeguards.

But these may not withstand the competitive intensity of strong investor interest. So, there may be a case for allowing the law to catch up with AI.

The US approach to regulating AI has been through a conversation with technology creators. Any ethical concerns emerging from the other side of the table acquire special emphasis in dialogue-based rule-setting. Unlike earlier technology developments, the state has a diminished role in the evolution of AI. Tech creators must be comfortable with the products they are bringing to the market. They need to be sure automation can fulfil customer expectations. Hopefully, Anthropic will find a resolution to its moral dilemma in court. The incident is, of course, a chilling reminder of the intensity of the AI race, where ethics can very easily become collateral damage.

Two Middle Powers Give Stability a Shot

Against the raging backdrop of the US-Israel war against Iran, two 'confident middle' powers, Canada and India, have taken a big step to inject stability predictability and growth into their partnership. Signalling the closing of a chapter of strained bilateral ties, Mark Carney and Narendra Modi expanded ties to reinforce the idea of an international order that reflects the idea of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' — One Earth, One Family, One Future. This is not mere rhetoric, but in contradiction to the current trend of #MeFirst.

Starting with the bilateral, the leaders articulated a multi-pronged 360° engagement. This includes finalising Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), expected to double two-way trade to \$51 bn by 2030; strengthening the energy partnership with a \$1.9 bn uranium deal, enhancing LNG and LPG trade, and advancing critical minerals and tech partnerships. It also includes improving talent and people-to-people engagement, and fostering partnerships in AI and space and expanding defence cooperation.

Building economic strength at home and diversifying partnerships abroad have become the mantra, making securing of energy and critical mineral supply chains and finalisation of FTAs de rigeur. This is a response to the tailspin caused by Trump tariffs, upending of old alliances and erosion of assiduously built partnerships. Canada-India ties can provide a pathway for a rules-based order that can strengthen economic resilience, promote sustainable development and address global challenges. It can be a decisive step towards reinforced fit-for-purpose international order: Whether it succeeds, or ends up as a transactional engagement, will depend on how New Delhi and Ottawa engage in the coming years.



JUST IN JEST

Fear of exaggerating may make us take serious things unseriously

Under-Overplay, Not Over-Underplay

Most of us smart 'uns suffer from an interesting affliction: fear of being caught tomorrow of having exaggerated something that makes us underplay everything today. It could be war, WWVs or the end of the world. Just to not be caught looking like one of those doomsayers, we'll insist on saying, 'No, no, it'll quickly peter out,' or 'Pft. Let's not be paranoid and/or, please!' It's the rhetorical equivalent of wearing three sweaters in summer because you're worried winter might be chilly.

Instead of making a mountain out of a molehill like politicians, this group, by default, makes molehills out of Himalayan ranges. The result? Wading through knee-deep chafe while insisting as long as one isn't 'drowned by the actual deluge that it's all so very manageable.' The logic is kind of impeccable: if you underplay everything to avoid the shame of overplaying, you end up over-underplaying. It's like whispering 'fire' in a crowded theatre and then being shocked when everyone's burnt to cinders. Perhaps the solution is radical honesty: admit that sometimes things are catastrophic, sometimes they're trivial, and sometimes they're both. Until then, hone your skills to differentiate between what's not worth getting hysterical over; and what definitely is. You'll find it's wiser to under-overplay than to over-underplay.

CHAPATI Attacks on the region, drones aimed at Abu Dhabi & Dubai, are unsettling for India

OUR GULF OF GOOD HOPE



Ashok Malik

Almost exactly four years ago, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine began, New Delhi was frustrated, just as the world was starting to make slow recovery from the pandemic, as the Indian economy was hoping to build on a brave budget, the very glimpse of advance was blurred by a war nobody needed. In spring 2026, India, its prime minister, and its economic and foreign policy managers find themselves in a similar situation, indeed one even more fraught, in West Asia.

The conflict between the US-Israel and an enraged Iran is not a nest, Machiavellian. Neither does India have the luxury of pondering and delineating normative niceties. It finds itself in the here and now. A triaging of its foreign policy priorities and strategic imperatives is inevitable.

New Delhi's immediate concern will be the spreading of conflict to Gulf states. With some 10 million Indians living there, this region is an extension of India's strategic geography. At stake are not merely golden visas and HNIs buying second homes in Dubai. From agriculture to energy supply chains run back and forth. The region is a growing market for India.

To take an example, Indian exports to Saudi Arabia were at about \$1 bn in 2020, but are touching \$12 bn by 25 yrs. Countries such as the UAE and Oman are among India's closest friends. Abu Dhabi is perhaps the West Asian capital city — even global



Smoke on the water: Jebel Ali port, Dubai, after Iranian strike on Sunday

capital city — with which New Delhi coordinates most.

From financial flows and inbound investments to sales targets for Indian manufacturing, Gulf Arab countries are crucial to India's expansion and neighbourhood. The UAE, where Indian guest workers are present across the value chain — construction site to e-silica — is intrinsic to India's 'Think West' thrust.

Attacks on the region, and the idea of drones aimed at Abu Dhabi and Dubai, are certain to unsettle India. This is not a matter of smugging Iran, or not being mindful of its emotions. It is simply fear that India's friends and the Indian people's international concerns.

At stake are not merely golden visas and HNIs buying second homes in Dubai. From agriculture to energy, supply chains run back and forth. The region is a growing market for India.

ests could become collateral damage. Since 2014, India's building of relations with modernising Arab monarchies has been given a new energy by Gol. It's one of Modi's signature successes. Yet, this built on foundations that already indicated a national

in an age when US ability to play a traditional net security provider role is domestically constrained.

Hope was for a calibrated US recession. Dread of a sudden US recession. But a maverick, impetuous US posture poses a wholly different risk paradigm. When this crisis is over, India and its Arab partners will need to factor in that new reality. 'This week has been the Gulf's 'Europe moment' — its own wake-up call.

Where does that leave Iran? While New Delhi is not as strategically proximate to Tehran as it is to Abu Dhabi, India has always had a working relationship with Iran. It is, and will remain, part of India's regional strategy, requiring cooperation in intelligence and security, and in vicinal geographies such as Afghanistan and Central Asia. Remember, India's Covaxin vaccine was used in Iran. In perspective of the regime of the day, the average Indian's respect for Iran as a society and nation is of a very high order. This does shape perceptions.

Admittedly this is not something the average Washington policymaker will easily understand, or be able to reconcile. However, it does explain why, notwithstanding any bilateral differences, India cannot but see the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Islamic regime's top leadership as an egregious, reckless violation.

Having said that, India has always had misgivings about Iran's nuclear program and promotion of proxy militias and terror auxiliaries. In the USA years, on three occasions — in 2005, 2006 and 2009 — India voted against Iran at IAEA. A West Asian and geopolitical irrigating — more accurately a triaging between different sets of imperfect choices — was required to even back then. Why should it be different today, when India has so much more at stake in the region?

In 2005, 2006 and 2009 — India voted against Iran at IAEA. A West Asian and geopolitical irrigating — more accurately a triaging between different sets of imperfect choices — was required to even back then. Why should it be different today, when India has so much more at stake in the region?

The writer is partner, The Asia Group, and chair of its India practice



THE SPEAKING TREE

Colours Of Holi

KAMLESH TRIPATHI

Holi blossoms from the celestial love of Radha and Krishna. It celebrates love as boundless as the spring sky and as playful as the Yamuna in gentile tide. It is a festival where devotion and delight mingle, where laughter carries fragrance of faith, yet, beneath its riotous colours lies a profound spiritual remembrance of good over evil, eternal victory of righteousness over tyranny and of light encroaching darkness.

Holi arriving on the full moon of Purnima, when winter loosens its pale grasp, and the spring steps forth in emerald splendour. It is the season when fields swell with the promise of the Kabi harvest, when old leaves drift earthward, and tender shoots unfurl like whispered hopes. Nature herself seems to celebrate, adorning the earth in rejuvenated hues, as though echoing colours soon to dance around and collect joy.

To early European travellers, Holi appeared as a carnival of the Hindus, a spring revel in honour of Krishna. Yet, it is far more than a spectacle. Its colours are not fleeting illusions like a rainbow arc. On the contrary, they are living expressions of cultural memory and collective joy.

Holi endures as an indelible emblem of India's cultural soul, and a radiant affirmation that after every winter of discord, spring renews the world with hope, like colour, inevitably prevails.

Chat Room

Made-Up War, Serviced Logic

Appropos America in a Tehran Hurry (by Manoj Joshi, Mar 2), this is not the first time that diplomacy has been overtaken by force. In 2018, Trump sabotaged the 2015 nuclear agreement. In June 2025, while the US was negotiating with the US, Israel attacked unilaterally. This time, however, the attack is much more dangerous as it's not about giving Iranians their freedom, as Trump has claimed. The US has close ties with several monarchies and dictatorships, where freedom rarely enters the equation. Nor has US shown any misgivings about Israel's crimes against the defenceless Palestinian people. It's a war of choice, launched to eliminate an opponent and reshape the region to suit American and Israeli interests.

Sanjay Chopra
Mumbai

Secure Fuel Of Economic Engine

Appropos the Edit, 'Should Be a Short Spurt in Pipelines' (Mar 2), energy is the first casualty of any geopolitical turbulence in West Asia. With the present surpluses in global crude supplies, chances of deleterious long-term impact appear remote. A short-term energy crunch cannot be ruled out that will upset the calculations of huge importers of energy, such as India. Loss of oil and gas supplies will depend on production strategies of the Opec and any overambitious measures of the US, which is aspiring for hegemony in this segment. With control on Venezuela supplies and its offensives against Iran, the US will play a dominant role in energy prices and distribution. India needs to diversify its energy strategy to protect our interests.

Rajnarayan Kumar
Bangalore

Implementation Proof of Success

Appropos the news report, 'Semicon: Modi Launches Mission Facility in Gujarat' (Mar 1), even though its membership of Pax-Silica will help Indian firms gain access to important markets, India's semiconductor journey remains a work in progress. The sole determinant of India's success is the rate of implementation of semiconductor policy initiatives back at home. SCL's modernisation remains more promising than reality, and its strategic ecosystem where India has natural strengths needs better incentives. The focus of India Semiconductor Mission 2.0 on equipment and materials is strategically sensible, but execution will be key.

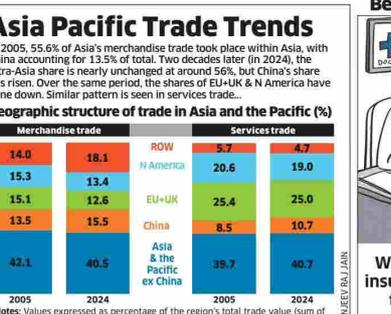
Pradeep Kumar
Surat

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

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a time, folks would say, Good news came from south of the way. But now Canada dreams, With maple-leaf beams, While the United States tweets doom all the day!

•••



Bell Curves

R Prasad

We do the diagnosis. The insurance company decides the line of treatment.

Global War Laureate



Seema Sirohi

Trump's war of choice against Iran may be the most consequential decision yet by the 'president of peace'. The conflict is spreading faster than justifications used to launch it. Iran rectified with an unprecedented wave of strikes against US military bases and civilian targets in Gulf countries. Hezbollah is activated. Oil prices are climbing.

Trump came into office vowing to measure his success by ending wars and counting 'the wars we never get into'. The report card is red on both counts. Claims of ending wars are disputed in some cases by the parties concerned, while his active military interventions have climbed to nine after a year in office.

It's a stunning, striking reversal of an important foreign policy plank that Iran has had core support among MAGA and grudging acknowledgement by left-liberals. At least he wasn't a warmonger. Turns out he isn't shy to use the US military for risky missions, despite generals desperately leaking information on low ammunition stocks and overextended carrier deployments.

If the Iran gamble pays off — it's no Venezuela extraction mission history books may look kindly at Trump. 'Operation Epic Fury' has already claimed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's son, Iran's defence minister, and several other regime leaders. Success of US and Israeli intelligence gathered over months was impressive, drawing sighs of 'wish we couldn't' in many capitals.

But what if the gamble doesn't work and draws West Asia into a wider conflict, a goal Iran would aim for? Trump has made a coherent case against Iran, how it posed an 'imminent threat,' or what precisely would

end the war. On offer is a list of past sins, Iran's support of proxy militias, and unproven claims it has long-range missiles that could reach the US. Iran's nuclear programme was also used as a reason, even though Trump repeatedly told the world the US military had 'obliterated' it last June. The definition of 'obliterate' stands amended.

The US-Israeli attacks, stated war objective of regime change in Iran, and Tehran's threats to wrap the region in fire, can spawn years of political and economic instability. It's a leap into the unknown. One need remember only Iraq and years of turmoil and terrorism.

As with Iraq in the days building up to the latest attacks, diplomacy with Iran was abandoned without a real explanation. Oman's foreign minister Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, who played a crucial role in mediating talks between the US and Iran, assured the world on Friday that a peace deal will win through. That Iran was discussing 'zero stockpiling of enriched uranium (read: it couldn't make a bomb), and that it was ready for 'full and comprehensive verification' under international authority' Iran was open to discussing everything and a breakthrough was imminent.

On Saturday, US and Israeli forces attacked Iran anyway. Diplomacy was cover to give time for a military buildup in the region. The decision to strike had already been made by Trump and Netanyahu. The rest was political theatre. And settling of scores. Tehran's uninterrupted chart of 'Death to America!' since the Islamic Revolution has alarmed every US administration. But rarely was it seen as a credible reason to declare war.

What changed? One reason was the classic pairing of Netanyahu and Trump. Israeli PM's political life depends on what the US president can do to help his survival. Constant war is one answer. Netanyahu is also lucky to have Mike Huckabee as US ambassador to Israel. A Christian who believes the modern state of Israel is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Huckabee created a storm recently when he said 'it would be fine' if Israel took all of West Asia because that's how the boundaries are defined in the Bible. He doesn't believe in a two-state solution, or calling descendants of people who lived in British-controlled Palestine as 'Palestinians'.

A second reason could be Trump's declining poll numbers, a fact that weighs heavily on the White House as midterm election looms. Rewind to 2012 when the real estate developer was watching the scene to decide whether he should enter politics and throwing bars. 'Now that Obama's poll numbers are in tailspin — watch for him to launch a strike in Libya or Iran. He is desperate. There's a lot of merry rend of Trump's earlier social media posts.

A question of whether the Iranian regime actually crumbles, or grows another head and continues harder and harsher down the path remains to be seen. Iran's ruling establishment is a hodgepodge of old-guard and multiple layers. Successors, and their successors, for important positions are already named in a system with a navy-sized conspiracy man that's been thought through over many years of sanctions and threats.



Stroking world domination



Dead Souls

Nikolai Gogol

As in enlightened Europe, so in enlightened Russia there are now quite a lot of respectable people who cannot have a meal in a tavern without talking with the servant and sometimes even making an amusing joke at his expense.

However, the visitor's guests were all killed; he inquired with extreme precision as to who was the governor of the town, who was the head magistrate, who was the prosecutor — in short, he did not skip a single important official, and with still greater precision, even the most concerned, he inquired about all the important landowners: how many peasant souls each one had, how far from town he lived, even what his character was and how often he came to town; he inquired attentively into the condition of the area: whether there were any disses in their process — epidemics of fever, some deadly agues, smallpox, and the like, and all this so thoroughly and with such precision that it showed more than mere curiosity alone.

The gentleman's manners had something solid about them, and he blew his nose with an exceeding loudness.

Translated from Russian by Richard Pease & Larissa Volokhonsky



A thought for today

Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing - after they have exhausted all other possibilities

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Worst Kind Of War

Conflicts started on basis of untruths almost always produce the most negative consequences

War is sometimes necessary. Say to defend a people and their territory against aggression. Hence the 'just war' theory...

Bush's case for the Iraq war was built on the fiction that Saddam had developed weapons of mass destruction and was also connected to the 9/11 terrorist attack. It was spun across media, Congress and UN over two years.

As for Iran's nuclear programme, didn't Trump say last year that 'obliteration' was the accurate term for what Operation Midnight Hammer had done to it?

After Bush, there was Obama's adventurism in Libya. It dislodged Gaddafi but left behind a country destabilised to this day.

The Game Of Gulf

Rich Arab nations must actively lobby to end Iran war. Their economies depend on them being oases of safety

Iran continues hitting targets across America's West Asian allies. On Monday, a Saudi refinery was burning, and explosions were heard across Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, etc.

Things were different during 1990's Gulf War. West Asia practically lived off oil and gas then. The world needed both, so when war ended, things went back to the old normal.

But the fact that Iran is flying drones and missiles at them - never mind that most or all of these are intercepted - is enough to spook investors, tourists and also immigrant workers.

Trump has said he can wrap up Op Epic Fury in four weeks. But West Asia cannot wait that long. It must seek peace on a war footing.

Kerala's 'm' dash

But name change game costs no small change

Bachi Karkaria



So Kerala joins the League of Proudly Renamed Places. Such change is far from just nominal, merely naam ke bastey.

So many names no longer needed to be made easier for un-manned Brit tongues. So festering Mysore or noisy Bangalore went back to 'Mysuru' and 'Bengaluru'.

Mamata expectedly condemned the latest name change as one more SIR, special initiative revision - this time to influence Kerala's imminent assembly election.

Speaking of Dilli as city not symbol of politeness, the 'Keralam' approval promptly prompted saffron MP Prawn Khandavel to revive the call to rewind centuries and revert to revered Indraprastha.

Kerala could counter 'anti-rattles' with a more contemporary expression from above region. It could angrily exclaim, 'What goes of your achan?' Well, any renaming of public places means ₹200cr-₹500cr goes from our amma-land.

Alec Smart said, "It may not be that easy to make Khamenei a gaya-tollah."

SIP Calmly, Don't Choke

Small investors shouldn't panic because war is pushing stocks down. The India story is sound. Don't try clever market exit or re-entry. Wealth is built via persistence, not prediction



Nilesch Shah

Equity markets, including India's, have reacted with fear to the West Asia war. Stock indices have sharply dipped. Many Systematic Investment Plan investors will be feeling unsettled.

Markets process information rapidly. They respond to events with volatility because prices reflect expectations about the future. Geopolitical shocks trigger immediate sell-offs as risk aversion surges.

The global economy is tightly interconnected through trade flows, currencies, interest rates, and commodities. So, war in one place affects economies elsewhere.

calm, optimism inflates valuations. Good news and high prices tend to coincide, leaving little margin of safety. In contrast, crises generate fear-driven selling.

Over extended horizons, stock markets are guided less by headlines and more by earnings. Companies that innovate, manage costs efficiently, expand market share, and adapt to structural shifts continue to create value.

The core strength of an SIP lies in rupee-cost averaging. By investing a fixed amount regularly, investors automatically buy fewer units when prices are high and more units when prices fall.

History reinforces this lesson. Investors who halted SIP investing is built on this view. It rewards patience over panic, discipline over drama. In times of crisis, the greatest risk is abandoning a sound strategy.



TEHRAN TURMOIL

How Is Trump's War Playing In US Politics? It'll Hurt Republicans Or Leave Them As Badly Off As Now



Patrick Basham

Iran's military resources, tactical dexterity and geographic, demographic and cultural strengths are a net asset on Trump - to his and Republican Party's electoral cost.

During three presidential campaigns as peace candidate, anti-war Trump criticised national-building wars, including plans for war with Iran.

Businessman Trump knew there's no greater danger than underestimating one's competition. In The Art of the Deal (1987), he emphasised thoroughly evaluating adversaries by knowing their strengths and weaknesses.

With anti-war VP Vance and anti-war director of national intelligence Gabard sidelined, exposure to nonconservative elements corroded Trump's political antennae.

Pre-war polling found overwhelming opposition to war. Our Democracy Institute poll found 84% opposed, including 80% of Trump voters.

Anti-war Americans maintain their position, regardless. Some pro-war voters became disenchanted with war, as the cost in blood and treasure hits home.

It isn't yet clear if war with Iran is experiencing any support. If Insider Advantage's Sat poll found 54% of voters pro-war, weekend Ipsos and YouGov polls found only 27% and 34% support, respectively.

Preliminary results from Democracy Institute's ongoing survey strongly suggest Americans are not rallying around Trump.

Third, even a winning war is net loser in public opinion. In a war does not normally translate into any gains for a president or party.

Fourth, foreign policy isn't a political winner for presidents, regardless party or ideology. Ordinary Americans focus on domestic concerns, not geopolitics.

MAGA voters and Trump-voting independents are America First and anti-war in policy priorities. Trump didn't prepare them for this war with a plausible, comprehensive articulation of either its necessity or regime change's probable consequences.

Some MAGA voters feel betrayed by Trump's hypocrisy and a liar. Republicans, already ahead of Nov's midterm polls, wobbly must contend with many anti-war Trump voters who're yet to see an improved economy or cleansed political and judicial systems, as was promised.

Politicised gambler and poll forecaster Robert Barnes thinks the war gives Democrats a 95% chance of winning the House, 85% chance of winning the Senate, and a 75% chance of capturing the 2026 presidency.

Trump emphasises flexibility as a tactic to outmanoeuvre competitors. It is telling that, with a rapid military victory and regime change out of reach, Trump is already talking 'talks with Iran'.



Michael Wasliura

On Jan 2, the day before American forces flew into Caracas, extracted Venezuelan head of state Nicolas Maduro, and delivered him to a jail in New York, Trump's overall approval rating stood at 43.5%.

On Feb 27, the day before US and Israeli forces struck Iran, killing Khamenei, Trump's overall approval rating was 43.1%, and betting markets gave Republicans a 44% chance of winning the 2026 election.

When it comes to US domestic politics, nothing changed as a result of the Venezuela op, and nothing is likely to change as a result of the Iran op. There was no 'Maduro effect'. There's unlikely to be any 'Khamenei effect'.

Thousands of demonstrators were killed during Jan's massive protests, but Trump is once again calling on ordinary Iranians to take power into their own hands. This, when just as in Venezuela, US military succeeded in only removing Iran's dictatorial regime's head while leaving key cadres in their posts.

That is not of serious political concern to Trump, involuntarily to every single one of the countless scandals he has orchestrated over the past decade. The two-time president has claimed immigrants from Mexico are 'bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists'.

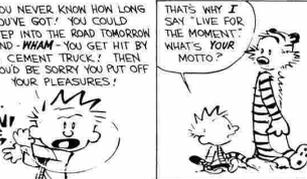
Whether Iran is transformed into the Switzerland of West Asia (not bloody likely) or whether it finds itself engulfed in a Syria-like civil war (all too likely), Trump's approval rating will almost certainly remain around 43%.

It's difficult to imagine what unforeseen event might actually cause a significant shift in American public opinion of Trump. Neither Epstein files nor abduction of a South African dictator made any noticeable difference. It is difficult to imagine any Iran-related development will be more consequential.

Even if the situation escalates into a prolonged war that claims more American lives, Trump's supporters are likely to stand by their president, and all but certain to "support the troops", while continuing to condemn their commander-in-chief.

It is a safe bet that when it's time to choose a new president Nov 2028, so much more will have happened that most of us will have long forgotten all about the time Trump killed Iran's supreme leader with a missile.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

A man on a thousand-mile walk has to forget his goal and say to himself every morning, 'Today I'm going to cover twenty-five miles and then rest up and sleep.'

Leo Tolstoy, War And Peace

Protecting Boundaries Through Peace, Not War

The world is at war once more. Social media and TV show the same story repeatedly: destruction, displacement, anger, and revenge. We are told that this war is about safety, independence, history and land. Analysts talk about geopolitical alignments and strategic interests. Govts make statements to explain their actions.

The world is falling apart. Metacognition is the ability to think about how we think on a personal level. It's the quiet place where we can feel our anger before we do something about it. It is the time when we stop blindly defending our ego and start questioning them. When we lose that ability, we react instead of thinking. Now picture that failure being shared by millions of people - collective metacognition.

take a step back and ask hard questions such as, 'Are our fears reasonable?' Are we reacting to something that is happening right now, or to something that happened in the past? Are we seeing the other side as people or just as enemies? The conflict today has gotten worse because of both weapons and stories of betrayal, unfairness, and survival. Everyone thinks they are protecting themselves. They all think what they are doing is necessary. In an age of instant communication, emotional contagion spreads quickly. Pictures of pain spread faster than understanding. The outrage grows stronger. Leaders act when people are angry. The cycle keeps going. Without a shared sense of self, feelings become rules. A security issue can be resolved through dialogue or escalated into a war.

existential threat. A historical grievance can be recognised and resolved, or it can be exploited to incite anger. The failure stems from the incapacity to scrutinise our own framing prior to acting. Babuji said that world peace can only happen when there is peace. An insecure identity seeks validation through dominance. A damaged mind sends its fear out into the world. When a lot of people are angry and anxious about something, those feelings build up in the collective consciousness. Leaders are not distinct from this domain; they arise from it. If people can't see their own anger, it will be hard for groups to see their anger. If people can't stop to think before they act, countries will have a hard time doing the same before they start a war. This doesn't mean that countries should ignore real threats. Someone who is peaceful on the inside can still protect their boundaries, but not with hate.



HPV drive: Prevention and outreach

With the launch of the HPV (Human Papillomavirus) vaccination drive for 14-year-old girls, the Central government has taken an assured step towards eliminating a major health concern for women. Cervical cancer is the second-most common cause of cancer deaths in India, after breast cancer, among women of reproductive age. Globally, HPV vaccination is accepted as an effective countermeasure. India accounts for about 23% of the global burden of cervical cancer, with over 1.2 lakh new cases and about 80,000 deaths reported every year. Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the nationwide vaccination programme on Saturday in Ajmer, Rajasthan. According to the Union Health Ministry, 14-year-old girls will receive a single dose of the vaccine at government health facilities in all states and Union Territories, ensuring extensive coverage against various types of HPV.

An HPV vaccination programme covering all girls in the early adolescent group has been a long-sought intervention. Some of the states have offered the vaccine, which is available in the market, as part of pilot programmes. However, concerns over cost and logistics have delayed a national rollout. The cost should not be a consideration when the health of millions of women is involved. The argument about logistics is not tenable either because India runs an efficient children's vaccination programme, which is also one of the world's largest. More than 160 countries have made HPV vaccination part of their national health programmes. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recommended it for all countries.

As part of the campaign, the government plans to make the vaccine available for 1.15 crore girls. It will be administered at primary and community health centres, sub-district and district hospitals, and government medical colleges and hospitals. An awareness programme has been launched, underlining the benefits of vaccination. This is an important intervention in a country where vaccine hesitancy continues to be a concern. India is still grappling with taboos and baseless fears about the potential after-effects of vaccination on fertility, sexual health, etc. These misconceptions and disinformation need to be countered with simple and transparent communication that reaches all sections of society. The programme must include schools to ensure wider reach. The government should aim for 100% coverage and make the programme a continuous exercise. With the right vision and implementation timelines, the HPV vaccination programme can evolve as a major public health initiative that will help to eliminate one of the biggest health threats to women in the country.

Nationwide campaign aims to eliminate cervical cancer amid persisting vaccine hesitancy

Legacy and livelihoods under threat

The Karnataka government's proposal to build a sports stadium on land belonging to the Karnataka Silk Industries Corporation Limited (KSIC) is not merely a planning misstep; it risks crippling one of the most successful public sector enterprises. At a time when KSIC is profitable, growing, and globally recognised, the project threatens a serious blow. The immediate fallout is already visible. Over 1,000 employees, including nearly 900 outsourced workers across KSIC's three units, are on strike. Production has been hit; racks in once-bustling showrooms are going empty, and an alarming sight for a heritage brand whose demand has reached an all-time high. This is not a routine labour protest; it is resistance to an existential threat.

The trigger to the dispute is the proposed acquisition of five acres from KSIC's T Narasipur yarn reeling factory. Undermine this unit, and the downstream weaving centres will starve of raw material. The stadium cannot realistically coexist with a silk factory: the proposed boundary stones sit barely five feet from a boiler; the project would physically block the daily coal transport route; and the Cauvery water pipeline for the factory passes directly through the earmarked site, making construction a logistical impossibility without severing the unit's lifeline. The impact will be severe on more than 550 mature trees, which act as a natural buffer against heat, ash, and noise. What makes the proposal particularly perverse is KSIC's performance. Unlike many state-run textile units that have collapsed under inefficiency, KSIC has thrived. It commands the entire silk value chain — from reeling to weaving — and holds the Geographical Indication tag (GI-11) for Mysore Silk. Net profits have tripled in five years, and the corporation has sustained a compound annual growth rate of about 19%, while saree production has nearly doubled.

KSIC's roots run deep. Established in 1912 by Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, the Mysore silk factory originally served the royal household and armed forces. Post-independence, it was taken over by the government, becoming a symbol of Karnataka's pride. To casually erode that legacy is to show contempt for both history and economics. The protesters, backed by opposition leaders and local representatives, have rightly urged Chief Minister Siddaramaiah to relocate the stadium. Instead of weakening a century-old iconic brand, the government should modernise KSIC by replacing its ageing machinery and increasing capacity. It is the state's duty to safeguard KSIC — an institution that continues to weave prosperity, not merely nostalgia, into every saree.

Karnataka must not let an ill-advised stadium plan diminish one of its most iconic brands

With Iran under attack, India's deepening ties with Israel may complicate its diplomatic balancing act in West Asia

PARUL CHANDRA

Just two days after the India-Israel clinch got tighter during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit there last week, with the two sides announcing the elevation of their ties to a 'Special Strategic Partnership for Peace, Innovation and Prosperity', Israel and the United States unleashed wide-ranging military strikes on Iran, including the targeted killing of its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The PM's visit could not have been more ill-timed, coming as it did just as US President Donald Trump was mobilising forces to attack Iran. This begs the question: Why was such an outreach so urgent, unless Modi intended to personally counsel his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu towards dialogue and regional stability?

If Modi did indeed offer such counsel, it was swiftly disregarded by the February 28 strikes on Iran. It remains unclear whether Tel Aviv shared its offensive plans with New Delhi or kept its partner in the dark despite proclamations of a relationship built on trust and strategic convergence. Either way, India is left in a difficult diplomatic position as it grapples with the fallout of the conflict now engulfing West Asia.

Predictably, given its strategic embrace of Israel, India has not criticised the military strikes on Iran. Western nations, too, have chosen a similar path. Instead, New Delhi has called for restraint, advocating diplomacy and the respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states. Yet, the region remains a powder keg for now, with Iran launching retaliatory strikes on US military bases and regional allies.

For India, the second military strike against Iran by Israel in the last eight months carries serious ramifications for its strategic interests in its 'extended neighbourhood'. The region is a cornerstone of India's energy security, a growing hub for trade, and home to an estimated 8.9 million-strong diaspora whose remittances are vital to the Indian economy.

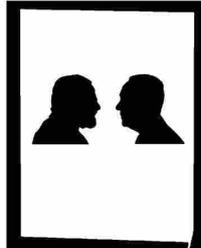
COMMENT

WAR AND AFTER

The risks and rewards of India's Israel tilt

Furthermore, the turmoil will queer the pitch for India's diplomacy and strategic interests as the Arab world navigates the conflict and its nations take sides depending on their own imperatives. The crisis will test India's ability to protect its interests *à la carte* the US without allowing its improving ties with the Trump administration to become a casualty.

India thus far had managed to balance relations with Iran — historically a close friend — even as it pursued close ties with Israel. Even though India was forced to cease all oil imports from Iran some years ago and, more recently, put on hold the development of the Iranian Chabahar port for fear of inviting US sanctions, Tehran seemed to understand



India's constraints. However, the current conflict, coupled with India's marked strategic pivot towards Israel, may throw Tehran's ties with New Delhi off-kilter.

There is also a growing perception that India's support for the Palestinian cause is no longer steadfast, which was evident again during the PM's visit to Israel. While India repeatedly reaffirms its commitment to a "negotiated two-state solution towards the establishment of a sovereign, independent and viable state of Palestine" and continues its humanitarian assistance for Palestinians, both bilaterally and through the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency), these actions seem secondary to offset its primary tilt towards Israel.

A selective condemnation

This shift is driven by realpolitik and an ideological affinity that Indian Hinduva proponents have had with Israel. The shared majoritarian leanings of both right-wing governments have

propelled the strategic embrace.

During his address to the Knesset, PM Modi emphasised that the two nations are "ancient civilisations" with "philosophical parallels", even drawing comparisons between Jewish and Hindu festivals to underscore a deep-rooted cultural connection. While New Delhi views a robust relationship with Tel Aviv as a strategic necessity, its diluted support for Palestine diminishes its moral standing and complicates its outreach to the Arab world.

India clearly sees major gains in boosting ties with Israel despite the latter having faced international opprobrium and isolation after its clearly disproportionate strikes on Gaza following the Hamas terror attacks on October 7, 2023.

While India has rightly condemned the Hamas terror attacks, with Modi emotionally saying, "we feel your pain... India stands with Israel firmly" during his Knesset address, there has been no similar outpouring of solidarity for the over 70,000 Gazans killed in the aftermath.

Amid the hosannas surrounding Modi's visit, Palestine at best was a side-show for New Delhi despite its reaffirmation of support for the Gaza Peace Plan, which it believes "holds the promise of a just and durable peace" in the region and in addressing the Palestinian question.

Modi's visit to Israel will no doubt impart further momentum and depth to bilateral ties amid the shared resolve to cooperate in diverse domains. While the expansive defence and security ties have been the linchpin, and agriculture is also an important area of cooperation, the two nations are now also looking to boost bilateral trade and investment as well as collaboration in sectors such as critical and emerging technologies, AI, and semiconductors.

They also want to boost regional connectivity initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the foundation of a grouping of India, Israel, the UAE and the UAE (I2U2) to boost economic cooperation, among other things. India, however, must ensure that its ever-tightening clinch with Israel does not jeopardise its broader strategic interests in the volatile West Asia region.

(The writer is a senior journalist)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A journey into Ubuntu

In simple words, the cab driver unknowingly captured a profound African philosophy

SRIPRIVA SATISH

I was recently travelling from Chennai to Bengaluru in a drop taxi. What I expected to be a long, monotonous, and tiring journey turned, surprisingly, into a beautiful revelation. Travel often carries its weariness. The rush of highways, unfamiliar faces and the constant hum of traffic can drain our energy. Yet this journey stood out for one simple reason: the person behind the wheel.

The young taxi driver was unlike many drivers who, burdened by the pressures of a demanding profession, can appear irritable and impatient. He was remarkably patient, soft-spoken and cheerful. A friendly conversation unfolded naturally, and the hours seemed to glide by.

As we spoke, he shared his life story

with disarming openness. He had lost both parents at a very young age and had been raised by his grandparents. When he spoke of them, his voice was filled with warmth and gratitude. They had showered him with care, values and emotional strength — gifts that shaped who he had become. Though his job meant long hours on the road and constant fatigue, he said with a smile that he still felt blessed and chose to see the positive side of life.

His work, he explained, gave him the opportunity to meet diverse people every day. Each passenger, according to him, taught him something new — a different perspective and new lessons about life.

I was moved by the maturity of his thoughts. He credited his patience, humility, and God-fearing nature to the loving upbringing of his grandparents. "I am who I am because of them," he said sincerely. Then, with a shy smile, he added, "And I am also here because of people like you — my customers." That simple statement struck me deeply. In just a few words, he unknowingly expressed the essence of a timeless African philosophy — Ubuntu.

Ubuntu translates roughly as "I am because we are." It reminds us that our identity is shaped not merely by personal achievement but by the relationships and human connections that nurture us. We thrive because others contribute to our growth, support us, guide us, and stand by us. The philosophy recognises that every human life is interconnected.

We are not solitary beings walking alone; we are bound by invisible threads of compassion, kindness, and mutual dependence.

Mahatma Gandhi expressed a similar sentiment when he spoke about the importance of the customer:

"A customer is the most important visitor on our premises. He is not dependent on us; we are dependent on him. He is not an interruption to our work; He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider in our business. He is a part of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us an opportunity to do so."

Ubuntu is not limited to business; it is a way of living. A perspective that recognises the inherent dignity in every individual we encounter — a concept to be etched in gold.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The West Asian crisis has far-reaching consequences

The escalating conflict between the US, Israel, and Iran has far-reaching consequences for countries not directly involved. The war's impact is felt across West Asia, with neutral nations' citizens caught in the crossfire. It is crucial to question the morality of making these countries suffer for a conflict not of their making. The US Congress must rein in its President's aggressive actions,

diplomacy over force.
KR Jayaprakash Rao, Mysuru

Ensure justice

Apropos Govt jobs: Madiga leaders to urge CM to resolve quota knot (Mar 2), the state government should consider internal reservation for Madigas within the existing 15% quota for SCs in public employment. Data show that a few relatively advanced sub-castes have captured a disproportionate share of jobs, while Madiga families remain trapped in low-paid, insecure occupations. Reservation was meant to correct

historical exclusion, not reproduce inequality within a protected category. Sub-categorisation would promote equitable distribution, social justice and genuine representation without reducing anyone's overall entitlement. A transparent policy with independent review can ensure fair access to state jobs and restore confidence in the reservation system.
N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.com (only letters emailed — not handwritten — will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT



Change means securing our borders. Change means ending corruption in jobs (in Bengal). Change means safety for mothers and sisters. Change means rule of law. Amit Shah, Union Home Minister

A man says a lot of things in summer he doesn't mean in winter.

Patricia Briggs

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Digital curfews: Mentor, don't ban

Blanket prohibitions are int, but real solutions are in building digital literacy and safer platform design

JEHOSH PAUL

In a move reflecting growing global anxiety over the 'TikTok brain', the Karnataka government is mulling a blanket ban on mobile phone use for minors under 16 due to parental concerns about social media addiction among children. The concerns driving this proposal are undeniably valid and are backed by recent national data. The ASER 2024 report found that 76% of children aged 14-16 use smartphones for social media, while India's Economic Survey 2025-26 identified digital addiction among children and youth as a growing concern, linking excessive use to reduced focus, sleep disruption, and weaker academic performance.

There is a scientific basis for this. Neuroscientific research has consistently shown that the prefrontal cortex, which governs impulse control and judgment, continues to mature through adolescence. At the same time, digital platforms are designed around persuasive features such as infinite scroll and variable rewards that can intensify compulsive use.

These concerns justify intervention, but they also demand the right kind of intervention. A blanket ban may reduce exposure temporarily, yet it leaves unanswered the deeper question of how young people develop the digital judgment and self-regulation required of responsible citizens.

A blanket ban assumes that age 16 is a magical threshold where responsibility suddenly appears. In reality, responsibility is a muscle, not a switch. If a child is cut off from the digital world until age 16, that child may enter digital spaces with less familiarity, weaker experiential judgment, and fewer internalised habits of self-regulation. The absence of gradual exposure may leave young people less prepared to identify misinformation, respond to cyberbullying, and moderate their own consumption.

Furthermore, the socio-economic reality of Karnataka makes the risks of a blanket ban more uneven than they first appear. The ASER 2024 report also found that 57% of children aged 14-16 used a smartphone for educational activity, which underlines how phones are already part of the learning ecosystem for many adolescents. That dependence is often sharper in rural settings, where, as experts have pointed out, many students rely primarily on mobile phones to access digital content, while children in better-resourced urban homes may have laptops or tablets.

Second, the government must integrate digital hygiene into the state's school curriculum. Just as civics explains how democracy works, digital civics should explain how the internet works. Students need to learn how to spot bait, verify deepfakes, and understand that their attention and data are valuable commodities. This kind of training is not only about adolescent well-being, but also about building habits of verification, restraint, and scepticism early to build long-term resilience in a country where online scams, misinformation, and financial fraud increasingly target older adults.

The current status quo, where minors have unrestricted access to some of the most addictive algorithms, is unsustainable. But prohibition is a blunt instrument; it may delay exposure, but it cannot build judgment. Critical thinking, self-regulation, and digital literacy can protect children long after any curfew ends. A responsible citizen is someone who knows how to use the internet without losing oneself in the process.

For a state shaped by the digital economy, the stronger legacy will lie not in banning technology for minors, but in teaching them how to use it responsibly.

(The writer is a lawyer and development consultant)

From 'we the people' to knowing the Constitution

SUNDAR ATREYA H AND
SOUJYA MOHAPATRA

The Indian Constitution begins with the iconic phrase 'we the people'. The phrase reflects the democratic nature of the country and the power bestowed on its citizens. 'We the people', however, are not a homogeneous category but a heterogeneous, plural population that speaks many languages, follows many religions and belongs to diverse economic backgrounds, sects and communities, each with its distinct style of life. The Constitution had the task of chiselling the nation. How far has it secured these rights, and more importantly, how much constitutional literacy has it achieved? This is a question that is worth pondering.

Seventy-six years ago, the founding members had the daunting task of preparing a Constitution that would unify the princely states and provinces into a single,

territorially bound country and safeguard the rights of all its citizens equally. The drafting process did not emerge from a vacuum; inspiration was drawn from various other constitutions. However, the political and economic setup of these countries was vastly different from the Indian context.

The Constituent Assembly bequeathed the responsibility of implementing the ideals of the Constitution to the future Parliament and the courts. The nascent days of Indian democracy saw clashes of ideologies, especially between the fundamental rights of the individual and the collective rights of the people. The Constitution had the task of securing the individual economic and ownership rights of the citizens; at the same time, it had to implement social welfare provisions that would benefit society collectively. To a fair extent, the Constitution is malleable and ductile.

It has seen 106 amendments and count-

less landmark judgments to reach its present shape and form. At times, the amendments have altered the core identity of the Constitution; at other times, they have also strived to expand the rights it guarantees. Many of the newer additions were possible, thanks to the intervention of the courts at important junctures. In that sense, the Constitution is not a stagnant document but a living and breathing document. The Constitution houses several rights which were not part of the original document that was adopted seventy-six years ago. But the bigger question is how much of the Constitution has been integrated into the day-to-day lives of its citizens.

There have been several critiques against the Indian Constitution, but the primary criticism is that it was written in a language which was not understood by many of the citizens whom it intends to protect. The original document was drafted only in English and in Hindi. This criticism is valid even today, as a majority of the

population fail to understand the rights and obligations that are enshrined in the Constitution. Although measures have been taken to print it in all its twenty-two official languages, it has not yet achieved the success of increasing the awareness about it to its citizens.

Further, the Constitution is criticised as a lawyer-made document. The majority of its makers were lawyers. Even the books that elucidate the Constitution are written by lawyers peppered with judicial decisions and maxims. This has acted as a barrier for a non-lawyer to understand the Constitution. The document is not meant to be understood only by the judges of the topmost court but also by the common man without judicial training. The awareness about the Constitution has not gained inroads into the life of the common man yet.

When citizens are not aware of the rights and obligations guaranteed by the Constitution, they are left without any

meaningful protection. This reduces the major ideals of the Constitution, such as 'liberty' and 'equality', to abstract concepts that are discussed within the hallowed court halls by the educated few in society. The values that nourish the Constitution ought to have become common knowledge by now; this applies to both the intellectual and the common man of the country.

The Constitution has attempted to study the problem of minorities in India and has attempted to safeguard their rights, yet the worrisome situation is several linguistic and economically underprivileged citizens are not yet aware of the rights that are secured in the Constitution. This is not merely an economic problem within the society, but it is a social issue that continues to exist in the society.

Eugen Ehrlich in the early twentieth century wrote the living law theory, which states that the law's true centre of gravity is not in the statute books but in the customs and practices followed by the members of

the society through non-state institutions such as family and businesses. People live their lives by certain social rules of conduct which they recognise as binding. He describes it as the 'inner order of association'. Ehrlich argues that in order to be effective, there needs to be consistency between living law and juristic law. And this cannot be a top-down exercise but a process that involves the collaborative association of ordinary people.

The Constitution of India is a result of different groups—both mainstream and vulnerable—making their voices heard in laying the foundational principles that would govern the country. In India, the values enshrined in the Constitution are yet to penetrate the non-state institutions across the country equally. Being uninformed about the constitutional principles only serves to weaken democracy, and this asymmetrical difference has to be bridged.

(The writers are assistant professors at KIIT School of Law)

A badly weakened Iran will no longer intimidate or threaten its neighbours in the same way. The regional impact could be comparable to the collapse of the Soviet Union

STEVEN ERLANGER

Iran's supreme leader may be dead, but there will be another. Its slain military commanders will be replaced. A governing system created over 47 years will not easily disintegrate under air power alone. Iran retains the capacity to strike back against US and Israeli airstrikes, and the war's trajectory is unclear.

But the Islamic Republic, already weakened and unpopular, is now further diminished, its power at home and in the region at one of its lowest ebbs since its leaders took power during the revolution that overthrew Iran's American-backed shah in 1979.

Even if the regime does not fall, which remains the stated aim of President Donald Trump, this massive attack is likely to have strategic consequences in the Middle East comparable to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader killed Sunday morning, maintained a visceral antagonism towards Israel and the United States, which he consistently called "the Great Satan." He built and financed a regional set of proxy militias that surrounded Israel and shared his hatred of it. Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the Houthis in Yemen—all served both to attack Israeli interests and protect Iran itself.

Iran built up its missile programme and enriched uranium to nearly bomb-grade, even as it denied ever wanting a bomb. It became a regional power so strong that Sunni leaders in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Persian Gulf sought to keep good ties with a Shia Islamic regime that also threatened them.

Iran's decline began two years ago, as Israel's tough and sustained response to an invasion by Hamas from Gaza. It accelerated when Israel eroded Iran's air defences, defeated Hezbollah and profited from the Syrian revolution that overthrew Bashar Assad, another ally of Iran.

But now, with the ayatollah's death and intense destruction from the air, Iran's regional sway has ebbed further, with uncertain consequences that will play out over months and even years.

"The Islamic Republics we know it will not survive this," said Sanam Vakil, director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, a London-based research group.

"The Mideast won't be the same again," she said. "For 47 years the Middle East has been living with a hostile regime and a destabilising force that it has tried to first isolate and then manage."

Now, she said, the regime might be dismantled, and something new and different might emerge. That leadership may turn out to be even less friendly to Washington, particularly if dominated by Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

Whoever takes charge, Iran will be badly weakened in the medium term, more inward-looking, and focused on political competition, internal security and economic chaos, Vakil said.

In the coming days, however, Iran may spread more short-term chaos as its current leadership tries to bring an end to the war while saving the regime.

Iran will try to rapidly increase the cost for Israel, the United States and its Gulf



A man holds a portrait of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as people mourn his killing at a rally in Tehran, Iran, on Sunday, a day after he was killed in coordinated US and Israeli airstrikes. NYT

Iran's regime may survive, but Middle East will be changed

allies "to force them to back down before this succeeds in destabilising the regime," said Ellie Geranmayeh, deputy head of the Middle East and North Africa programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Increasing its attacks on Arab countries in the Gulf is risky but may be Iran's best chance to shorten the war—since it could prompt the Arab world to pressure the US and Israel to end their campaign.

"Iran's aim now is to absorb US and Israeli attacks, hold its position and signal expansion of war, and wait for worried regional actors to mediate a ceasefire," said Vahid Nasr, an Iran expert at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, on social media.

"They expect that if Trump does not get a quick win then he will look for an exit, and negotiations afterwards will be different," Iran's proxies across the Mideast could also come to Iran's defence, increasing the price of an extended war, according to Ali Vaez, Iran project director for the International Crisis Group, a research institution.

"If Hezbollah fully engages from Lebanon, if militias strike US bases in Iraq and Syria, or if the Houthis escalate in the Red Sea, this stops being a bilateral conflict and becomes a regionwide war stretching across the Middle East," Vaez said. A wider war would have considerable longer-term impact on oil prices and inflation, especially if Iran can shut the Strait of Hormuz, a key international shipping route.

But in the longer term, an Iran that is wrapped up in its own domestic problems—trying to avoid elite fragmentation and consolidating a new leadership or even move

towards a more consultative one, with less clerical influence and more power sharing—will not have the energy or the resources to meddle in the region. That could open up new opportunities for Lebanon and the Palestinians, as it has already done for the Syrians.

It leaves Israel ascendant, making it even more of an intractable fact in the region that the Sunni nations must accommodate. A new and more moderate government could take office in Israel after elections later this year. With Iran defanged, it may feel it has the mandate to build on the ceasefire in Gaza and negotiate seriously with the Palestinians, under pressure from Washington and the Saudis.

Israel itself would prefer regime change, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has made clear, but would be content, analysts say, with a divided, broken and chaotic Iran wrapped up in its own problems, like Syria is now.

Presuming there is no revolution, a reconstituted Iranian government must still grapple with a powerful Israel and a United States it cannot trust. The current regime has made nuclear enrichment a key element in its efforts to cement regional power and deterrence. And it has refused to change course, even as that display of persistence seems to have brought it closer to destruction than any other policy, whether that be supporting terrorism abroad or massive repression at home.

It is unclear if even a more moderate government would make new concessions over its nuclear programme under the pressure of war. It is also unclear if any Iranian leader would feel able to trust

Trump, who tore up former President Barack Obama's nuclear deal in 2018 and now has bombed Iran twice in the middle of ongoing negotiations. Would Iran deem it necessary to give in on the nuclear issue to survive? Or if a hard-line, more security-dominated government emerges, will it try to race toward a nuclear weapon, more convinced than ever of its need?

Despite the fierce crackdown on Iranian protesters in January that left many thousands dead, Trump continues to encourage the Iranian people to rise up to overthrow the regime.

"Bombs will be dropping everywhere," he said. "When we are finished, take over your government. It will be yours to take."

But it may not go that easily or cleanly, noted Ivo H. Daalder, a former US ambassador to NATO.

In February 1991, during the first Gulf War, President George H W Bush issued a similar call to the Iraqi people to rise up and oust Saddam Hussein.

"They did," Daalder noted, "and the US stood by as Saddam's security forces slaughtered them in huge numbers."

Iran's future will not be determined solely by missiles, militias or the ambitions of outsiders powers, but by the balance struck within its own fractured elite and its weary society. Airstrikes can shatter infrastructure and decapitate leadership, but they cannot easily script what comes next. Whether the country lurches towards deeper militarisation, stumbles into prolonged instability or cautiously reshapes its political order, the reverberations will extend far beyond its borders.

The New York Times

Life beyond the grid

SREENATH NAIR

It is not that I couldn't learn Excel. The cells beckoned, formulas blinked like arcane incantations, and macros promised productivity bordering on the divine. But somewhere between the IF and the VLOOKUP, I paused. Something about the spreadsheet—those neat rows and columns, each a little coffin of clarity—that felt like an erasure.

The spreadsheet is not just a tool. It is a worldview. It organises everything—budgets, budgets, budgets—into manageable, sortable units. It offers the illusion of control. Beneath that illusion, however, lies a quiet tyranny: the triumph of quantification over intuition, predictability over possibility.

We now live in an era of spreadsheet determinism, where anything that cannot be modelled is treated as unreal. If it cannot be forecast, it is deemed undeserving of existence. For those who do not naturally think in grids and projections, survival itself begins to feel conditional—especially in business environments where modelling is mistaken for intelligence.

I often imagine a novelist submitting a manuscript, only to be told that the work has 'low ROI'. I don't blame Excel for that verdict. I blame the mindset that asks fiction to perform like an asset class.

Futures and options, those glittering derivatives born in the crucible of financial ingenuity, are merely symptoms of this broader malaise. Finance professionals, trained to reduce the world to risk and reward, now occupy positions of disproportionate cultural authority. Their tools quietly become our truths. They speak in volatility curves and Sharpe ratios, and the rest of us are expected to nod, enlightened. But what they model is not life. It is only what can be made legible to a model.

Netfilx, ends up with a lower market capitalisation (MCap) than Netflix. Swigg's algorithm is undoubtedly impressive. But we should hesitate before rating it above the brick-and-mortar enterprises that quietly built the world we inhabit. Market capitalisation, after all, bears no necessary relationship to tangible value, social utility, or productive capacity. When valuations reward quirkiness in apps more than decades of real investment, one has to ask whether anyone would still choose to build old-style enterprises at all. A fairer valuation grammar may be essential.

And let us also not forget the general welfare that old-time private and public enterprises once extended to their employees and families. It was a fuller cosmology. It included health-care, schools, living quarters, libraries, and townships that blurred the line between work and community. They were social ecosystems that were imperfect yet enduring. Labour therein was tethered to a sense of continuity and care.

None of this is to deny the virtues of productivity, upskilling, machining, or the necessary pruning of flab. There is value in making enterprises agile, in questioning inefficiencies, and in refusing nostalgia as an excuse for stagnation. But when welfare is dismissed as excess weight on a balance sheet, something essential is lost.

What gets lost in this transition is not merely a set of benefits or structures. It is a way of imagining value itself in life. Now, the humanities are politely sidelined. Psychology is labelled 'soft'. Philosophy becomes an indulgence. Governance, art, climate, and education are handed over to consultants armed with spreadsheets.

But you cannot spreadsheet a forest. Or a friendship. Or a revolution (Bitcoin included).

True transformation does not come from optimising inward. It comes from the untidy persistence of human will, from failure, contradiction, and empathy. These are not values you can enter into a cell.

And so, I never learnt Excel. Not out of defiance, but as an act of quiet rebellion. It is to remind myself that not all things that count can be counted, and not all things that count need to be.

I remain eternally grateful to my CEO, who once said, without fuss, that I could delegate my Excel work to 'someone else who knows'. He added that I should rather focus on my strengths than learn Excel.

Thank you, Sir.

(The writer is a journalist-turned-communications professional based in Bengaluru)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1976
PM warns foreign nations to keep off India's affairs
Calcutta, March 2
Prime Minister Indira Gandhi today warned the "Eastern and Western nations" not to interfere in the internal affairs of India. "Let me, as the Prime Minister of this country, tell the foreign powers that we will not tolerate interference in our internal affairs," she declared at a mammoth public meeting at the Brigade Parade ground here. "The more they interfere in our internal affairs, the more rigid and determined we will be in dealing with them. We are not answerable to any big or small country of the world," she said.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2001
Centre sells Balco to Sterlite
New Delhi, March 2 (PTI)
The Government today sold its 51 per cent stake in public sector Bharat Aluminium Company (Balco) to Sterlite Industries Ltd for Rs 551.5 crore. Sterlite Industries handed over a cheque for Rs 551.5 crore to the government after signing the shareholders and share purchase agreements. The agreements were signed by Aruna Bagchi, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Mines, on behalf of the government, S C Tripathi, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Mines and Chairman and MD Balco on behalf of Balco and Tarun Jain, Director (Finance) for Sterlite Industries.

OASIS | BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ

Inner peace key to global harmony

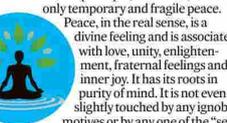
With the invention of nuclear weapons and their sophisticated means of delivery, the nature of war has now dreadfully changed. As a result of this horrendous development, mankind is, today, faced with the problem of its very survival. In this situation, the question of disarmament, arms delimitation or delegitimation of war has attained foremost importance.

But, while recognising that the constant threat of a nuclear war poses a grave danger to global peace, it would be wrong to equate peace with mere absence of war. For war is nothing but a manifestation of the motives

of violence and destruction or of the ignoble emotions of hate and anger. It is equally true that it is man's mind which is a vast store of divine potentialities also. Wars, it has truly been said, are born in the minds of men, but the seeds of peace also are to be found in man's mind. So, the problem of global peace is, in its real essence, the question of man's mental equanimity and spiritual peace. If man moulds his motives in consonance with the pithy slogan 'Be good and do good', peace will surely return to planet Earth.

Any other effort—diplomatic, political, juristic, etc.—which is divorced from this principle, will attain, at best, only temporary and fragile peace. Peace, in the real sense, is a divine feeling and is associated with love, unity, enlightenment, fraternal feelings and inner joy. It has its roots in the purity of mind. It is not even slightly touched by any ignoble motives or by any one of the 'seven deadly sins'. The word 'peace', it should, therefore, be remembered, has wider and more subtle connotations than the one which has generally formed the theme for discussions at

peace conferences that have been held across the globe for decades. Most of the modern dictionaries also define 'peace' in terms equivalent to these. But, in truth, peace refers to harmony of man's mind with his intellect, his conscience, his environment and other beings. Equanimity of mind is an essential characteristic of the state of peace. In yogic parlance, it is the name given to spiritual experience which one gets when one's mind is lovingly linked to God, the Ocean of Peace. It is such a state of mind that spreads vibrations of peace in the world and can find a way to establishing lasting global peace.



Managing the fallout

West Asian conflict can be challenging for India

From rising fuel prices to a shrinking remittance economy and the safety of the Indian diaspora, the conflict between Iran, on one side, and the United States (US) and Israel, on the other, has underscored India's exposure to West Asia. Zero visibility on the endgame means India needs to deploy all the policy tools at its disposal to manage the consequences of the unpredictable conflict. Inevitably, fossil-fuel imports remain the biggest challenge if Iran chooses to block the Strait of Hormuz, which accounts for a fifth of the global flows of petroleum and liquefied natural gas. Although Tehran has not officially notified the closure of the strait, hundreds of shipments have already been suspended. Benchmark Brent crude oil also shot past \$80 a barrel when the conflict broke out, before settling at \$77 levels — the highest since June 2025, when the US attacked Iran's nuclear capabilities. India, the world's third-largest consumer of oil, buys over 80 per cent of its requirements from abroad. Over half of this comes from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait — a dependence that has grown as US pressure has forced a cutback in accessing cheaper Russian oil.

India's strategic oil reserves currently meet the country's oil demand for about 10 days (excluding the oil companies' reserves that can meet the demand for another 60 days) and a week's worth of fuel stocks, underlining the challenges arising from possible supply and price shocks. Serious efforts to build robust strategic reserves for oil and gas would be worthwhile. Oil imports account for 31 per cent of gross domestic product, and, according to a Nomura calculation, every 10 per cent rise in the price of oil worsens the current account by 0.4 percentage point. Although India has been running a modest current-account deficit, turmoil in financial markets could affect capital flows, which were anyway under pressure, and make financing more difficult. The rupee could come under renewed pressure.

Furthermore, the concurrent inflationary pressures will demand a rethink on budgetary and monetary assumptions. To be sure, India could diversify sourcing options, from Venezuela and the US, for example, but both are relatively costly. To leave the impact on inflation, though not a big worry at the moment, the government could absorb part of the hit by reducing the central excise on petrol and diesel. A major impact could also be felt on the gas economy. India imports 85 per cent of its liquefied petroleum gas from the Gulf and has no strategic reserves.

In contrast to the relative flexibility to deal with fuel-supply disruption, India has fewer options when it comes to ensuring the safety of its roughly nine million diaspora members. In countries that are now on frontlines of Iranian attacks — Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates — Indians account for more than a third of the population. Most are employed in low-skilled jobs in construction and hospitality and they come from the poorer parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Telangana, while skilled workers mostly belong to Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Evacuating such large numbers from these hot zones will be challenging in itself. The additional issue to contend with will be the diminution of remittances. West Asia remains the largest source of remittance after the US. An indefinite suspension of this source of money could impose fresh hardships on thousands of dependent families. Therefore, managing these multiple known unknowns will test the government in new ways. A lot will depend on how long the conflict lasts and in what ways it changes the geopolitics of the region.

Preventive leap

Nationwide HPV drive can target the cervical cancer burden

The Government of India has launched a free, nationwide vaccination drive for Human Papillomavirus (HPV), offering single doses of Gardasil-4 shots to all girls aged 14 years at government health facilities across the country. Cervical cancer remains the second-most common cancer among Indian women, with nearly 80,000 new cases and over 42,000 deaths each year, accounting for almost one-fifth of the global burden. According to estimates from the 2022 data of the International Agency for Research on Cancer based on Global Cancer Observatory (GLOBOCAN), India accounts for around 19 per cent of the cases of global cervical cancer and 23 per cent of the deaths.

Cost had earlier been a barrier. In the private market, vaccines such as Gardasil, manufactured by Merck, cost ₹3,000-4,000 per dose. With multiple doses required, this places full immunisation beyond the reach of many families. Now with public procurement, this changes the equation. Through collaboration with Gavi, the vaccine alliance, India can access vaccines at significantly lower prices, enabling a large-scale rollout without imposing a financial strain on households. Embedding HPV vaccination in the Universal Immunisation Programme builds on the country's long experience in mass immunisation. India's vaccine-delivery systems have evolved considerably, supported by stronger cold-chain infrastructure and digital tracking tools. The U-WIN portal, a user-friendly digital platform under the immunisation programme, enables seamless access to records, flexible scheduling, and "anytime, anywhere" access for beneficiaries. As of December 31, 2025, U-WIN had registered 143.2 million beneficiaries, recorded 16.2 million deliveries, and documented 609.8 million vaccine doses administered. Leveraging this digital backbone for HPV vaccination can help track doses and generate reliable real-time data.

However, vaccination alone will not eliminate cervical cancer. One of India's biggest weaknesses remains low screening coverage. Many cases are detected at advanced stages, when treatment becomes more complex and survival rates fall sharply. A 2025 epidemiological study published on *ScienceDirect* estimated that only about 1.9 per cent of Indian women aged 30-49 years had undergone cervical screening. Large regional differences in health care infrastructure further complicate implementation. Urban centres may be equipped to manage vaccination and follow-up care, but rural and underserved districts often face shortages of trained personnel and diagnostic facilities. Without parallel investment in routine screening, and follow-up care, the full benefits of vaccination will not materialise. Awareness is another critical factor. Myths around vaccines and a limited understanding of HPV transmission could affect uptake. Awareness campaigns could communicate that the vaccine prevents cancer. For this, frontline health workers require training not only in administration but also in counselling families and addressing hesitancy.

Ultimately, the programme's success will depend on sustained and coordinated execution. Effective tracking, monitoring adverse events with vigilance, continuously training health care workers, and close coordination among the Centre, states, and local bodies will be vital. If implemented well, the initiative could demonstrate how India's pharmaceutical capacity, digital infrastructure, and public health outreach can converge to address a long-standing disease burden.

The accountable city CEO

India's cities need bureaucrat-CEOs who do more than maintain order



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

The 16th Finance Commission has rightly ramped up the allocation of funds to both rural and urban local bodies to nearly ₹8 trillion, spread over five years, with 41 per cent of it earmarked specifically for cities. The Finance Commission has also added certain conditionalities to these grants, the key ones being the constitution of State Finance Commissions, the timely completion of audited accounts of local bodies, and the presence of elected local bodies in place. These are rightly the necessary core conditionalities and will help strengthen the underlying institutions.

In tandem, the Union Budget allocated ₹1 trillion to the Urban Challenge Fund, aimed at catalysing fund flows to urban local bodies (ULBs) over the next five years. Here as well, there are conditionalities: 25 per cent of the allocation will be released only if the state government contributes a similar amount, with the rest to be mobilised from market sources in the form of bonds, loans, public-private partnership, etc. The Budget therefore aims to incentivise not just fund flows but also the strengthening of market institutions.

In my view, both these measures will lead to significant improvements in the institutions that govern the operations of ULBs and funds flow to them. But while they ease fund flows, they do not address the urban governance problem that has led to the widespread poor performance of Indian cities. We, therefore, need another initiative to correct an underlying issue that lies at the root of almost everything that's wrong with India's cities.

But first, consider this. Why are there so many rural areas that do not want to be classified as urban? Some believe that this is because of the fear of higher taxes, but property taxes are minimal in India, so that

is not the core issue. Others believe that this will mean zoning regulations that could adversely affect large landowners. But that is also not the case because conversion to urban area leads to an improvement in infrastructure, and increase in land values, so the landowners benefit immensely.

The core reason is that rural governments are controlled by politicians, but city governments have allocated powers to the bureaucracy. Therefore, by agreeing to convert a rural area into an urban one, a rural politician would effectively be signing away his powers to a bureaucracy controlled by the state government.

Score of opinions, studies, and reports have identified the issue as this: The locally elected authority (e.g., the Mayor), who is accountable to the public through the electoral process, has few powers. The bureaucrat-chief executive officer (CEO) who runs the city has greater powers; he controls the administration and effectively reports to the state government. Therefore, those who are accountable to the city's residents (municipal councillors and the mayor) have to get work done through bureaucrats who are accountable not to the people of the city but to the state government. This mismatch between accountability and authority causes all kinds of governance failures. It also impacts fund flows to city governments, which, in turn, perpetuates the poor resources and capacities available to city governments in India.

But consider this factoid as well. Nothing in our institutional structure stops the state government from allocating greater powers to the political head of the city council. But in over 75 years of Independence, not a single state government has delegated powers to the



LAVEESH BHANDARI

Unifying the bond market

One of the most desirable financial sector reforms would be the "unification of the bond market", i.e., unifying the regulatory regime for G-Secs (government securities) and corporate bonds. This would greatly simplify the lives of investors, traders, and other stakeholders, besides increasing retail participation in G-Secs and developing the corporate bond market.

To facilitate retail participation in G-Secs, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) came out in November 2021 with a scheme for direct retail participation in G-Secs through its own depository system and the NDS-OM trading platform. The result has been hardly encouraging. The RBI's scheme is not the right approach to encourage retail participation; it only results in an artificial segmentation of investors across different types of securities.

G-Secs are like any other security. To achieve greater ease of doing business and with a view to facilitating greater investor participation, G-Secs should be issued and traded through the stock exchange mechanism. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi)-regulated on-line bond trading platforms, introduced in 2022, have been quite a success in enhancing trading volumes of corporate bonds.

The trading and settlement take place through the market infrastructure institutions regulated by Sebi. While these platforms also facilitate trading in G-Secs, they haven't helped much, as most of the G-Sec trading volume is on the NDS-OM platform and settlement is through the Clearing Corporation of India Ltd (CCIL), institutions under the RBI's regulatory oversight. The question to be asked is: Why have two separate trading mechanisms for corporate bonds and G-Secs?

While shares and bonds of government-owned companies and statutory bodies can be held in an investor's single demat account with securities market depositories, G-Secs require a separate account with the RBI's Public Debt Office (PDO), which holds only G-Secs. Unlike the PDO, the securities market depositories have a wide spatial spread, covering 99 per cent of the PIN codes in the country.

Having a single operating demat account both for G-Secs and other securities will ease the process of making investments across all securities, thereby increasing the investor base for debt securities. The government should issue G-Secs in demat form so that demat holders (currently more than 210 million and increasing) can easily and smoothly invest in G-Secs. In fact, G-Sec-based exchange traded funds should be developed to increase retail participation.

G-Secs have an overwhelming presence in the debt market in India — as of December 2025, the outstanding G-Secs were around ₹115 trillion, as compared to outstanding corporate bonds of ₹58 trillion. The pricing of corporate bonds is intrinsically dependent on the presence of a continuous yield curve in G-Secs. At present the G-Sec and corporate bond market follow different regulatory regimes. Unifying these markets would enable seamless transmission of pricing information from G-Secs to corporate bonds. Having the same regulatory regime for trading, clearing and settlement of corporate bonds and G-Secs and a holding structure that provides for frictionless transfer of G-Sec and corporate bonds will result in "economies of scale and scope" leading to greater competition, efficiency, and liquidity in the markets.

An active repo market is an important pre-condition for improving liquidity in the corporate bond

market. This is mainly because active traders, especially market makers, are in a position to provide finer two-way quotes (bid-offer spreads), if they are able to finance the inventory of bond holdings through an active repo market.

In addition to helping market makers, an active repo market has the following additional benefits: (i) Improves liquidity in the underlying debt securities, (ii) Holders of debt have the ability to monetise debt securities without selling the underlying, and (iii) In the short to medium term, issuers also benefit as the prices of bonds may improve due to improved liquidity.

While the repo market is a good basis for issuance and trading of corporate bonds are vested with Sebi, such powers for repo in corporate bonds are with the RBI. The right approach would be to have a single regulator regulating all aspects of the corporate bond market. This would require amendment to the RBI Act.

Different governments over the decades have been talking about the need to deepen the bond market in India. The Securities Market Code (SMC) Bill, introduced in Parliament in December 2025, was an opportunity to *inter alia* harmonise the regulatory architecture of the bond market. Unfortunately, the SMC confines itself to the consolidation of the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act (SCRA), the Sebi Act, and the Depositories Act. It should have comprehensively looked into the bond market-related provisions in all concerned laws, including the Government Securities Act, 2006, the RBI Act, 1934, and the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, to take a holistic view and suggest appropriate amendments. The government must take steps to bring in required amendments to the SMC Bill to unify the bond market, and bring all aspects of regulating the corporate bond market under a single regulator.

The author is, respectively, former chairman of Sebi and partner, SPRV consultants

The author heads CSEF Research Foundation. The views are personal

Marketing the UMA way



BOOK REVIEW

AMBI PARAMESWARAN

Why do large multinationals struggle when they enter India? They often blame our red tape and procedural issues. Some blame our chaotic retail infrastructure. Others speak about the fickleness of the Indian consumers. I remember discussing this with Dorab Sopariwala, who was then an advisor at the ad agency in which I was working. Dorab is a marketing/consumer research veteran who incidentally did his higher studies in the United Kingdom, and even worked in marketing research in London/Europe. Having worked on

projects across the world he had a simple diagnosis: Most MNCs see India as one country. He felt that while MNCs see Europe as a continent, they fail to see India as a continent. Those who can see the difference when they enter India don't make the mistake of trying to "blow the ocean" to use a metaphor. They slice and dice India and win the battle, one step at a time.

I was reminded of Dorab's wise words when I was reading *Marketing That Works - Building Breakthrough Brands in India*. The author, Shivaji Das Gupta, is an ad industry veteran who advises companies on building customer-centric brands in India. Early in his book, he introduces us to his world of UMA - Unify, Magnify and Amplify. He does this by questioning the age-old wisdom of marketing — STP (Segmentation, Targeting, Positioning). In all marketing textbooks, STP is the foundation for building brands. You

segment the market. Identify the target consumer. Position the brand to appeal to this consumer.

Mr Das Gupta asks if we need to question the application of STP in a world that is being buffeted by digital platforms. He writes, "Facebook, Instagram, Amazon, Uber and many others built their empires on nurturing aggregator values — quite the opposite of a narrowing market model rooted in one-time Western truths, class divides and codes of denial."

Instead of blindly applying STP, Mr Das Gupta says firstly you Unify; see the opportunities of one nation and many stories. In Magnify, you sharply define sources of revenue. And finally, in Amplify, you bring the brand to life. The logic of the approach comes from the fact that digital medium has unified people across languages and geographies in a vast, heterogeneous country like India. But they are not the same. You need to

identify the sources of revenue and then apply your brand's proposition to them.

After laying the foundation to the UMA model in the first half of the book, Mr Das Gupta offers 28 nuggets, each looking at one aspect of the Indian consumer that has changed. And at the end of each of these nuggets, he applies the UMA spotlight.

For example, Nugget #1 is about shopping: "Why must India shop together?" The rise of e-commerce and quick commerce has opened new windows of opportunity. You can unify if you identify emerging patterns in shopping and societal bonding. You can magnify impact by going beyond categories defined purely by consumption. And you can amplify brand equity by aligning it with progressive interpretations of tradition. Another example is Nugget #4, "A nation of traitors." Are Indian consumers fickle,

ready to drop a brand on a whim? Can companies try and retain the better consumers? Can they get them to upgrade? Again, the UMA model provides some interesting solutions. Understand the dynamics of upgrade. Expand the range of opportunities. Build brand expression by elevating the acquisition experience.

The 28 nuggets make engaging reading. And each covers a different aspect of the Indian market and Indian consumer. For example, Nugget #7 is, "Don't miss the Maruti 800 moment": How Suzuki changed a country's definition of a car. Or Nugget #8: "When cool becomes hot" or how air conditioning has become the standard. In Nugget #9 Das Gupta asks: How elastic is your brand? Can you stretch it beyond narrow product lines? When will it go "snapp"? Many of these nuggets gave me time

to pause and reflect. Nugget #19 "Home-Living in every Cohnalla": How community living has been redefined with the emergence of gated communities. Or Nugget #24: "Bring on the silver magic": The rise and rise of the silver haired generation. You may not want to give up on your STP obsession but I assure you that the 28 nuggets will give you enough fodder for thought. They have all been written eloquently and make their points well. You will notice some common themes such as the use of digital platforms, the growth of Unified Payments Interface, the increase in consumer affluence and so on. But even then, each nugget has been put together carefully. I suspect Mr Das Gupta may have another 28 waiting to be penned. And I eagerly await the next version of the book. Read this book and be ready to see Indian and Indian consumers through a new lens.

The reviewer is an independent brand coach and author. His latest book *Marketing Mixology* looks at the four essential skills for marketing success

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LEGAL

Marriage as partnership: HC reframes role of 'homemaker'

Amaal Sheikh
New Delhi, March 2

"A HOMEMAKER does not 'sit idle'; she performs labour that enables the earning spouse to function effectively," the Delhi High Court observed, rejecting a common assumption that non-earning spouses seeking maintenance are economically inactive.

A recent judgment reframed how courts assess homemakers, stating that the contribution of a spouse managing the household cannot be dismissed merely because it does not generate income or appear in financial records. It treats homemaking not as dependency, but as labour that shapes legal entitlements arising from marriage, including maintenance and financial support after separation.

The observations came in a case concerning maintenance claimed by a wife who had left employment and was caring for the couple's child while the husband, a drilling engineer working in Kuwait, and earning more than Rs 5 lakh per month, lived abroad. This raised the question whether educational qualifications or theoretical earning capacity could justify the denial of maintenance.

The court noted that a newly married woman was often expected to "give up her employment to devote her time to the household" even when she was educated and professionally capable. Yet, when marriages deteriorate, "the same husband takes a starkly contrary position and contends that the wife is well-qualified... and is deliberately choosing to remain unemployed while seeking maintenance." This stand, the court said, "cannot be encouraged."

WIDER JUDICIAL TREND

In *Kannan Naidu v. Kamala Ammal*, the Madras HC recognised homemaking as an indirect financial contribution while deciding property rights.

In *Surjanjan Saha v. Rupma Saha*, the Delhi HC rejected demands that a homemaker produce income tax returns to prove unemployment, observing that requiring such proof from a person with no taxable income amounts to "demanding the impossible".

A magistrate and an appellate court denied relief, describing her as an "able-bodied" and educated woman capable of employment and referring to bank transactions to suggest independent means. The family court, however, granted monthly maintenance of Rs 50,000. The High Court had to decide whether educational qualification and theoretical earning capacity could defeat a maintenance claim.

Addressing the label of the 'idle' spouse, the court listed the activities that disappear from legal accounting: managing households, raising children, and reorganising one's life around the earning spouse's career and transfers.

The judgment reframed marital economics itself: "Where one spouse earns income in the marketplace, and the other sustains the domestic sphere, the economic stability of the household is the result of combined, though differently manifested, contributions." In sum, the court moved homemaking from the realm of moral appreciation into legal recognition.

'Capacity to earn' vs 'actual earning'

Matrimonial litigation has long held that an educated spouse should support herself. But the court said that "the capacity to earn and actual earning are distinct concepts... mere capacity to earn cannot be a ground to deny maintenance".

The court also noted the difficulties associated with re-entering the workforce after long career breaks.

Although voluntary decisions leave employment may carry practical consequences, it insisted that courts must evaluate reality rather than assumptions. Maintenance, the court said, cannot be viewed only as protection against destitution but as a mechanism of fairness between spouses.

The court situated this within a partnership model of marriage. "A marriage is not only a personal relationship but also a partnership in which each spouse contributes in different ways." So, maintenance becomes recognition of contribution, even where that contribution was unpaid.

WAR IN WEST ASIA

Iran's power pyramid, with Supreme Leader at the top



EXPERT EXPLAINS

BY AK RAMAKRISHNAN

RETIRED PROFESSOR OF WEST ASIAN STUDIES, JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY

THE ASSASSINATION of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 86, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, marks the end of a significant figure of a style of leadership that the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79 and the post-revolution politics have produced.

Khamenei was killed in an attack by the US and Israeli forces and a process to find his successor was set in motion immediately, so that the Assembly of Experts, a deliberative body, can choose the next leader.

Meanwhile, the three-member Interim Leadership Council that will assume the duties of the Supreme Leader has already been formed under Constitutional provisions. The events showcase the established procedures that the Iranian political system has in place for times of crisis.

Threads of religion and politics

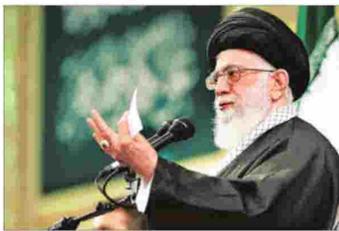
Ayatollah Khamenei represented and led a political system consisting of hierarchical but interrelated institutions, and a political culture developed through a variety of processes after 1979.

However, the close linkages between religion and politics in the Shia-majority Iran have a longer history. The anti-monarchist ethos of Shia religious leaders and their participation in a range of political movements in modern Iranian political history warrants recognition here.

Key examples include the Tobacco Movement of the 19th century, launched against concessions granted by the Iranian royals to the British and the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11 for a constitutional monarchy. An anti-monarchist stance has been common in the participation of religious leaders.

The ideological leadership provided by the first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, while remaining in exile in France, for the 1979 revolution was crucial in shaping the character of both the revolution and the Islamic Republic.

While almost every section of the Iranian



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

population participated in the anti-Shah protests of the late 70s, the religious section was able to muster more legitimacy and popularity due to its ideological and strategic leadership.

The strategic advantage for the Shia clergy can be attributed to multiple factors, a significant one being the role of mosques as a major site of political activism. Friday prayer gatherings became a point of religious-political assembly. This was because the Shah's apparatus, like his secret police SAVAK, surveilled public places, leaving mosques as among the few places of *bast* (sanctuary) in a repressive society.

Khomeini and Khamenei

The ideological leadership of religious scholars further led a revolutionary interpretation of religious texts and practices. They enabled people to link the transformative potential of their belief system to the requirements of anti-monarchist and anti-imperialist political action.

Islamic interpretations given by intellectuals like Ali Shariati did not envisage a political leadership of the clergy. But, Ayatollah Khomeini's interpretations on the linkages between Islam and politics projected the idea of Islamic Government under the leadership of the religious jurist-prudent. Khomeini's idea of *velayat-e-faqih* (rule of the jurist-prudent) thus became a cornerstone of the political system.

The Islamic Republic's Constitution drew heavily from these ideas and from the republicanism of the French political system. The overarching power of the Supreme Leader in the 1979 Constitution is adopted from the 'rule of the jurist-prudent' idea.

Ayatollah Khomeini was followed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the Supreme Leader after Khomeini died in 1989. The Constitutional changes in 1989 broadly

maintained its original character. The level of power that Khomeini wielded was curtailed to an extent.

The Supreme Leader, selected by the elected Assembly of Experts, a popularly elected President and the Majlis (the Parliament) represent different facets of the political system. The selection of Khomeini's successor was not without controversy. Even though Ayatollah Montazeri was designated to the position, it ultimately went to Khamenei, who was already President of Iran for two terms between 1981 and 1989.

His Presidency saw the eight-year Iran-Iraq war and he made it a point to regularly visit the families of martyrs of the war.

In that sense, Ayatollah Khamenei fit both religious and political roles well. Known for his headline politics internationally and seen as a pragmatic leader by some Iranian analysts, his leadership came under severe scrutiny in recent years. The Mahsa Amini protests of 2022 and the recent demonstrations over economic frustrations pointed to the domestic concerns over the regime's authoritarian rule and Iran's global economic isolation. His idea of a resistance economy — one that is self-reliant to confront economic sanctions — was not enough to overcome Iran's economic woes.

After Supreme Leader

The political system of Iran has seen elections being regularly held for the Presidency, the Majlis and local governments. The ideological divergence among the so-called reformists and hardliners has remained a major feature of Iranian politics for decades now.

Khamenei, even while supporting hardline candidates, developed a political practice of the Supreme Leader to manage differences. His *fatwa* on the non-use of nuclear weapons and his approval of nuclear negotiations, including the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 with Western nations, showed that ideology and pragmatism could coexist in important realms of state conduct.

However, continued sanctions, Iran's international isolation and the Iranian people's desire to have more say in the affairs of the country, along with more meaningful participation, created a significant divergence between the system and its people.

There are many legitimate questions that arise out of the gap between people's demands and the delivery and conduct of the state today. The ongoing war and the assassination of its leadership place unprecedented challenges to the political order in Iran.

Making of modern Iran

Even before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, there was a history of Shia Muslim leaders participating in anti-monarchist protests.

To escape the Shah's repressive rule, mosques became a sanctuary for many in the late 1970s.

Post-1979 Iran was born from a mix of politics and religion, with processes to ensure continuity beyond the Supreme Leader

KEY BODIES

Interim Leadership Council

Under Article 111 of Iran's Constitution, a temporary leadership council would assume the Supreme Leader's duties until a successor is elected. This council comprises President Masoud Pezeshkian; Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejdi; and Ayatollah Alireza Amini, deputy chairman of the Assembly of Experts and a member of the Guardian Council.

Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)

Responsible for debating and building consensus on critical national security issues, the SNSC is Iran's top national security body. While the president serves as its chairman, its other members include top ministers, the Speaker of parliament, the Chief Justice, and top military officials representing the armed forces and the IRGC, among others.

Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)

The IRGC is the strongest and best-equipped section of Iran's armed forces. Formed soon after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, it answers directly to the Supreme Leader — unlike the ordinary military. Over the decades, it has gained and extended its influence both at home and abroad.

Basij and Quds Force

The Basij militia, an internal security paramilitary force controlled by the IRGC, is often used to crack down on protests inside Iran. The Quds Force, an elite IRGC unit focusing on special operations outside Iran, has spearheaded the country's regional strategy of supporting affiliated Shiite groups in West Asia.

Assembly of Experts

Made up of senior ayatollahs elected every eight years, the Assembly is the body that appoints the Supreme Leader. The constitution also gives it the power to question and even dismiss a leader. In practice, the republic's most senior figures usually choose the leader, which is then approved by the Assembly.

Guardian Council

Half appointed by the Supreme Leader and half by the Chief Justice, the 12-member Guardian Council can veto laws passed by parliament and disqualify election candidates. In the past, this mandate has been used to block potential critics of Khamenei.

After strikes on Iran, expanding theatre of conflict in West Asia

Rishika Singh
New Delhi, March 2

MISSILES CONTINUED to fly across West Asia on Monday, as the US and Israel bombed Iran and it retaliated, aiming for US military bases that dot the region.

Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE have all been impacted, shattering the calm these countries have enjoyed so far, insulated from their volatile surroundings and emerging as a destination of choice for expats from around the world.

Iran's confirmed targets

Iran's strikes have been aimed at Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Bahrain and the UAE. In many regions, debris and injuries have been attributed not to the attacks but to the interceptors thwarting them. Some major hits include:

US Navy's 5th Fleet headquarters, Bahrain: The AP reported that the island kingdom of Bahrain said one person was killed by shrapnel from an intercepted missile. Home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet, Bahrain said it intercepted 61 missiles and 34 attack drones.

Ships rotationally deploy here from the

Strikes, counter-strikes



Pacific and Atlantic Fleets. The area of responsibility for the fleet encompasses about 2.5 million square miles and includes the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea. It includes critical choke points at the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal.

Ararico refinery, Saudi Arabia: The Saudi Arabian state oil company, the largest in the world, temporarily shut down its major Ras Tanura oil refinery near Dammam on the Persian Gulf after Iran

drones targeted it. Saudi state TV reported no casualties from the fire at the refinery.

US jets shot down in Kuwait: CNN reported that three US fighter jets were accidentally shot down by Kuwaiti air defences in a "friendly fire incident," citing the US military.

Al Jazeera also cited the Kuwaiti Defence Ministry, which said that the Al Al-Salem Air Base came under attack by several ballistic missiles, which were all intercepted. One death was reported on Sunday. At least three US service personnel have also died.

Energy facilities, Qatar: Qatar's Defence Ministry said two drones struck energy facilities in Ras Laffan. Bloomberg reported that state-owned petroleum company QatarEnergy ceased LNG production after the attacks. Notably, LNG imports accounted for 50% of India's overall imports from Qatar in 2024.

Palm Jumeirah, Burj Al Arab and Dubai airport: Explosions were reported at the luxury hotel. Drone debris caused a fire at the hotel, the AP reported. Three people were reported dead in the UAE.

Why these targets

Unlike past conflicts, the widening

spread of attacks suggests an Iran under great pressure, with President Masoud Pezeshkian describing Khamenei's killing as "a great crime".

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, in a letter to the UN on Saturday, said they would utilise "all necessary defensive capabilities and measures" to counter the US-Israeli attacks. "Consequently, all bases, facilities, and assets of hostile forces in the region are considered legitimate military targets. Iran will exercise this inherent right decisively until the aggression is completely and unequivocally halted," he wrote.

He also told Al Jazeera, "We are not attacking our neighbours in the Persian Gulf countries, we are targeting the presence of the US in these countries."

Notably, Oman, which had so far been negotiating US-Iran talks, announced Sunday that the Duqm commercial port was targeted by two drones, injuring one worker. Oil tankers have also been reportedly hit.

Experts also believe that Iran is trying to exert pressure enough so that these countries can pressure upon the US to arrange for a ceasefire. Turkey also has a major US military air base, but a direct attack on Turkey can get NATO involved.

SPORT

Germany's pitch for 2036 Olympics overshadowed by the 'Nazi Games' of 1936

Mihir Vasavda
Mumbai, March 2

THE COUNTRY'S president calls it "historically problematic". A former chancellor sees a chance to "clearly show Germany has learned from history". A historian links the optics of "an anniversary celebration". An economist predicts the "positive effects" that could prevail.

As India aggressively positions itself as a candidate to host the 2036 Olympics, centring its pitch on peace, religious diversity and economic rise, its rival bidder, Germany, confronts a question overshadowed by its past: exactly a century after the Nazi Olympics of 1936, it could reopen wounds for victims of Nazism and their descendants, besides triggering international media narratives that focus heavily on Hitler's Games rather than modern Germany. There are concerns that far-right groups could appropriate this symbolism.

Historian Oliver Hilmes told a German media outlet, "There is almost an anniversary character, the strange impression of a 100th anniversary celebration, which is somehow positive." A survey found that 67% of Berlin residents oppose a bid to host the Olympics in any year, indicating unease.

The debate resurfaced after German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier warned that deliberately choosing 2036 risked turning history into a marketing device. The German Olympic Association president, Thomas Weiskert, responded by saying that "all dates would remain open".

Instrumentalisation of history

Steinmeier suggested that the issue isn't that Germany shouldn't host — it's that the centenary year is uniquely sensitive.

Critics argue that returning to the Olympic stage exactly 100 years later could unintentionally create a symbolic "echo" of 1936. It could reopen wounds for victims of Nazism and their descendants, besides triggering international media narratives that focus heavily on Hitler's Games rather than modern Germany. There are concerns that far-right groups could appropriate this symbolism.

Historian Oliver Hilmes told a German media outlet, "There is almost an anniversary



Jesse Owens won the gold at the 1936 Olympics. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Germany was awarded the Games in 1936. In 1933, after Hitler came to power, he and the Nazi government issued a declaration — at the request of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) — stating that the Games would be open to "all races and denominations". In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws were enacted, bringing the regime's antisemitic and racist ideology to the forefront.

IOC's critics argue that Germany should have been stripped of the Games after Hitler seized power. An American-led boycott was also proposed, but it did not materialise. The 1936 Olympics saw nearly 4,000 athletes from 49 nations compete — a record at the time.

But the Games are remembered more for Hitler's propaganda for his political ideology of the Aryans' racial superiority. Hilmes said: "Even the basic sporting idea that the better might win could not please the Nazis. In their world of thought, 'the Aryan prevailed'. And so, it was perceived by Hitler as shame that the Black American Jesse Owens finally won four gold medals in Berlin." Germany ended up winning the most medals at the event.

Confronting history

Supporters of the bid point to Germany's political culture built around *Ermahnungskultur* ("culture of remembrance"), which acknowledges the Nazi regime's history and their persecution of Jewish people and other minorities.

Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder directly disagreed with Steinmeier's comments. "Hosting the Games in Germany on that date would offer an opportunity to demonstrate to the world, and also to the younger generation in Germany, what we as a democratic Germany have learned from our history."

Support for the proposal extends beyond local political circles. For instance, historian Jens-Christian Wagner told a German media outlet that bringing the 2036 Olympics to Berlin would be a "positive step". However, he stressed the importance of critically examining how the 1936 Olympics were appropriated.

The Editorial Page

The Indian EXPRESS
— FOUNDED BY —
RAMNATH GOENKA
— IN 1932 —

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A war without a plan for the day after

WHILE the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, represents a big blow to the clerical establishment, it may or may not be an irreversible setback for the regime. The US and Israel, whose stated aim is regime change — notwithstanding Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's way that "this is not a regime change war, but the regime sure did change" — seem to be betting on intensive airstrikes while exhorting the Iranian people to complete it on the ground. This strategy may overlook the resilience of the deeply entrenched authoritarian system designed to withstand external pressures. This is particularly so in Iran, where powerful institutions are controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Trump's America may be about to learn that respecting a leader as powerful as Khamenei is not the same thing as resigning a country's future. While its action in Iran appears, especially, to be an escalation without a plan, this is a lesson that America has failed to learn even earlier.

President Trump has established a formidable track record of acting unilaterally, without consultation with domestic and foreign stakeholders. His imposition of global tariffs, his threats against Greenland, and his attempt to cut deals with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Ukraine, are part of this pattern. In the case of Iran, there is no indication that he is stitching up a coalition or partnering with alternative power centres inside the country. He must know that as a scenario akin to the capture of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, succeeded by a regime acceptable to the White House, is unlikely, Iran is a much larger and militarily stronger state with a network of regional proxies and, domestically, the deeply embedded ideological force of the IRGC, whose singular mission is to defend the 1979 revolution. The question, then, is whether the US and Israel have waged a war without a plan for the day after, one that risks breaking a country and leaving recovery and reconstruction to the mercy of the victors.

Trump portrays himself as a president of peace, yet since he returned to office last year, his administration has bombed seven countries. His claims of ending wars are embedded in exaggeration or falsehood. America's historical record in engineering regime change is troubling. In recent history, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya were torn apart by US-led interventions and continue to grapple with instability. Ironically, one of Trump's earliest political stances was a scathing critique of George W. Bush's war in Iraq, a war that had bipartisan support in the US Congress. This is the case here: Democrats and the MAGA base are opposed to the Iran campaign. Trump helms a situation he once condemned unequivocally. As new fronts open and fires spread across the region, in cities that pride themselves as the new cosmopolitan centres, from Dubai to Abu Dhabi and Doha, the absence of a plan has a terrible daily cost.

Government's silence on killing of Iran leader is not neutral, it is abdication

ON MARCH 1, Iran confirmed that its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei, had been assassinated in targeted strikes carried out the previous day by the United States and Israel. The killing of a sitting head of state in the midst of ongoing negotiations marks a grave rupture in contemporary international relations. Yet, beyond the shock of the event, what stands out equally starkly is New Delhi's silence.

The Government of India has refrained from condemning the assassination or the violation of Iranian sovereignty. Initially, ignoring the massive US-Israeli onslaught, the Prime Minister confined himself to congratulating Iran's retaliatory strike on the UAE, without addressing the sequence of events that preceded it. Later, he uttered platitudes about his "deep concern" and talked of "diplomacy and diplomacy" — which is precisely what was under way before the massive unprovoked attacks launched by Israel and the US. When the targeted killing of a foreign leader draws no clear defence of sovereignty or international law from our country and impartiality is abandoned, it raises serious doubts about the direction and credibility of our foreign policy.

Silence, in this instance, is not neutral. The assassination was carried out without a formal declaration of war and during an ongoing diplomatic process. Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. A targeted killing of a serving head of state strikes at the heart of these principles. If such acts pass without principled objection from the world's largest democracy, the erosion of international norms becomes easier to normalise.

The unease is compounded by the timing. Barely 48 hours before the assassination, the Prime Minister returned from a visit to Israel, where he reiterated unequivocal support for the government of Benjamin Netanyahu — even as the Gaza conflict continues to draw global outrage over the scale of civilian casualties, many of them women and children. At a time when much of the Global South, along with major powers — and India's partners in BRICS such as Russia and China — have kept their distance, India's high-profile political endorsement without moral clarity marks a visible and troubling departure. The consequences of this event extend beyond geopolitics. The ripples of this tragedy are visible across continents. And India's stance is signalling tacit endorsement of this tragedy.

The Indian National Congress has unequivocally condemned the bombings and targeted assassinations on Iranian soil, describing them as a dangerous escalation with grave regional and global consequences. We have extended condolences to the Iranian people and to Shia communities worldwide, reiterating that India's foreign policy is anchored in the peaceful settlement of disputes, as reflected in Article 51 of the Constitution of India. These principles — sovereign equality, non-intervention and the promotion of peace — have historically been integral to India's diplomatic identity. The present reticence, therefore, appears not merely tactical, but discordant with our stated principles.

For India, this episode is especially troubling. Our ties with Iran are civilisational as well as strategic. In 1994, when sections within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation sought to advance a resolution against India at the UN Commission on Human Rights over Kashmir, Tehran played a consequential role in blocking the effort. That intervention helped prevent the internationalisation of the Kashmir issue at a delicate moment in India's economic trajectory. Iran has also enabled India's diplomatic presence in Zahedan near the Pakistan border — a strategic counter-balance to the development of Gwadar port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The present government would do well to remember that in April 2001, the then prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, during an official visit to Tehran, reaffirmed warmly India's deep ties with Iran, both civilisational and contemporary. His acknowledgement of those long-standing relations seems to hold no relevance for our current government. India's ties with Israel have, in recent years, expanded across defence, agriculture and technology. It is precisely because India maintains relations with both Tehran and Tel Aviv that it possesses diplomatic space to urge restraint. But such space depends on credibility. Credibility, in turn, rests on the perception that India speaks from principle rather than expediency. This is not merely a moral proposition; it is a strategic necessity. Nearly 10 million Indians live and work across the Gulf. In past crises — from the Gulf War to Yemen to Iraq and Syria — India's ability to safeguard its citizens has rested on its credibility as an independent actor, not as a proxy. That credibility did not emerge by accident. India's post-Independence foreign policy was shaped by non-alignment — not as passive neutrality, but as a conscious assertion of strategic autonomy. It was a refusal to become subsumed into the rivalries of great powers. The present moment raises uncomfortable questions about whether that posture is being diluted. An unilateral military action by powerful states looks like retreat from that principle. And in effect, an abandonment of our legacy.



SONIA GANDHI

This matters not only for history, but for India's present ambitions. For a country that seeks to represent the Global South, the optics of acquiescence carry real costs. If sovereignty can be disregarded without consequence, as it is in the case of Iran, smaller powers are left exposed to the whims of the strong. India has repeatedly asserted its support for rules-based international order that protects the weak from coercion. That argument rings hollow if it is not voiced when the test is immediate and uncomfortable. Why should countries in the Global South trust India to defend their territorial integrity tomorrow if it appears hesitant to defend that principle today?

The appropriate forum for resolving this dissonance is Parliament. When it convenes, this disturbing silence over the breakdown of international order must be debated openly and without evasion. The targeted killing of a foreign head of state, the erosion of international norms, and the widening instability in West Asia are not peripheral matters; they touch directly upon India's strategic interests and moral commitments. A clear articulation of India's position is overdue. Democratic accountability demands no less, and strategic clarity requires it.

India has long invoked the ideal of *ivudushaiva kutumbakam* — the world is one family. That civilisational ethos is not a slogan for ceremonial diplomacy; it implies a commitment to justice, restraint and dialogue, even when dialogue is inconvenient. At moments when the rules-based order is under visible strain, silence is abdication. India has long aspired to be more than a regional power; it has sought to serve as the conscience-keeper of the world. That stature was built on a willingness to speak for sovereignty, peace, non-violence and justice even when doing so was inconvenient. At this moment, there is an urgent need for us to rediscover that moral strength and articulate it with clarity and commitment.

The writer is chairperson, Congress Parliamentary Party and member of Rajya Sabha

Why should countries in the Global South trust India to defend their territorial integrity tomorrow if it appears hesitant to defend that principle today?

As conflict roils markets, pain will be felt widely

THE CONFLICT in West Asia has rattled stock markets across the world. On Monday, major Asian markets ended the day in the red. The Nikkei 225 fell by 1.35 per cent. Kospi by 1 per cent and Hang Seng by 2.4 per cent. Indian markets also fell, with the Sensex down 1,948 points or 1.29 per cent at the close. The India VIX, a volatility index, surged 25 per cent as uncertainty rose over the conflict. The FTSE 100 was also down during early trading. With risk aversion setting in, demand for safe haven assets such as gold has surged.

Escalation of the conflict to the wider region has pushed up oil prices — Brent crude oil was up more than 6 per cent — as investors grapple with the implications of the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant share of the world's oil and gas flows. On Sunday, the OPEC+ agreed to increase oil output by 2,06,000 barrels per day. But on Monday, Saudi Aramco's Ras Tanura was reportedly shut down temporarily. Disruptions in supplies will push up oil prices. Some analysts predict that oil prices could touch \$100 per barrel if supply disruptions worsen. For India, which imports a substantial share of its oil needs, higher crude oil prices, sustained over a period, could have implications for inflation and the twin deficits. The Gulf is also home to a large Indian diaspora. Disruptions to its economies could have consequences for remittance flows to India. The US Congress, this is the case here: Democrats and the MAGA base are opposed to the Iran campaign. Trump helms a situation he once condemned unequivocally. As new fronts open and fires spread across the region, in cities that pride themselves as the new cosmopolitan centres, from Dubai to Abu Dhabi and Doha, the absence of a plan has a terrible daily cost.

Navigating volatile Af-Pak belt requires Delhi to be nimble

KHAWAJA ASIF, Pakistan's defence minister, has said that his country is in the midst of an "open war" with Afghanistan because its patience has run out due to terror attacks from Afghan soil. Is war a solution to Pakistan's problems with Afghanistan? Has the Pakistani establishment forgotten that Afghanistan has been the graveyard of empires? Every year, a thousand deaths when Pakistan expressed impatience with terror attacks against it.

At the core of the crisis is Pakistan's perennial desire to turn Afghanistan into a vassal state. The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, hailed in Pakistan as a vindication of its policy, has turned into a nightmare. No longer dependent on Pakistan, the Taliban has charted an independent path. It does not recognise the Durand Line. Pakistan accuses it of providing sanctuary and support to the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Taliban denies the charge — it describes the TTP as Pakistan's internal problem, and accuses Islamabad of harbouring terrorists of its nemesis, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province. Afghan hostility compounds Pakistan's challenge in its volatile tribal belt.

Pakistan has resorted to restrictions on the transit trade of landlocked Afghanistan, expelled a large number of Afghans and carried out periodic airstrikes in Afghanistan. Its hopes of exploiting fissures within the Taliban have been belied. The ongoing hostilities are the second, though more intense, major flare-up between the two countries in four months. Hostilities broke out in October last year following Pakistan's airstrikes in Afghanistan, but they ceased as a result of the efforts of friendly countries. However, the two sides failed to build upon the ceasefire. The trigger for the latest flare-up was provided yet again by Pakistan's airstrikes in Afghanistan close to the Durand Line, allegedly against militant hideouts. The Taliban said the attacks had killed a large number of civilians. This was followed by a Taliban offensive against a large number of Pakistani posts in the border area. Pakistan upped the ante by launching Operation Ghazal-i-Haq

and carried out airstrikes on targets in Kabul, Kandahar and some other areas.

An all-out military conflict is not in the interest of either party. Pakistan can cause considerable damage from the air, but cannot hope to succeed where the Soviets and US-led NATO forces failed. It is up against a very resilient foe. The Taliban would prefer to avoid extensive attrition from the sky. But they have lived with extreme adversity, and will have Afghanistan for over 40 years. If the situation escalates, they would put up a fierce fight rather than yield ground. Not a military match for Pakistan, their preference would be for covert operations and guerrilla tactics.

There have been calls for restraint from the international community. Apprehensive about the threat to its CPEC stakes, China tried its hand at mediation in the past, but failed. The Americans have leaned towards Pakistan. The US under secretary of state for political affairs has offered condolences for the lives lost, adding that the situation would continue to monitor this situation closely and support Pakistan's right to defend itself.

India has strongly condemned Pakistan's recent airstrikes in Afghanistan and reiterated its support for Afghanistan's sovereignty. Radicalisation and instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan have resulted from the internal dynamics of these countries and the short-sighted policies of major powers. India, however, has to deal with the consequences. Besides its civilisational links with the Afghan people, India has also remained their partner in development and against Pakistan's attempts to subjugate them. With the bad memory of the 1990s, when Pakistan used Afghan territory to engineer terror against it, India can not afford to cede strategic space in Afghanistan to hostile forces. Therefore, it has acted pragmatically to upgrade its engagement with the Taliban government. The situation in the Af-Pak belt remains volatile, and India will have to remain nimble-footed.

Sabharwal is India's former high commissioner to Pakistan and author of India's Pakistan Conundrum: Managing a Complex Relationship.

J&K's grit earns it Ranji Trophy — and fans across country

WHEN AKHNOOR'S left-arm pacer Sunil Kumar — the supporting act for Aujib Nabi in the Jammu and Kashmir team — was a net bowler for Kolkata Knight Riders a few years ago, he stopped within 25 metres of his idol, MS Dhoni, but couldn't work up the courage to speak to him. "His attitude — keep your head down, stay calm and move forward — was exemplary," says Kumar, adding he followed Dhoni's path. It's a testament to such perseverance that, in a stacked T20 World Cup season, cricket fans were following updates on the finals of a red-ball domestic championship rooting for J&K and referring to Nabi as a strong contender for the national colours.

Over the last 20 years, passionate ex-cricketers like the late Bishan Singh Bedi, Irfan Pathan, and now Ajay Sharma have tried to nurture cricket in J&K, even as several talented players have sought to hone their cricketing skills by watching whatever was on offer on TV. Mithun Manhas and Brigadier Anil Gupta took over the administration reins to ensure systems were in place. At this moment, there is an urgent need for us to rediscover that moral strength and articulate it with clarity and commitment.

On a glorious Friday, after the J&K batsmen had scored more than 300, Nabi had scythed through Karnataka, watched by the state Chief Minister, Omar Abdullah. Across the country, fans rooted for the unafraid J&K, building up a crescendo on social media to demand a place for Nabi in the Test team. Jammu and Kashmir remain divided in politics. But the cricket team has remained a thick unit, enduring the same struggles, united in the face of slandering by the big teams. Its style isn't new — it's vintage Mumbai *khaudis* batting, drilled in by a Delhi coach. It's the gathering of talents — spinners for turning tracks, seamers for flat pitches, and unburied batsmen — that has worked for J&K. The team hypenates regions bound by history and geography, proving the unifying power of cricket.

Howling coach P Krishna Kumar had told this newspaper how he educated himself to understand the psyche of players from the troubled Kashmir Valley. "They needed to be told that the rest of India cares for them and wants them to do well," he recalled. Today, almost every cricketer fan who watched Nabi bowl two brutish deliveries to scalp K L Rahul and Karun Nair — and many more — wants the J&K pacer in the Indian team. In that clarion call, Nabi united the country as very few cricketers with their fractured fandoms have

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The Taliban would prefer to avoid extensive attrition from the sky. But they have lived with extreme adversity, and will have Afghanistan for over 40 years now. Therefore, if the situation escalates, they would put up a fierce fight rather than yield ground



SHARAT SABHARWAL



SHIVANI NAIK

J&K Ranji win has many back stories

THE MORE instructive number from J&K's maiden Ranji Trophy triumph is not 66 — the years they waited — but 30. That is roughly how long it took the team to win the ICCA chief Brigadier Anil Kumar Gupta shut the door on after taking over in 2021. While the rest of the Indian cricket chased the franchise boom, J&K made a bet: That a region starved of recognition would find its redemption in the grind of red-ball cricket, not quick money. On Saturday, that bet paid off.

It would have been easier to let talented youngsters from Baramulla and Kalakote disappear into T20 entertainment. Gupta chose otherwise. Selectors fanned out to Kishtwar, Poonch and Kupwara. Resilient players were identified to simulate southern conditions. Aujib Nabi, rejected at trials twice, drove 60 km daily to train. A team that lost a quarter-final by a single run last year returned with quiet fury. The Karnataka symmetry is almost too neat. They lifted the Ranji in 1982, the same year J&K recorded their first-ever win in the competition. That it took 44 more years speaks to everything this region has endured — insurgency, neglect, and the prejudice of being considered permanent also-rans.

What makes this resonate beyond sport is the team itself. Captain Paras Dogra, 41 and in his 34th Ranji season, was a Himalachal brought in specifically to bridge the Valley-Jammu faultline. Across the country, fans who rarely follow domestic cricket were tracking scores and demanding a Test cap for Nabi. A region long defined by conflict had united every else behind it. The BCCI should study this — not merely to hand Nabi his India cap, but to ask what becomes possible when administration backs process over profit. Some lessons, like some trophies, take 66 years to arrive.

40 YEARS AGO

March 3, 1986



Meerut curfew reimposed

CURFEW WAS reimposed in the trouble-torn areas of Meerut district following three deaths in stabbing incidents during a curfew relaxation in the morning. The areas affected include Delhi Gate, Kotwalli, and parts of Lisari Gate, the Rail Road police circle.

India to buy aircraft carrier

INDIA AND Britain are on the verge of finalising a deal, estimated to be worth approximately £60 million, for the sale of the British aircraft carrier *Hermes* to the Indian Navy, according to well-informed sources in London.

Negotiations for the purchase of the 28,000-tonne ship by India are understood to be in advanced stages. The head of sales in the British Defence Ministry, Colin Chandler, paid a visit to New Delhi two days ago while a team from the Indian Navy is in London.

Violence in Kashmir

THE LAST few days' violence in Kashmir is bound to have a bearing on the Centre's policy on Kashmir as well as the present political set-up in the state. The policy changes are likely to be set in motion soon, while efforts are under way to reassure the minority community that became the target of the post-

February 19 violence in the Valley, particularly in Anantnag district. The minority community of Kashmiri Pandits has suffered discrimination, but the recent violence has left them in a state of shock.

Rent control dilemma

THE UNION Government is in a dilemma over Ministry of Urban Development's move to amend the Delhi Rent Control Act. While the ministry is all set for the amendment with detailed proposals finalised by its experts, the government is in a fix whether or not to initiate amending legislation in Parliament for fear of opening up the "Pandora's box" again.

The Ideas Page

TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2026



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AAP leaders have won a reprieve, but the system is beset with a creeping unfairness



SUHANS PALSHIKAR

THE CASE against AAP leaders didn't stand the court's scrutiny. But that doesn't matter because the damage has already been done. Both Manish Sisodia and Arvind Kejriwal spent considerable time behind bars, having had difficulty obtaining bail. Most importantly, their image was sufficiently tarnished and the party pushed to the wall. AAP lost the Delhi Assembly election because of anti-incumbency and its many mistakes, but can ignore the role of the loud accusations and court cases as contributory factors?

Many may not find it easy to be sympathetic toward AAP and yet, it would be a folly not to read the subtext of the drama. The current outcome is, in a sense, irrelevant and surreal. The purpose behind the court case has been served. Kejriwal was not the only CM to be arrested. Hemant Soren followed him to jail. Nor is AAP the only party to suffer. The BJP has gone quiet; Congress finds it tough to face the slew of court cases against its leaders. What happens to such cases is secondary. They showcase the ease with which the ruling party at the Centre is wielding the stick to undermine the Opposition. Court cases are playing a crucial role in the fortunes of parties. So, legal niceties apart, the fundamental question such episodes force us to consider is this: How free and fair is political competition? Neutral cynics would draw attention to the fact that political competition is never really free and fair — the rich and socially powerful always have an advantage. It is not easy to form a new political party and get enough space in the political arena.



ILLUSTRATION: CR SAKSHIMAR

These criticisms are indeed true. But what one is encountering in this instance is the misuse of process. This argument will undoubtedly activate the "what about" industry, pointing out the many misdeeds of other parties when they have been in power. Their sins notwithstanding, what we witness now is a qualitatively different level at which the unfairness of the process vilifies competitive politics. Most non-BJP parties have been at the receiving end of this unfairness, but curiously, they seem to be too unconcerned to think about it collectively.

Multiple mechanisms are developed to neutralise as many impediments to fair competition as possible. The term "free and fair" is not only relevant for a formal conduct of elections, it is central to the existence of multi-party competition. The level playing field is never a given. Democracies try to make sure that the formal terrain is a level playing field.

This argument will undoubtedly activate the 'what about' industry, pointing out the misdeeds of other parties when in power. Their sins notwithstanding, what we witness now is a qualitatively different level

then the damage was already done. The refusal to stay that scheme and halt the damage allowed unfairness to consolidate. It also sent out a message that there will be no red cards shown.

Showing red cards is the job of neutral umpires. But the appointments of election commissioners or the legality of the Special Intensive Revision, the refusal to stay these suggests that the system of red cards is disappearing fast.

Therefore, the entire episode involving AAP leaders needs to be understood in the context of creeping unfairness. A quick glance at cases of corruption initiated against opposition leaders will show how unfair the balance currently is. The withdrawal of cases after the accused join the ruling party is more direct evidence of that unfairness. Consistently, we also notice that beyond mild-mannered — and even awe-filled — commentary, the media has remained silent. If not indulging, about this unfairness. To put it mildly, unfairness is hidden from the public, producing the impression that electoral defeats are due only to a lack of popular support.

Recently, the DMK has taken the lead in reopening the debate on Centre-state relations. But along with the debate over the "reset" of federalism, there is an urgent need for a reset of democratic and competitive politics itself. India's polity and its institutional culture are moving in the direction of deep discomfort with the idea of an opposition. That discomfort leads the ruling party to weaponise investigating agencies and seek the silent complicity of neutral umpires. Perhaps it would be good if the ruling party realises that petty gimmicks to crush the Opposition manifest not its strength but an ambition to impose a closure on the idea of opposition itself. Diminishing the Opposition by non-electoral means is only a step away from losing even the formal framework of competitive politics.

The writer, based in Pune, taught Political Science

US and Israel may not be prepared for Iran's resilience



ANJU GUPTA

THE SECOND round of the US-Israel offensive against Iran began in the early hours of February 28, following weeks of a massive buildup of American firepower in West Asia. Much like the events preceding the 12-day conflict in June 2025, this time, too, US-Israel talks had reached an advanced stage — the two countries were apparently moving toward parallel technical deliberations on enriched uranium and inspections of Iranian nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

US-Israeli forces carried out coordinated aerial strikes across Iranian cities, including the complex housing the Supreme Leader, government ministries, and the Atomic Energy Organisation in Tehran. Supreme Leader Imam Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and several top officials, including the IRGC chief, Major General Mohammad Pakpour, and defence council secretary Ali Shamkhani, have been killed in the attacks.

Iran launched a massive counter-offensive within hours. The Iranian regime has vowed to "avenge the martyrs" of the Supreme Leader and has continued with successive waves of aerial attacks.

All this invites questions: Did the US and Israel cross a red line by targeting the Supreme Leader without being prepared for the fallout? Are they ready for a long and potentially destabilising war in an already volatile Middle East?

Both the US and Israel have framed the offensive in terms that suggest regime change as an objective. However, developments suggest that the Islamic Republic has moved quickly to ensure continuity. Iran has initiated the constitutional process under which the Assembly of Experts will appoint a new Supreme Leader. In the interim, a council consisting of the President, the head of the judiciary, and a jurist from the Guardian Council — selected by the Expediency Discretionary Council — has assumed the duties of the Supreme Leader.

The Iranian regime had been speaking of a succession plan since the 12-day war. Rather than weakening the regime, the killings may instead unite a population that had, until recently, been engaged in significant street protests over economic conditions and political repression.

So far, the Iranian regime has demonstrated considerable resilience. Iranian aerial attacks have been intercepted or have struck targets associated with the US across Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the largest US military base in the region, and the US Fifth Fleet headquarters in Manama have reportedly been targeted multiple times. Iran's counter-offensive against US bases in the Persian Gulf countries has explicitly drawn strong condemnation from these states. Their air, land and sea-based assets form the backbone of US military deployment in the region. In return, they rely heavily on American security guarantees. On their own, these states are unlikely to offer significantly greater support for the US-Israel offensive against Iran. However, following Israeli strikes on Hamas-linked targets in Doha last September, confidence in US protection may not be as strong as before.

It is possible that Iran is seeking to pressure Gulf states into deterring further US-Israel escalation by threatening to disrupt shipping through the Strait of Hormuz or by expanding attacks in the Red Sea and beyond. In the coming days, the US and Israel will have to decide whether they are prepared for a prolonged conflict or if they will seek an off-ramp to de-escalate. The situation also carries significant implications for South Asia. Further escalation in the Middle East could lead to a new round of sanctions against Iran and disrupt critical trade and energy supply routes. India, in particular, has much at stake. The large Indian diaspora in the Gulf could be caught in the crossfire. India also has a strong interest in the stability of Iran, an important regional partner. Moreover, any reckless targeting of nuclear sites in Iran could pose risks of radioactive contamination across the region.

As a time of rising tensions, there is a pressing need for responsible nations to support diplomatic efforts, regardless of their concerns about Iran's nuclear and missile programmes. The alternative — a prolonged and expanding conflict in West Asia — would carry consequences far beyond the region. Gupta, a security analyst and former Director of Operations, is author of *Global Terror in South Asia: Tracing the Roots in Geopolitics and the Tragedy of Afghanistan*



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

War in West Asia

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have turned the present era into an era of war ('Iran's Revolutionary Guards hold key to Islamic Republic's future', *IE*, March 2). Iran is intensifying its strikes across the region as the war widens. It is a frightening prospect that there may not be an end to it anytime soon. Travel disruption and the sharp rise in oil prices pale beside the loss of life. Trump himself says the war could last weeks. The US's unprovoked aggression against Iran is evidence that Trump labours under a misapprehension that America's status as a militarily superior country gives it the right to use its military might against a sovereign country to secure greater global dominance.

G David Milton, Marathahandode

Killing of Khamenei

THE KILLING of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has resulted in a change of leadership, although it is difficult to predict a transition of power, as the US president desires ('US, Israel kill Iran's leader, unleash new ghosts', *IE*, March 2). For starters, Iran is not Venezuela, and there is no dissent or insurrection in the system that governs the regime and military. An interim leadership has been announced and Iranian commanders have promised to avenge Khamenei's murder. The Iranian army's targeting of civilian areas, as well as US military locations in Gulf states, and Israel, indicates that it will not give up lightly.

Abhijit Roy, Jamshedpur

THE SUDDEN rupture in West Asia, caused by the killing of Iran's supreme leader, unleashes geopolitical precarity across the region, threatening energy markets, the safety of the diaspora, and fragile diplomatic channels ('US, Israel kill Iran's leader, unleash new ghosts', *IE*, March 2). For India, the risks range from disrupted trade routes to a parallel price surge. Yet beyond regional fallout lies a deeper question: When great powers bypass diplomacy for force, what remains of the so-called international rules-based order? Or is it just raw power?

Abhinav Shah, Lucknow



DEVDUPT PATTANAIK

NATHURAM GODSE killed Gandhi. Was he a vegetarian? As per Hindu lore, Parashuram slaughtered generations of Kshatriyas. Was he a vegetarian? According to Jains, Akbar and Aurangzeb embraced vegetarianism. Did that make them non-violent? These are questions that need to be asked by the next generation of historians and scientists as politicians proclaim that meat-eating makes people violent.

Is the opposite true? Are vegetarians kinder people? Are vegetarians less likely to be murderers? There is no scientific paper that proves that eating vegetarian food makes a person morally superior, gentler, or more compassionate. Yet, in India, the belief that vegetarians are nicer people is deeply rooted and strongly connected to spiritual arrogance.

Vegetarianism has become associated with Jains, Brahmins, Banyays, Lingayats and with the idea of purity, even though Kashmiri, Mithili, Bengali and Odia Brahmins are meat-eaters. Meat-eating became associated with communities considered "untouchable" and "impure": Tribals, Dalits, Chandals, Ahi Shudras. Over time, diet has become a caste marker. Upper-caste oppressors are viewed as self-controlled, spiritual, non-violent. Lower caste meat-eating/oppressed groups are seen as aggressive, even dangerous. This binary continues to shape social attitudes. Gandhi promoted this idea by forbidding meat-eating in his ashrams. The RSS, too, has pure-veg canteens in its push to unite Hindu civilisation. The reality, however, is far more complicated. A vegetarian busi-

There is no scientific paper that proves that eating vegetarian food makes a person morally superior or gentler. Yet, in India, the belief that vegetarians are nicer people is deeply rooted and strongly connected to spiritual arrogance

nessman can approve projects that destroy mangroves along the coast, cut forests in the Andamans, blast mountains in the Aravallis, or push aggressive infrastructure in fragile Himalayan zones. These acts damage ecosystems, displace communities, and wipe out animal life. Yet, they are rarely described as violence. They are called development. While killing a goat for food is condemned, the clearing of thousands of acres of forest is justified. This moral dissonance is striking. Many sincerely believe that maintaining a vegetarian kitchen, building temples, funding rituals, and supporting gurus preserves spiritual merit, even while participating in ecological destruction. The plate becomes pure even if the planet burns.

If we look at early religious texts, the picture changes. Vedic rituals included animal sacrifice. Horse meat, goat meat and other meats are mentioned. Later texts debate these practices, reinterpret them, or move toward symbolic offerings, as an option only. Jain theology argues that animals may be reborn humans, so eating animals resembles cannibalism. In the Vedic *Satapatha Brahmana*, Bhrgu dreams that plants eaten in this life eat us in the next one. Plants are alive, too. In folk Islam, there is a saying that eating halal food does not compensate for haram acts. The same logic applies here. A vegetarian diet does not automatically cleanse greed, prejudice or exploitation. Ethical life cannot be reduced to ingredients.

Within Indian history, there are vegetarian bankers and merchants who funded Islamic Sultanates and the East India Com-

pany. They earned wealth through systems that enabled war and conquest. Their diet did not prevent their participation in power politics. In the 17th century, certain Vaishnav and Jain groups in Rajput courts began defining Hindu identity through vegetarianism. Over time, vegetarianism became a badge of religious authenticity. Today, this logic is slowly dividing Hindus into pure and impure categories, into higher and lower Hindus.

Muslims were excluded from these spaces, as were tribal and so-called "unclean" communities. Today, however, tribals and so-called "lower" communities are called Hindus, taught *Hanuman Chalisa*, in order to make them part of a Hindu vote bank. If they wish to rise in institutional hierarchies and gain access to higher posts, however, they are encouraged to "purify" themselves by changing diet. This is a vegetarian social engineering toolkit, marketed as kindness and compassion by the very people who will brook no opposition to their access to power and wealth.

There is also an economic irony. India is among the largest exporters of beef, and many large export houses are owned by families that identify as vegetarian.

The problem arises when diet becomes a measure of human worth. Violence is not limited to the slaughterhouse. It can hide in boardrooms, policy decisions, and financial deals. Kindness is not guaranteed by what we refuse to eat. It is revealed by how we exercise power.

Pattanaik is a mythologist and author of over 60 books

'Assi' asks, what if crime is symptom, not aberration



MEENAKSHI JHA

THE RECENT film *Assi* is a courtroom drama that forces the audience to sit with the reality of sexual violence and the systemic indifference around it. Much of the conversation has centred on *Assi's* legal and technical arc. But the film's true power lies in the images it plants and the symbolism behind them.

Consider the early visual contrast between gleaming high-rises and crowded slums. It establishes the uneven topography on which justice will unfold, experienced through filters of class, access, and hierarchy. When the unconscious survivor is placed on a red chilli cart, it evokes the familiar

idiom of salt or chilli rubbed into a wound. Pain here is magnified, exposed, made public. There is also a washed vehicle at a landfill on the outskirts. Cleaned, then dumped. Evidence may be scrubbed, surfaces restored, but fear remains — thrown to the margins of the city, never entirely erased. The landfill, a site of accumulated waste, mirrors the emotional debris survivors must continue to carry long after headlines move on.

The film is acutely aware of language as power. In a preliminary questioning scene, the police officer invokes the names of writers such as Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, Ismat Chughtai, and Amrita Pritam — not for literary homage but as a tactic of intimidation and confusion. Literature becomes an instrument. The moment also hints at a deeper irony: We celebrate our literary icons while falling to internalise the moral imagin-

ation they demanded of us. The echo of Ram Manohar Lohia's *phituni ki bhedi bhedi hoti hai* — hangs heavy. There is a limit to how far one can slip. The line implicates a society with an eroding ethical footing. Formal education, too, stands indicted. A school may boast impeccable academic results, yet remain unable to prevent students from circulating rape "memes". The film posits: What have we truly taught our

A conviction can close a case file, but it cannot disinfect a culture that laughs in WhatsApp groups. The question is no longer about what the court will decide, but what we are willing to confront in ourselves

children? The repeated statistic — "every 20 minutes, a rape is reported" — functions as a condemnation. Numbers rise, but conscience fails to catch up. Equally telling is the neighbourhood's response when the survivor returns home. Women gather as if in mourning. The assault is treated as social death. And yet, the narrative complicates this easy despair. The husband's steadfast support refuses the thin trope of abandonment. Solidarity within intimate relationships becomes a silent act of resistance. The most morally fraught thread is the vigilante figure, the "Chhatri Man". Is the extrajudicial retribution cathartic or corrosive? When institutions falter, the temptation to endorse parallel justice grows. But does such action interrupt violence, or does it perpetuate endless retaliation?

Even where narrative threads appear tied, the film gestures toward cases where no clues surface, where perpetrators are familiar, trusted, embedded within our own circles. Investigation, in those cases, loops back to collective complicity: The landfill is not always at the city's edge; sometimes it's within.

In the end, the film asks whether we deserve the comfort of believing justice was delivered, a conviction can close a case file, but it cannot disinfect a culture that laughs in WhatsApp groups. The most unsettling possibility is this: What if the crime is not an aberration but a symptom? Then the question is no longer about what the court will decide, but what we are willing to confront in ourselves before the next statistic ticks over.

Jha is an educator and freelance writer

THE ASIAN AGE

3 MARCH 2026

War escalates as Iran hits back at US allies

The escalation of the US-Israel war on Iran into a much wider open regional war with Iran retaliating to the point of indiscriminately hitting civilian targets in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Manama too has led to the crossing of so many red lines that we must fear where this needless conflagration is heading and whether there will be a cessation of hostilities anytime soon.

The ever-widening conflict also sucked in Beirut in Lebanon as Israel was hunting Hezbollah targets even as US President Donald Trump talked up the amount of ammunition his country has and how that would help pound Iran for four to five weeks "if necessary". Even then, his administration remains vague about the immediate scenarios on the battlefield and in what shape the replacement government in Tehran will take.

The death of its 'Supreme Leader' may have pushed Iran beyond the point of no return as it aimed its projectiles right across the region, including a strike on a refinery in Saudi Arabia belonging to its biggest oil extractor and refiner. Uncaring of where its relationship with its neighbouring Islamic countries may be going, Iran seems hell-bent on revenge even as it takes more intense hits to over 130 cities from two attackers in the USA and Israel.

The merest straw of hope to clutch at was heard in the offer of talks by some members of Iran's new leadership, including Mr Ali Larijani, who were keen to speak with the US President, according to Mr Trump's remarks to an American magazine. Meanwhile, the missiles and drones are streaking across the skies of the Middle East, enveloping the region in more deadly rounds of explosive firepower.

Oil prices have surged 15 per cent since the weekend strikes, while stock markets are plunging, and countries are scrambling to ensure supplies as the Strait of Hormuz which sees the movement of an average of 20 million barrels a day being closed by Iran. People are stranded worldwide as the airspace over Middle Eastern hubs has been closed while airports like the world's busiest in Dubai have been shut.

As a pointless war, avowedly over Iran's crazy ambition to own nuclear bombs as well as its stockpile of missiles and relatively inexpensive kamikaze drones, rages and spreads, India's first response has been to sympathise with the USA over the deadly attacks on its two major cities as conveyed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the UAE president Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. With the situation so complex in a war that started with an attack on Iran, sympathy for all those suffering, including the Iranian people, may have been the better option.

Leaving aside formally mourning the death of a despotic figure in Ali Khamenei, not to acknowledge that the original cause of the war was a breach of international law and sovereignty and look only at the welfare and safety of the diaspora working in the Gulf, was an extremely narrow view of ties with nations of the region, especially Iran's relationship with Iran, based on mutual interests, has served both nations well.

Safety first for Make in India

Two blasts at two units involved in the manufacture of explosives in two industrially advanced states on two consecutive days — February 28 and March 1 — killing over 40 people, are highly distressing and highlight poor regulatory oversight of units dealing with hazardous materials.

The blast at the Suryashree Fire Works factory at Vetpalalem in Andhra Pradesh is said to have occurred while workers were mixing chemicals, while the cause of the blast at mining and industrial explosives manufacturer SBL Energy Limited at Kaulgaon in Nagpur district, Maharashtra, is yet to be ascertained.

According to data from the Directorate General Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI), three people died and 11 were injured each day between 2017 and 2020. Over 250 major explosions were reported between 2020 and 2025. A large number of accidents occurred in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala Pradesh and Telangana, where most chemical factories are located.

The most likely causes of explosions reported include manual mixing of hazardous chemicals, the use of cheap and highly reactive aluminium powder, the accumulation of combustible dust in poorly ventilated rooms, inadequately trained workers, and the illegal storage of explosives beyond permissible limits.

These triggers could have been prevented, saving the lives of hundreds of people, if manufacturers had followed due processes or if the government had strengthened its regulatory mechanisms. However, except for paying lip service after blasts and announcing ex gratia to victims, no major follow-up action has been taken by governments to prevent blatant violations of safe manufacturing protocols.

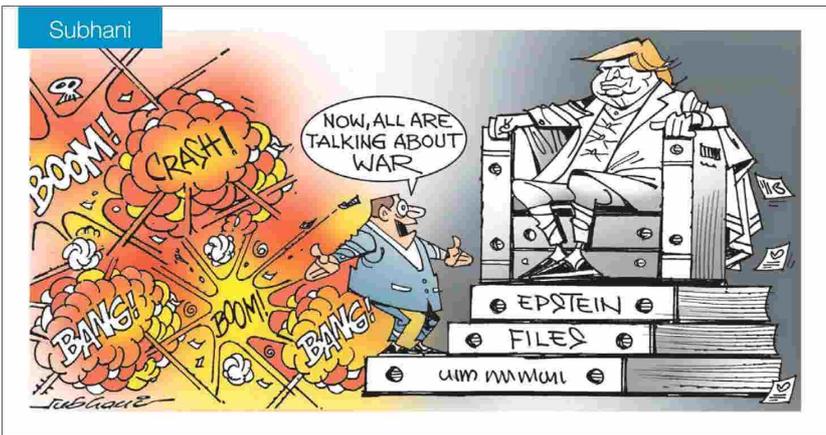
Dismal working conditions in factories are one of the reasons that make Indians look down upon careers in manufacturing compared to jobs in the service sector. Unless the manufacturing sector becomes safe, no amount of Make in India push from the government will attract the cream of Indian talent to manufacturing industries, which is crucial for job creation and economic growth in the country.

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After Khamenei: Mideast is at strategic crossroads



Syed Ata Hasnain

The confirmed killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has transformed the confrontation between the US-Israel axis and Iran from calibrated coercion into a historic strategic rupture.

Reports of the elimination of the senior military and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leadership alongside him suggest not an isolated strike but a systematic attempt to fracture Iran's internal cohesion.

Yet, even at this dramatic moment, one question demands clarity: does removing a "supreme leader" amount to removing the regime? Operationally, the strikes reflect formidable intelligence penetration and precision capability. Identifying hardened leadership locations, tracking movements, and neutralising targets with calibrated force imply sustained surveillance and coordinated strike architecture. The message to Iran's elite is unmistakable: hardened facilities and secrecy no longer guarantee survival.

But political systems are not individuals. They are networks of institutions, loyalties and coercive instruments. The IRGC remains intact. The clerical establishment retains succession mechanisms. The Assembly of Experts can appoint a successor. The government machinery continues to function. Despite visible dissent, a substantial segment of society still views the revolutionary system as a defender of sovereignty. In such moments, dislocation is easily mistaken for collapse. The government machinery and Tel Aviv's perspective, the momentum is unmistakable. Leadership decapitation, command disruption and psychological shock generate a rare moment of leverage. It is precisely in such moments that strategic outreach becomes most attractive. The argument is seductive; press forward, sustain strikes, widen internal fractures and convert operational success into systemic transformation.

History cautions that states rarely unravel in straight lines. External shock often

produces internal consolidation rather than collapse. Regimes facing existential threat tend to harden before they fracture. Nationalist, religious and civilisational narratives can temporarily override internal dissent, binding society around the very structures under pressure. If Iran's security establishment closes ranks, decapitation may consolidate rather than dissolve the regime's core. Such consolidation would not guarantee strategic success, but it could restore domestic legitimacy and reinforce nationalist fervour.

The "utopian option" would be a swift ceasefire followed by negotiations from a position of altered power balances. Such a course would allow the United States and Israel to consolidate deterrence credibility and exploit the breach without triggering prolonged regional destabilisation. It would allow Iran's new leadership to stabilise internally and recalibrate externally. In theory, power demonstrated could be converted into diplomatic leverage. In practice, that path appears improbable.

Tehran cannot afford visible paralysis. Leadership elimination demands demonstrative retaliation to reassert perceived deterrence credibility. That response may be calibrated, but it must be visible. Conversely, Washington and Tel Aviv may see a narrow window in which continued pressure could perpetuate regime fragmentation. Escalation temptation therefore exists on both sides.

If the succession inside Iran is managed swiftly and unity is projected publicly, a softening of the government machinery and limited retaliation, symbolic messaging and eventual quiet re-engagement through intermediaries. Such an outcome would stabilise markets and preserve limited-war boundaries. However, the US-Israel combine is unlikely to dilute the weight of its targeted offensive after gaining this advantage.

Equally plausible is a drawn-out phase of episodic exchanges between Iran on one side and the US and Israel on the other. Missile and drone strikes could continue

intermittently, with Washington and Tel Aviv targeting military and strategic assets while Tehran retaliates through calibrated missile launches or drones. Such an exchange would erode infrastructure and economic confidence without triggering full mobilisation or a ground invasion. It would not resolve the confrontation, but would confine it within tense yet managed thresholds.

A more dangerous evolution would involve lateral expansion across West Asia, remitting roughly \$50 billion annually. Around 60 per cent of India's energy imports originate from the broader region. Sustained escalation would affect shipping routes, insurance costs, diaspora security and growth projections. Strategic net worth with purposeful projection, evacuation preparedness and energy diversification will define New Delhi's response.

The deeper lesson lies in distinguishing tactical achievements from strategic finality. Precision does not guarantee permanence. Leadership elimination disrupts; it does not automatically transform. Strategic escalation is an instrument, not an outcome.

The greatest danger now is misreading advanced momentum as inevitability. If Washington and Tel Aviv press their advantage without clarity on post-conflict governance, dominance could give way to prolonged instability. Tehran responds with maximalist retaliation, it risks inviting wider destruction at a moment of vulnerability. A leadership vacuum in Tehran is the last thing needed and wider destruction will bring a moment of opportunity for an ISIS type of takeover, as happened in Iraq.

The Middle East stands at a genuine crossroads. This moment could become the apex of coercion before recalibration — or the opening chapter of deeper regional upheaval. The coming days will reveal whether strategic restraint tempers success, or whether momentum overwhelms prudence.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, is a former GOC of the Srirangar-based 15 ("Chinar") Corps

LETTERS

DEATH OF A LEADER

The death of R. Nalakanu at 101 closes the life of a rare Indian political conscience: one shaped by struggle, simplicity and sustained commitment to the marginalised. Born in 1924 at Srivalkuntam, Tamil Nadu, he joined the freedom movement and the CPI in the 1940s, motivated by anti-colonial and labour struggles rather than careerism. Over eight decades, he organised agricultural labourers, sought land reforms, workers' rights and secular harmony, outside the electoral limelight. What distinguished him was the unity of belief and practice. He lived without personal property, donated award funds to public causes and declined monetary gains: choices echoing Gandhian simplicity but anchored in a materialist commitment to uplift the poorest. His life reminds the nation that principled service, not personal gain, defines leadership.

Vijay Singh Adhikari
Nainital

COPS VS COPS

A RECENT controversy arose when the Delhi police detained two activists in Himachal Pradesh without formally informing the state authorities. The Himachal Pradesh police was not taken into confidence, prompting the chief minister to the established Supreme Court guidelines on inter-state arrests. These rules mandate prior intimation and coordination. This appears to stem either from a communication lapse between police units or from political pressure influencing administrative decisions. Such incidents risk eroding public trust and creating avoidable friction between states. To prevent recurrence, structured training at the police academy should be strengthened.

R.S. Parthala
Patala

PLAY HOLI SAFELY

WHILE HOLI is a vibrant festival of joy and friendship, it is often marred by the use of toxic materials and, at times, unruly behaviour that endangers health and the environment. To ensure a safe and memorable celebration, opt for natural colours, use water responsibly, protect skin and hair, respect consent, avoid dangerous materials, refrain from using water balloons, paint, grease or dirt, which can cause serious physical injuries, wear sunglasses to protect eyes and, if possible, play in open, non-slippery areas to avoid falls. Let us make this Holi a truly happy occasion by spreading joy without causing harm to ourselves or the environment.

Jubel D'Cruz
Mumbai



Aakar Patel

Myths & reality over 'love jihad': Why all this fuss on conversions?

There are things that this nation is agitated about and following it for some time. In my book *Hindu Reshtha*, which was published a few years ago, I looked at the numbers from the past.

On March 7, 2017, *Malayalam Manorama* reported the research by a non-profit organisation (Media Development and Research Foundation, Kottikode) which showed 60 per cent of those who had converted in Kerala between January 2011 and December 2017 chose to become Hindu. Gazette records of changed names showed that 6234 people had converted in the seven-year period, of whom 4,988 chose to become Hindu, of which the vast majority, 4,756, were Christian and 212 Muslim. Of the total, the number of women was 2,244 and men 2,724.

Of the 1,894 who became Muslim, 75 per cent were previously Hindu, again with men and women converts being roughly equal. And of the 1,496 who became Christian, 35 per cent were Hindu, with 720 women and 776 men. Six individuals chose to become Buddhist, of whom five were Hindu, one was Christian and there were a total of two women and four men.

A newspaper report in a couple of years before that ("Nearly 6,000 converted to Islam in Kerala in 5 years," *Business*) quoted an "intelligence report" filed by the police showing that 6,789 people had converted between 2011 and 2015. Of these, about half were

men and half women. Hindus converting were 7,419 with 1,016 being Christians.

A question then arises. In WhatsApp groups heavily indoctrinated by the government and the voices in their own head. They may dismiss this as just being fake news. Such people should consider what happened in the Juk Sabha on February 4, 2020. A question was asked by Benny Behanan, MP from Chalkudy in Thrissur. He asked the home ministry to say whether it was aware of any cases of "love jihad" and if so, what were the details of this.

The ministry replied: "Article 25 of the Constitution provides for the freedom to profess, practice and propagate religion subject to public order, morality and health. Various courts have upheld this view including the Kerala High Court. The term 'love jihad' is not defined under the extant laws. No such case of 'love jihad' has been reported by any of the Central agencies."

A question then arises. If "love jihad" is not a real thing and the government accepts that it is not a real thing and the data on conversions shows it is not a real thing, then why is it being discussed at all, let alone at the frenzy levels we associate it with?

There are two reasons for this, in my opinion. The first is that the real news is not favourable to the narrative of New India. If we were to discuss how spectacularly incompetent the intelligence agencies are,

based on a recent case in which the United States has caught and jailed an Indian citizen, the government would not be able to preen as it does about national security. If it were to be discussed how a totally false case was filed against a party and its chief minister jailed because the BJP wanted to overthrow it, we would not be able to as confidently tell the world we are the mother of democracy. And so, the focus is on other things and the government wants to keep the focus there. All of that is one reason.

The other reason is that the narrative of Hindutva has become so acceptable that even the facts do not do much to dent it. An outright lie that is accepted as a lie by the government in the Lok Sabha is still material enough for the BJP to have passed seven bills since 2018 laws that tackle this myth. This has become our reality.

The latest data will come as reassurance to those who know the BJP project is misguided and damaging, and as a puzzle to those who had bought the lie but are open to be swayed based on information and analysis. But it will likely do nothing to shift the focus of those parts of the Hindutva base that have become enchanted by the voices of conspiracy and doom permanently occupying their head.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel



SUSHILA KARKI Nepal Prime Minister

“ Casting votes is not simply stamping ballot papers and electing leaders, but a moment to decide the future of yours and your children. Let us make March 5 election peaceful, fair



HARRISON FORD Hollywood actor

Sometimes we make entertainment, sometimes we make art. Sometimes we're lucky to make 'em both at the same time, and if we're really fortunate, we also get to make a living doing it



PETE HEGSETH US Defence Secretary

The operation has a clear, devastating, decisive mission to destroy the missile threat from Iran. This is not a so-called regime change war, but the regime sure did change”

Deepening ties with Brazil

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's recent visit to India marked a key moment in the evolution of bilateral ties that went beyond optics. The substantive outcome of the trip, which saw a string of bilateral agreements signed, reflected a commitment by two of the largest democracies in the Global South to move beyond rhetorical solidarity and craft a structured, forward-looking partnership. The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on rare earths and critical minerals is a very significant development at a time when India is looking to reduce dependence on China. The India-Brazil joint statement, following a meeting between Lula da Silva and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, made it clear that the two countries were keen to work together across the full mineral value chain, including exploration, mining, processing, recycling, and refining. New Delhi is seeking new suppliers of rare earths to not only curb dependence on China but also to support capacity expansion amid a global race for raw materials. Brazil is the second-largest producer and exporter of iron ore and holds large reserves of minerals critical for making steel, demand for which is growing in India amid rapid infrastructure expansion. Bilateral cooperation is expected to focus on attracting investment in exploration, mining and steel sector infrastructure. Brazil is estimated to have 21 million tonnes of rare-earth oxide equivalent, 2.7 billion tonnes of bauxite, 270 million tonnes of manganese, and 0.4 million tonnes of lithium. The latest agreement with Brazil on critical minerals follows recent supply chain engagements with the US, France and the European Union.

Lula's visit underscored commitment by India and Brazil to strengthen ties beyond symbolic diplomacy

The timing of the Brazilian President's visit is crucial, as it came in the midst of geopolitical uncertainties with developing countries navigating the aftershocks of aggressive tariff regimes imposed by the Trump administration. Both India and Brazil have faced tariff pressures, exposing the vulnerability of export-dependent sectors and the risks of overreliance on traditional Western markets. In this context, the decision to set an ambitious bilateral trade target of \$30 billion by 2030 is strategically significant. Bilateral trade, which crossed \$15 billion in 2025 with a notable growth rate, is now being framed as a pillar of economic resilience. By committing to reduce non-tariff barriers, expand the India-MERCOSUR Preferential Trade Agreement, and facilitate electronic certificates of origin, both sides are signalling seriousness about structural trade reform. A total of nine MoUs, covering digital infrastructure, micro, small and medium enterprises and steel sector, were signed. Brazil, the largest trading partner in Latin America, is a major iron ore producer, with reserves of manganese, nickel and niobium. The agreement on rare earths and critical minerals could help Brazil attract Indian capital and buyers into Brazilian projects, which can make new mines and processing plants easier to finance. It suits Brazil's goal to move up the value chain rather than just explore raw ores.

The kingmaker who could not crown himself

Kishor's failure shows the limits of treating elections as a technical task rather than a political practice



DEVENDRA POOLA

Prashant Kishor, popularly known as strategist PK, occupies an intriguing place in contemporary campaign politics. Before entering electoral contestation, he transformed the grammar of campaigning itself. His pioneering work in data-driven messaging, targeted mobilisation, brand-centric communication and professional organisation-building helped produce decisive victories in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu at different moments. This track record gave him the reputation of a "kingmaker", a strategist who could reshape the fortunes of diverse political actors irrespective of ideology.

It was precisely this stature that generated substantial expectations when Kishor founded the Jan Suraj Party in Bihar. The shift from coalition of others' victories to claimant of his own mandate created a critical test case. Could technocratic political competence translate into mass legitimacy? PK's first electoral test reveals a mixed outcome. In 35 constituencies, the Jan Suraj vote exceeded the victory margin, shaping outcomes without securing wins and functioning more as a spoiler than a serious contender. But Jan Suraj party lost its deposit in 236 out of the 238 seats it contested. Ironically, an attempt to disrupt the establishment ended up reinforcing it, leaving Nitish Kumar in a better position than anticipated. Yet, a 3.4% statewide vote share, higher than that of the Left and AIMIM combined, along with third-place finishes in more than half the seats contested, signals that Jan



Suraj has carved out a noticeable foothold for a new entrant.

Basis of High Expectations

Three interrelated factors raised public anticipation for PK. First, Kishor framed his entry as a corrective to Bihar's stagnant political competition, which had long been dominated by familiar players and identity-based alignments. This narrative resonated with sections of voters frustrated by entrenched governance deficits.

Second, his professional reputation promised a modernised campaign, efficient mobilising and an alternative to personality-based or caste-mediated politics. Many middle-class and youth constituencies projected their aspirations onto him. Third, through the Jan Suraj padyatra, he attempted to cultivate direct social presence at the village level. This gave the impression of building a grassroots structure rather than relying solely on elite-driven branding. The symbolic distinction between old politics and governance-oriented new politics seemed possible.

What Went Wrong

The electoral results, however, revealed five key limitations. First, despite padyatras and consultative platforms, Jan Suraj did not develop sufficiently embedded cadre networks capable of mobilising votes at scale. Bihar's political society remains largely structured by local brokerage and caste authority. Technocratic messaging

could not compensate for the absence of durable community intermediaries. Second, the promise of development and governance, though attractive, struggled to override caste-rooted solidarities. Political behaviour in Bihar continues to be mediated by identity and social protection concerns. Kishor underestimated the embedded nature of these cleavages. Third, strategic efficiency is not a substitute for political meaning. Kishor's critique of all major parties did not translate into a compelling ideological or redistributive story. Voters did not receive a clear sense of "why" beyond dissatisfaction.

Fourth, his earlier associations with several different parties made it difficult to sustain a purist outsider identity. Opponents successfully portrayed him as a strategist with shifting loyalties rather than a principled reformer. Last, political consultants often underestimate the long duration required to cultivate legitimacy. Transitioning from influence without accountability to representation with accountability

While India values technocratic expertise, voters ultimately seek recognition of identity, economic insecurity, and cultural belonging

demands sustained engagement that cannot be compressed into one or two election cycles.

Structural Truths

The Bihar results show broader structural truths. India may be welcoming of technocratic expertise, but voters still demand recognition of identity-based vulnerabilities, economic precarity and cultural belonging. Administrative competence is necessary but not sufficient. In a context where politics continues to be the primary route for asserting social dignity, leaders who do not embody collective historical anxieties struggle to acquire trust.

Moreover, while citizens express discontent with the existing political class, their preference for stability often leads them back to familiar faces. Disruption requires not only criticism of the status quo but construction of alternative institutions and durable solidarities.

Finally, Kishor's failure is not simply personal. It reflects the limits of a model where electoralism is treated as a technical problem rather than a relational and ideological practice. The very skills that elevated him as a strategist, data literacy, message crafting and technological rationality, become insufficient when faced with the emotional, identity-rooted, slow-moving infrastructures of democratic legitimacy.

(The author is Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Economic and Social Studies (CESS), Hyderabad)

Letters to the Editor

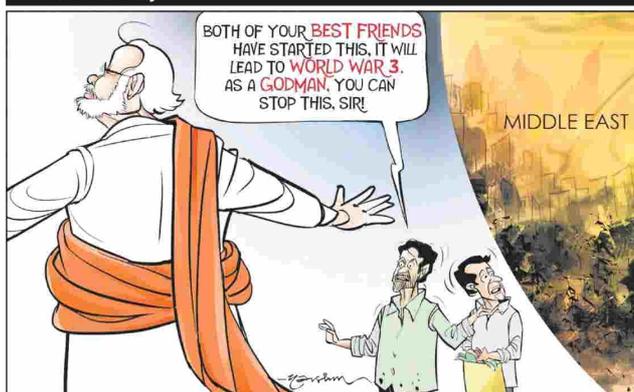
Ban paraquat

This refers to 'The paraquat paradox' (Feb 28). It is indeed true that paraquat-related deaths are rising in Telangana, posing a serious public health concern. Unfortunately, due to the extreme lethality of the substance, even minimal exposure has resulted in fatal outcomes. Accidental inhalation poisoning among farmers during spraying has also led to deaths, highlighting the occupational risks associated with its use. Recent criminal cases have further underscored the deadly nature of paraquat. The absence of a specific antidote and the need for pro-

longed intensive critical care place an enormous emotional and financial burden on affected families. The prolonged suffering and high treatment costs often result in devastating consequences for already vulnerable households. Given these realities, it is imperative that the Central Insecticides Board and Registration Committee revoke the approval granted to paraquat dichloride and its formulations in the interest of public health. There have been sustained efforts by medical professionals in Odisha advocating for its ban, and progressive steps have been taken in States such as Kerala to restrict its use. Telangana now has an opportunity to lead the country in addressing this public health crisis.

Dr PRATHURI SUDEEP KUMAR, Hyderabad

Cartoon Today



Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

India in the hotspot

India's military ...lags behind China

India is beefing up its air force. Defense Ministry officials this month announced their intent to buy 114 French Rafale fighter jets for about \$36 billion, the largest defense acquisition by value in India's history.

Ancient stepwells brought back to life

Loud cheer reverberated around Bansilalpet, in Hyderabad, when first trickle of water dribbled out of ground. After an 18-month effort, the 17th-century Bansilalpet stepwell had become a source of clean drinking water.

India book England semi-final

India are through to a mouth-watering semi-final against England after compiling their highest run chase at a T20 World Cup to see off West Indies in Kolkata. The holders owed much to a magnificent 97 from Sanju Samson.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Economic tremors

Conflict in West Asia will test India's resilience

THE escalating crisis in West Asia, triggered by the US-Israeli strikes on Iran and the latter's retaliation, is causing economic tremors beyond the region. The stability of the energy market is at grave risk amid the threat to key global shipping routes. Oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments have already been disrupted due to attacks near the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic chokepoint for roughly one-fifth of the global oil supply. Ship insurers have pulled back war-risk coverage, freight costs are climbing and some ships are rerouting or halting operations. The immediate result has been a spike in crude prices, with Brent crude rising notably.

Higher crude prices will fuel inflationary pressures worldwide, challenging central banks that are already balancing inflation with growth. Industries reliant on petroleum and its derivatives — from transportation to chemicals and plastics — face rising input costs that can compress margins and slow down investment. Delayed deliveries will add to the woes of supply chains.

India imports 80-90 per cent of its crude oil, of which West Asia accounts for more than 40 per cent. Disruptions in Hormuz or even elevated geopolitical risk premiums could increase India's oil import bill as well as the fiscal deficit. A rise of even \$10 per barrel could hike import costs substantially. India's trade corridors, especially for exports to the Gulf region, face rough weather. Electronics exports and other merchandise reliant on shipping through Hormuz and onward freight networks are at risk of delays, rising costs and lost opportunities. The Indian government is putting on a brave face, but a prolonged and deepening regional conflict would significantly aggravate the economic challenges. Navigating this storm will require agile policy responses, diversification of energy sources and stronger economic buffers to cushion against instability.

Banking fraud

More robust internal controls needed

THE Haryana government's account in the IDFC First Bank may have totalled a minuscule 0.5 per cent of its total bank deposits, but the detection of a Rs 590-crore fraud is a wake-up call. A rethink is inevitable across state governments on the pros and cons of engaging private banks, not that public sector banks have remained insulated from frauds. The case underscores the systemic gaps. It's not merely about a loss of face. The erosion of trust continues, though the Reserve Bank of India has been quick to clarify that there is no broader threat to the banking system. It's a valid argument that since the fraud could not escape detection in the final count, it indicates an effective system of checks and balances. IDFC First Bank, on its part, alerted the regulator, informed the stock exchanges, and filed an FIR. The counter-argument is equally persuasive. Unauthorised and fraudulent transactions managed to bypass the internal controls.

The law enforcement agencies in Haryana are on the job, unravelling the dubious role of bank employees and the collusion of government officials. The state government has also recovered the bulk of funds linked to the fraud. The police investigations and forensic audit by professionals will inevitably zero in on where and how the slippages happened. A key lesson is to get a grip on the evolving nature of risk and devote both time and resources in vigilance strategies. More robust overview processes and plugging the loopholes are essential requirements.

The banking sector has experienced significant structural reforms over the decades, yet the challenges to secure it are only mounting. The expanding digital payments infrastructure, with new-age channels being used for transactions more than ever before, cannot do without a matching operational architecture having sufficient guardrails.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune

THE TRIBUNE, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3, 1926

The Indian Budget

THE Indian Budget for 1926-27, which was introduced by the Finance Member at Monday's meeting of the Legislative Assembly, has no exciting features. The first remark it calls for is the obvious one, that for the fourth year in succession, the Government of India has a surplus instead of a deficit budget. For five years, it had an accumulated deficit of nearly Rs 100 crore. In 1923-24, the financial tide turned, and instead of a deficit it had a welcome surplus of Rs 2.39 crore. The next year, it did still better with a surplus of Rs 5.68 crore. This year, it budgeted for a small surplus of Rs 24 lakh, but the revised estimates increase the surplus to Rs 1.30 crore, which may be still further increased in the actuals. Lastly, the Budget for the ensuing year estimates the revenue at Rs 133.43 crore and the expenditure at Rs 130.38 crore, leaving a substantial surplus of Rs 3.5 crore. The second important feature of the Budget is the final disappearance of the already suspended cotton excise duty. This was so generally anticipated that the actual announcement will cause no shock of agreeable surprise. In the words of the Finance Member himself, "The patient died on December 1, 1925, and it only remains for us to assist at his obsequies and give the corpse decent interment. We have no need to fear even its unlamented ghost." No miracle can, indeed restore it to life at this time; not even "some unthinkable accident in the passing of the Finance Bill." With a touch of humour, both conscious and unconscious, the Finance Member said "the privilege of sharing with the Government in the credit for this historic achievement will belong to the Legislature, when the Finance Bill is passed."

Iran is prepared for the long haul

Caught off guard by Op Midnight Hammer last year, Tehran is on a stronger footing this time

GADDAM DHARMENDRA
FORMER AMBASSADOR TO IRAN

THERE are wars of choice and wars of necessity. The US-Israeli military strikes on Iran fall in the former category, the ownership of which is firmly vested in US President Donald Trump and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Operation Epic Fury, launched by the US and Israel, and the Iranians' Operation True Promise-4 have entered the fourth day. While Iran was caught off guard by last June's Operation Midnight Hammer, this time the speed and fierceness of its counter-force missile strikes, launched within the first 24 hours of hostilities, appear to have taken the US and Israel by surprise.

Iran has so far absorbed massive US-Israeli aerial bombardments and missile strikes and has counter-attacked by targeting Gulf countries and US military bases in the region, extensively damaging the US Navy's 5th Fleet headquartered in Bahrain and shooting down four US jet fighters over Kuwaiti airspace. Both are unprecedented US losses. The Bahrain strikes have degraded US naval supply and replenishment operations. The Iranians are clearly better prepared and have gamed multiple conflict scenarios, identifying targets in advance.

For the present, the conflict is on an escalatory ladder with a high risk of turning into a regional war of attrition. It's a question of when and whether the Gulf countries will enter the fray. Following an Iranian strike on a Saudi Aramco refinery, a Saudi official blamed the Americans, saying that they had "left all Gulf states that host American military bases at the mercy of Iranian



WRATH: Calls to avenge Khamenei's killing are spreading among the Shia community. REUTERS

strikes". Iran has successfully delivered a warning to members of the Gulf Cooperation Council to shed the pretence of hosting US bases on their territories while distancing themselves from American actions emanating from those very bases.

Iran is not Venezuela and calculations of a regime collapse have shown to be a catastrophic misreading by the US administration. Equally confounding is the lack of clarity of US-Israeli war aims and desired endgame. Iran was widely assessed to be at its weakest position ever. The June 2025 US airstrikes "obliterated" its nuclear programme, as US President Donald Trump put it, burying it under tons of rubble. Israel's declaration of Iran's regional allies exposed the limits of the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' ambitious strategy of "forward defense" via its "Axis of Resistance", while US sanctions brought the Iranian economy to its knees. The latter development triggered the recent nationwide social upheaval and anti-regime demonstrations which shook the ruling clerical establishment.

The US-Israeli escalation comes while negotiations were

Iran's resilience and counter-strike capabilities are dragging the US into one of its most consequential conflicts in decades.

still going on between Iran and the US. It mirrors the game plan of deception that the US adopted during the 12-day war with Iran last year. At that time, as is the case now, the US and Iran were engaged in detailed discussions on Iran's nuclear programme. Oman's Foreign Minister Badr Al Busaidi, who is mediating the talks, revealed after the recent Geneva meeting that the Iranians had offered unprecedented concessions on their nuclear programme. He said, "If the ultimate objective is to ensure forever that Iran cannot have a nuclear bomb, I think we have

cracked that problem." Later, the usually reticent Oman publicly expressed his "dismay" as US launched military strikes.

It's possible that things may not have deteriorated this rapidly had the US and Israel not launched the airstrikes that led to the death of 86-year old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Predictably, the Iranian response has been one of calculated ferocity and a conscious expansion of the conflict's geographic contours. For the Shia faithful, martyrdom (*shahadat*) is the ultimate sacrifice — embracing death in defence of their faith.

Two developments have quickly followed Khamenei's death — first, the succession process as laid down in the Iranian Constitution has been set in motion. A three-member interim leadership council has been set up, consisting of the President (Masoud Pezeshkian), the Head of Judiciary (Gholam Hosen Mohseni Ejei) and a representative of the clerics (Ayatollah Alireza Araf). The announcement of the next Supreme Leader or Velayat-e Faqih is expected as early as this week. The second pertains to calls to avenge Khamenei's

killing that are spreading among the Shia Ummah, from Lebanon and Iraq to Pakistan. In Lebanon, the Hezbollah have opened a new front against Israel. The Lebanese Hezbollah had stayed silent during Operation Midnight Hammer. In Iraq, there was an attempt to storm the US Embassy in Baghdad by Kataib Hezbollah, a pro-Iranian militia group.

The turn of events are a matter of serious concern for India, given our dependence on oil imports from the Gulf and the presence of over nine million expatriate Indians in the region. Outside of Iran, India has the largest Shia population, based in Lucknow, Hyderabad and Kargil. Khamenei's death is echoing within the Shia community in the country.

India holds the presidency of the BRICS, of which Iran is a member. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has spoken to his Iranian counterpart. Following Iran's missile strikes on the Saudi Aramco refinery, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called up Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and underlined the "utmost importance" of early "restoration of regional peace and stability".

The adverse downstream consequences of the US-Israeli actions are stacking up multidimensionally, impacting global shipping, spiking oil and energy prices and causing air traffic disruptions, all of which are being closely followed across the world.

Saudi Aramco's Ras Tanura oil refinery is one of the world's largest refineries and export terminals. Its shutdown is likely to lead to a massive spike in global oil prices. Trump, however, has nonchalantly announced that the conflict could last several weeks. This declaration reveals a gross misreading of Iran's resilience and counter-strike capabilities, which are dragging the US into one of its most consequential conflicts in decades. In the process, notions of a clean decapitating strike have been demolished, along with expectations of an imminent collapse of Iran's clerical regime.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Iran poses the most serious long-term threat to regional stability. — Ehud Barak

A selfless official who rose to the occasion

SURINDERJIT SINGH SANDHU

IN the late 1960s, I, along with two friends, went to Anandpur Sahib to witness the Hala Mohalla festivities. The beauty of the place, the majesty and serenity of Gurdwara Takht Sri Kesgarh Sahib, and the sight of the Naina Devi temple perched atop a distant hill created a bewitching spectacle.

Bitten by the civil services bug, I was curious to visit the tehsil and the office of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM). What I saw shocked me: the premises looked like a dilapidated and haunted garage belonging to an idle mechanic. When I visited again in the mid-1970s, a new and beautiful tehsil and SDM's office complex had come up along the Charan Ganga rivulet.

In the late 1970s, the SDM was at his residence in the complex when an employee on flood duty brought a teletypewriter message. As the SDM read it, his face turned pale. Soon, the tehsildar and naib tehsildar, who stayed opposite his house, arrived; worry was writ large on their faces. The message said a Financial Commissioner-rank officer, along with 12 guests, would visit Nangal and the Bhakra Dam three days hence. It was mentioned that they would first pay obeisance at the Naina Devi temple and then proceed towards the dam.

The route from Kiratpur Sahib to Naina Devi, with a detour via the Kiratpur-Kullu road, and from Naina Devi to the Bhakra Dam, is very scenic. The naib tehsildar had his own take on the upcoming visit. Thin and short in stature, he said, "Sir, it is my submission that this is a highly flood-prone area, and it has been raining incessantly. September rains are dangerous. We need to focus on the people's problems."

It was the young SDM's first posting. Looking at the naib tehsildar, he replied, "The Financial Commissioner is a very senior officer; he will also review the flood situation." The naib tehsildar then asked, "Who will pay for so many people, Sir?" The SDM looked at the tehsildar and said, "En naib sahib bamesha mikas nikalte hain" (he always finds faults). From then on, the SDM addressed only the tehsildar, snubbing the naib tehsildar whenever he tried to intervene.

A week after the Financial Commissioner's visit, floodwaters entered the tehsil complex at around 3 am. The naib tehsildar was the first to raise the alarm; he informed everyone that the earthen embankment along the Charan Ganga had breached. By 7 am, officials from the irrigation and PWD departments, along with revenue officers, had reached the site. The entire group stood on a mound of earth on the riverbank. Despite being cautioned twice by the naib tehsildar to move back, the SDM remained at the edge, explaining something to the irrigation engineers.

Suddenly, the earth beneath the SDM gave way, and he was swept away by the currents. The frail naib tehsildar immediately jumped into the water. After a 30-minute pursuit covering about one kilometre, he managed to rescue the officer. He had put his own life at risk for the sake of the SDM who had belittled him. No wonder he was hailed as a hero.

The writer is a retired IAS officer
epaper.tribuneindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Deft diplomacy a must in West Asia

Apropos of 'Iran regime change may elude Trump', eliminating Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would not automatically mean a pro-Western successor. History offers little comfort here. Iraq and Libya demonstrated what happens when external powers mistake military success for political transformation. Meanwhile, for India, energy dependence, diaspora remittances and trade routes through the Gulf demand careful diplomacy, not ideological alignment with either side. New Delhi should quietly pursue back-channel engagement while keeping its options open. Silence is not neutrality; it is a wasted opportunity. India has built its credibility and should use it constructively before the situation deteriorates further.

A MYLISAM, COIMBATORE

UN must intervene in Iran war

Military escalation or attempts at regime change in Iran can have far-reaching consequences for world economy and energy security. The past has shown that external interventions often worsen conflicts rather than resolve them, leading to prolonged instability and humanitarian crises. A prolonged conflict in the region may disrupt oil supplies, increase inflation and adversely affect developing countries like India, which depend heavily on imports from the Gulf. The international community, including the United Nations, must actively promote negotiations, ceasefire and confidence-building measures. Peace, stability and cooperation are essential for the regional prosperity. Military solutions rarely bring lasting peace, whereas diplomacy can ensure security and development.

CHARU SHARMA, HOSHIARPUR

Inviting global anarchy

Refer to 'West Asia in turmoil': Khamenei's targeted killing by the US and Israeli forces represents a reckless departure from civilised diplomacy that invites global anarchy. Regardless of one's geopolitical stance, extrajudicial killing of a sovereign head of State is a dangerous precedent that replaces established legal frameworks with raw military force. The US under Donald Trump is becoming a rogue country.

SS PAUL, NADIA (WB)

Fragile global equilibrium

Apropos of 'West Asia in turmoil', the crisis marks a seismic shift that threatens to dismantle the fragile equilibrium of global energy markets and regional security. This escalation forces New Delhi into a gruelling diplomatic ordeal where the traditional pursuit of strategic autonomy meets the harsh reality of binary geopolitical choices. While strengthening ties with Israel and the US offers undeniable technological and security advantages, sacrificing historical rapport with Tehran risks domestic friction and the loss of a vital gateway to Central Asia. India must move beyond passive balancing and actively leverage its unique position to advocate for de-escalation. Relying solely on a tightrope walk is no longer sustainable when the very pillars of regional stability are collapsing.

K CHIDANAND KUMAR, BENGALURU

Punjab's economic challenges

Refer to 'Punjab's future lies in its cultural imaginary', without ignoring the richness and resilience of Punjab's cultural heritage, the state's challenges are not solely cultural. The economy remains heavily agrarian, and many communities continue to face economic pressures and migration. Culture is deeply intertwined with these realities, and while it can inspire, reflect and preserve identity, it works best when accompanied by concrete attention to the region's economic growth. Celebrating and nurturing Punjab's culture is essential, but the state's future depends on strengthening its economic foundations and fulfilling the aspirations of its people.

MANU KANT, BY MAIL

Samson all the way

India's impressive victory over the West Indies in a do-or-die match of the T20 World Cup showcases the team's resilience. The highlight was Sanju Samson's outstanding performance, whose attacking innings kept India firmly in control during the chase. His timely strokes shifted momentum at crucial stages. Earlier, disciplined bowling led by Jasprit Bumrah ensured that the opposition was prevented from setting a bigger target.

RUKMA SHARMA, JALANDHAR

Dr Singh gave me the courage to ask questions



ANGELA MERKEL
FORMER CHANCELLOR
OF GERMANY

IN April 2025, a few months after the death of your father, Manmohan Singh, dear Upinder Singh, as his eldest daughter, you wrote to me and asked me to deliver the first lecture of the Trust named after your father in his honour. I have gladly complied with this request.

Why? First of all, out of very fundamental considerations. Throughout my entire active political life, the flourishing of German-Indian relations was close to my heart, and that remains the case today.

Particularly during my 16-year term as Federal Chancellor, from end-2005 to end-2021, I attached great importance to the cooperation between our two countries. This is why Dr Singh and I held the first German-Indian Intergovernmental Consultations in 2011 and continued them later on a biennial basis.

The strategic importance of our relations, as well as those of the European Union with India, is obvious to me: India and Germany are two democracies, with India being the largest in the world.

The EU is the second-largest global economic power; Germany is the largest economy among its member states. Alongside China, India is one of the two states with more than a billion inhabitants — by

now, India is the most populous country on earth. Compared to Germany, India has a young population; the average age is just under 30 years, whereas in comparison, people in Germany are on average 46.8 years old.

Most recently, I am pleased that finally, after an 18-year negotiation marathon, an FTA between the EU and India has been announced.

I also hope that today's event can make a small contribution to the consolidation of the relations between our two countries.

Why do I dare to hope so? First and foremost: It was a great pleasure for me to work with Manmohan Singh for almost 10 years. I felt this immediately at our first encounter — he was a very special personality. I think everyone who knew him felt similarly. He could captivate people, even though he did not appear dominant in either his demeanour or his speech. He was more than 20 years older than I.

What impressed me about Dr Singh (when we first met in April 2006) was his alert and curious gaze, which radiated experience and openness in equal measure. He seemed both composed (in sich ruhend) and gentle as well as determined.

As the first Prime Minister who was not a Hindu, but belonged to the Sikh minority, he embodied the pride of a nation that seeks its equal in religious, ethnic, and geographical diversity in the world.

As the first Prime Minister who was not a Hindu, but belonged to the Sikh minority, he embodied the pride of a nation that seeks its equal in religious, ethnic, and geographical diversity in the world.

He did this without losing many words over it — to me, he radiated a natural authority that did not, however, act intimidatorily, but rather gave me courage — the courage to ask



FIRST DR MANMOHAN SINGH MEMORIAL LECTURE: Angela Merkel with former PM Manmohan Singh's wife Gursharan Kaur, Congress leader Sonia Gandhi and former J&K Governor NN Vohra. PH

questions and courage to conduct open conversations.

Manmohan Singh's life path was impressive. He was born in 1932 in the village of Gah in what was then British India and is today Pakistan. After school, he studied economics in Chandigarh in the Punjab and continued his studies in 1957 in Cambridge, Great Britain. Subsequently, in 1962, he earned his doctorate at Oxford University on questions of foreign trade and economic development.

But it was as Finance Minister, after India had fallen into a severe financial crisis, that he implemented courageous reforms. Until then, India had been a heavily regulated and strictly shielded economy. Dr Singh liberalised foreign trade, dismantled domestic bureaucratic hurdles, and opened the Indian market to

We can no longer simply view democratic orders as unshakably given. If we want to continue living in democracies, we must actively stand up for them.

foreign investors.

For me, as Federal Chancellor of approximately 84 million inhabitants, it was fascinating in itself to converse with a colleague who bore responsibility for more than a billion people. Added to this was the fact that, unlike in Germany, most people in his country were poor. When Dr Singh became Prime Minister in 2004, the GDP per capita in India was 624 USD; when he left it in 2014, it was 1,553 USD. These figures speak for themselves.

In our conversations, Manmohan Singh illustrated to me again and again, not reproachfully but in a firm tone, what reservations emerging countries like India had toward us, the rich industrialised nations, including Germany.

From his point of view, we continually expected great interest from them in our eco-

nomical and political problems, but were in no way prepared to show them, the emerging countries, the same measure of curiosity and interest.

In my political memoirs, I describe how my view of the world sharpened through such conversations as those I had with Manmohan Singh. On my desk in the Chancellery stood a globe. At some point, I began to think about the difference between a globe and a map.

In doing so, it became clear to me that my worldview, like that of many other Europeans, was Eurocentrically-shaped. On a globe, the distance from every place in the world to the centre of the globe is the same, and thus no place in the world is highlighted. On a world map, it looks quite different. On it, there is a centre and margins. The decision of where the centre lies is arbitrary.

Now, the world has changed dramatically since the time Dr Singh was Prime Minister. Not only has the economic and political weight of the emerging countries — symbolised by the BRICS group of states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) — shifted significantly in favour of the former compared to that of the industrialised states — known as the G7 group (US, Canada, Japan, France, Great Britain, Italy, and Germany). What weighs more heavily today is that in recent years, seemingly unshakable certainties have been shaken. Let me name three of them:

In Europe, the principle of the territorial integrity of states was violated by Russia's attack on Ukraine, and thus the European order, after World War II, was thrown into turmoil. Multilateralism as a concept for our international

cooperation is under pressure. (And) New technical possibilities such as so-called social media, and developments in the field of Artificial Intelligence, are capable of calling truths, lies, and lies, truths.

On July 19, 2025, Dr Singh delivered a speech in the US Congress, where he detailed what is indispensable for a democracy — free and fair elections with an independent election commission, an independent judiciary, a fearless press, as well as the protection of minorities and civil society organisations that can work unhindered.

What applied then applies all the more today. Promoted by parties on the fringes or outside the democratic spectrum that call these principles into question, and driven by so-called social media, democracy is coming under pressure, at least in Germany.

We must make no compromises on what we regard as essential for our (democratic) order. We must not back away from hate and incitement. We can no longer simply view democratic orders as unshakably given. If we want to continue living in democracies, we must actively stand up for them.

I hope I have been able to make clear, through these examples, the many challenges we face as societies today. (I believe) it is fit to establish the tradition of an annual Manmohan Singh Lecture here today, and I thank you that I was allowed to hold the first of these.

Excerpts from the First Manmohan Singh Memorial Lecture delivered in New Delhi on February 26, 2026. Go to www.tribuneindia.com for the complete version

How policing is getting choked in the federal structure



AJAY K MEHRA
SENIOR FELLOW, CENTRE FOR
MULTILEVEL FEDERALISM

THE role of the police has been coming into question rather frequently even 79 years after Independence. In recent years, it has faced scrutiny in the country's federal context. Two cases of inter-state actions come to my mind that are instances of blatant violations of the principles of federal policing.

Had these merely been cases of friction involving two states, sorting them out would have been easier, for the Union government could have stepped in to mediate and resolve the complexities. Interestingly in recent instances, each time the Centre has been one of the parties to the conflicts.

Talking first about the more recent incident. Hardly had the euphoria over the Delhi AI Impact Summit disappeared, on February 25, the Delhi Police was ordered to arrest the Indian

Youth Congress (IYC) activists who were involved in the shirtless protest at the summit.

A few IYC leaders belong to Himachal Pradesh, which is ruled by the Congress, so the young political workers took shelter there. Without informing the HP Police, a 15-member Delhi police team picked up Saurabh Singh and Arbaaz Khan, hailing from Uttar Pradesh, and Sidharth Avdhut, belonging to Madhya Pradesh, from a remote area Chirgaon in Rohru falling in Shimla district.

As they were returning, the HP Police intercepted the Delhi Police team multiple times. A verbal spat over jurisdiction and the due process ensued. The avoidable political drama involving the police forces of Delhi, Haryana and Himachal concluded after the three suspects were remanded to a three-day police custody by the Delhi Chief Judicial Magistrate.

Four years earlier, on May 6, 2022, the fracas was between Punjab Police on one hand and a joint Delhi and Haryana Police team on the other. It was indeed an overreach of the Punjab Police at the instance of CM Bhagwant Mann.

Tajinder Pal Singh Bagga, a Delhi BJP leader, was arrested from his residence in the national capital by the Punjab



AT STAKE: In federalism, the authority structure is defined first between the Union and state governments.

Police on the complaint of AAP leader Sunny Singh Ahluwalia. The complaint was regarding making provocative statements, promoting religious enmity and criminal intimidation.

As the Punjab Police team was heading towards Mohali with Bagga in their custody, both the Delhi Police and the Haryana Police swung into action. The Delhi Police registered a kidnapping case based on a complaint by Bagga's father; the Haryana Police barricaded the Delhi-Mohali road.

The law clearly requires the police to firmly establish an information chain by immediately informing the local police station.

The Punjab Police followed none of the administrative and legal protocols. The Haryana and Delhi Police conveniently ignored legal niceties, and brought him back to Delhi.

Since both controversies are regarding the police and policing in the federal context, they need to be understood. This is what the United Nations states on policing 'Although contemporary international standards provide a normative rubric, policing has always been and remains a diverse spectrum of preventive, deterrent and

investigative activities carried out by a variety of actors.'

The complexities of the police role in local, national and international contexts brought out here are bound by the principles of security (of the people) and justice (to the people), which are administered in each case by a 'legitimate authority'.

Moreover, whatever the form of government, the police functions by delineating levels of authority structure. In a federal form of government, this structure is defined first of all between the Union and state governments.

The Constitution clearly lays down the authority and responsibility of policing to the states. The basic framework of the law, however, is outlined within the constitutional structure. Thus, the three lists under Article 246 clearly specify policing responsibilities.

However, in cases of inter-state policing, the law clearly requires the police to firmly establish an information chain by immediately informing the local police station before effecting arrests or taking any action.

The law also mandates that an arrested person be provided before the nearest magistrate and moved either to another or the same jurisdiction only following a transit

remand. Any search and seizure by the police must also be done in the presence of two independent witnesses.

The two incidents mentioned raise tough questions on the misuse of the police and criminal justice system machinery by political parties in power at the Centre and in states within the tenets of federal policing. This unravels an unlawful precedent in the context of policing by the Union and state governments.

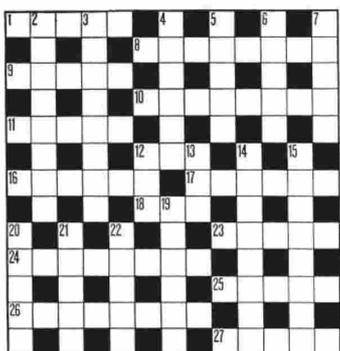
The police officers, both belonging to the IPS cadre allotted to the relevant state and of the state cadres, thus, get used to give the procedures of the criminal justice system the go-by and carry out their task of policing entirely on political grounds, violating constitutional principles.

In the aforementioned instances, the BJP in power at the Centre and in Haryana and the AAP ruling Punjab, have each crossed the line.

Given the circumstances, PM Modi is the most competent and powerful authority to resolve such legal-constitutional tussle, enabled by a reassuring majority.

The utility and efficacy of a competent police organisation cannot be overemphasised in Indian democracy.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 Attach (5)
 - 8 Not to mention (3,5)
 - 9 Surly (5)
 - 10 Sofien (4,4)
 - 11 Tree associated with Lebanon (5)
 - 12 Fuss (3)
 - 16 Leap (6)
 - 17 Composer of New World symphony (6)
 - 18 Female sheep (3)
 - 23 Favourite leisure activity (5)
 - 24 Inopportune (3-5)
 - 25 Under way (5)
 - 26 Be humiliated (4,4)
 - 27 Commerce (5)

- DOWN**
- 2 Indefinitely (3,5)
 - 3 Personally demeaning (5,3)
 - 4 To support (6)
 - 5 Warily uncommunicative (5)
 - 6 Contributor (5)
 - 7 Diversionary sham attack (5)
 - 8 Grow old (3)
 - 13 Type of lyric poem (3,3)
 - 14 Exceed acceptable limits (2,3,3)
 - 15 Mutual ill feeling (3,5)
 - 19 Full violently sideways (6)
 - 20 Young female horse (5)
 - 21 Reduce sharply (5)
 - 22 A moment (5)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 True to type, 6 Pall, 10 Lofly, 11 Porcelain, 12 Liberate, 13 Set-to, 15 Thirsty, 17 Debrief, 19 Pigment, 21 Shelter, 22 Hoard, 24 Quixotic, 27 Rebellion, 28 Haste, 29 Tame, 30 Make tracks.
Down: 1 Told, 2 Unfailing, 3 Thyme, 4 Topiary, 5 Portend, 7 Await, 8 Line of fire, 9 Feasible, 14 Stop the rot, 16 Speedily, 18 Intrinsic, 20 Tequila, 21 Science, 23 Album, 25 Other, 26 Mess.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MARCH 3, 2026, TUESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Phalgun Shaka 12
- Phalgun Purnimite 20
- Hijari 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 15, up to 5:08 pm
- Sukarna Yoga up to 10:25 am
- Magna Nakshatra up to 7:32 am
- Moon in Leo sign
- Phalgun Purnima
- Gandmoola up to 7:32 am

FORECAST

CITY	18:22 HRS	
	WEDNESDAY	06:45 HRS
	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	30	15
New Delhi	32	15
Amritsar	28	12
Bathinda	32	11
Jalandhar	28	12
Ludhiana	30	12
Bhiwani	33	16
Hisar	32	13
Sirsa	32	13
Dharamsala	24	10
Manali	19	04
Shimla	18	09
Srinagar	21	02
Jammu	30	12
Kargil	07	-06
Leh	07	-08
Dehradun	30	13
Mussoorie	21	10



It's fear that makes us lose our conscience. It's also what transforms us into cowards

Marjane Satrapi

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

SPIRIT OF RANJI WIN PROVIDES AN OPENING TO TRANSFORM J&K

AN underdog rarely gets the chance to command the nation's attention while scripting history in a domestic tournament. Last week, the Jammu & Kashmir men's cricket team did just that by winning the Ranji Trophy for the first time in more than six decades of playing the tournament. When J&K won the final against eight-time champions Karnataka at Hubballi, after beating previous champions Delhi, Hyderabad, Madhya Pradesh and Bengal in the run-up, the head coach solemnly observed that several protagonists had played their parts in the team's journey to immortality.

True, the magical moment took years of belief and toil to arrive at. Take all-rounder Parvez Rasool. He inspired hope when he became the first cricketer from the politically-troubled Kashmir valley to be selected for an IPL team in 2013. A year later, he rewrote history becoming the first from J&K to represent India. Rasool's tryst with destiny inspired a generation of players like Umar Malik and Abdul Samad. Credit should also go to former India players Bishan Singh Bedi and Irfan Pathan, who worked with the team at different points of time to galvanise it into an ultra-competent outfit.

The defining moment, however, came in 2021 when the J&K High Court directed the Indian cricket board to form a sub-committee to run the sport in the territory. With BCCI president Mithun Manhas on the panel, things took a turn for the better. He emphasised grassroots development and hired ex-India all-rounder Ajay Sharma as coach.

The enormity of the occasion could be deciphered from the presence of dignitaries in the stands including Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on the last day of the final. It was heartening to see the entire erstwhile state, now a Union territory, burying its differences to support the team. The victory has a chance to usher in a new future for the region where India's preeminent sport has been neglected for decades. In pacer Aqib Nabi, who finished as the leading wicket-taker and player of the tournament, they can find a role model whose cricket started on the streets of Baramulla. The win shows that with the right kind of support and belief, even so-called smaller teams can win on big stages. It also shows that cricket is thriving across the country as J&K became the fifth first-time Ranji champions in a decade.

GET HIRING PANEL GOING TO FILL POLICE RANKS

THE police force in Odisha is staring at a severe resource challenge as its recruitment system remains caught in a bureaucratic maze. A month after ratifying the rules governing the Odisha Uniformed Services Staff Selection Commission (OUSSSC), the new recruitment agency for all uniformed services in the state, the government is yet to appoint its chairperson and members. Meanwhile, the OUSSSC faces a formidable task. Apart from the police, it is mandated to recruit for the forest, excise, commerce and transport departments as well.

After the last drive to hire sub-inspectors ran into trouble, the government ordered the Central Bureau of Investigation to probe the multi-state racket allegedly rigging the examination system. With public anger mounting, the government approved the OUSSSC's formation last November, and the cabinet ratified the rules for appointing its leadership by the end of January. Yet there has been no movement since, even as thousands of young aspirants wait for the recruitment process to resume. This includes the lakhs of candidates affected by the cancellation of the last two rounds over allegations of irregularities.

The scale of the challenge is undeniable. Nearly 29 percent of the roughly 77,000 constabulary posts in the state lie vacant. At the sub-inspector and inspector levels, the vacancy rate is even higher at 42 percent, with at least 3,400 positions currently unfilled. Even after the OUSSSC becomes operational, it will take months to recruit for such a large number of posts in just one department. Thereafter comes the equally demanding task of training the new recruits using the existing infrastructure and personnel. Deploying them effectively and managing career progression will add further complexity. The umbrella body must also ensure that the entire process is demonstrably more transparent than before.

But none of this can begin until the OUSSSC is made functional. With vacancies mounting at key operational ranks, investigation and crime control are inevitably compromised. The Mahaj government must act without further delay.

QUICK TAKE

CHOOSE YOUR LANE

A crash in China, the world's largest electric vehicle producer for a decade, has brought attention back to the 'intelligence' of intelligent cars. A Lynk & co crashed into a highway guardrail when it misinterpreted a voice command to turn off reading lights at the back and instead shut the headlights. By the time the news went around the world, the company had pushed a software update that made headlight decisions manual-only. It follows a number of accidents reported by autonomous vehicle users that have made them question the technology's viability. Nitin Gadkari arrived at the point by a different route when, asked about the future of self-driving cars in India, the road transport minister scoffed at bringing in a technology that would likely worsen unemployment. To each one's own route.

THE events unfolding in West Asia demand clear military scrutiny. As a practitioner of the profession of arms, I prefer to assess this confrontation not through the prism of political expectation or regime speculation, but through operational reality. Leadership decapitation, air dominance, missile exchanges and intelligence penetration must be examined as instruments of modern warfare—because it is through the military domain that the trajectory of this crisis will be shaped.

The killing of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, along with reports of the elimination of senior military and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders, marks a dramatic escalation. This is not simply a political assassination; it is a calculated strike at command coherence.

The first and most striking feature of this episode is the depth of intelligence penetration. Identifying hardened locations, confirming presence, sequencing strike windows and synchronising effects require integrated human intelligence, signals interception, satellite tracking and cyber reconnaissance. The compression of the kill chain—from identification to elimination—reflects mature intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance integration. This was structured targeting sustained over time, not just an opportunity target practice.

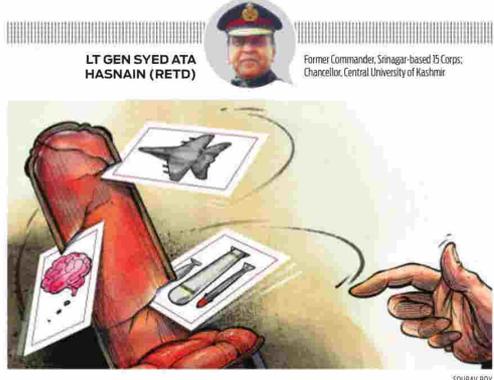
Air superiority has clearly been decisive. Iran's air force, long constrained by ageing platforms and sanctions, has relied more on missile deterrence than aerial contestation. Once segments of airspace are penetrated or suppressed, hardened leadership becomes vulnerable. The reported dominance of Israeli air assets, supported by American surveillance and logistical networks, underscores the vulnerability of States that cannot effectively contest air denial. Yet, air dominance alone does not conclude conflicts.

Iran's deterrent posture rests fundamentally on its missile and drone architecture. Over decades, Tehran invested heavily in surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, cruise systems and loitering munitions. These systems do not require air superiority to function. They are dispersed, mobile and often concealed within. The central operational question now is whether sustained strikes can degrade this missile ecosystem faster than Iran can launch, relocate or conceal the remaining assets. Remember, too, that the systems are not all from the modern inventory.

Missile defence adds another layer of complexity. Israel's architecture—Iron

dominance gives the US and Israel an early upper hand. But it will not be enough to effect a full regime change. Cyber ops could prove quietly consequential.

IRAN CONFLICT: THE BEGINNING OF AN ENDURANCE TEST



LT GEN SYED ATA HASNAIN (RETD)

Former Commander, Sinagar-based 15 Corps; Chancellor, Central University of Kashmir

David's Sling and Arrow systems—combined with American regional networks, provides high interception probability. However, saturation remains a persistent vulnerability. Offensive missiles and drones can be massed; defensive interceptors are finite and expensive. The economic asymmetry of modern warfare becomes visible here: relatively low-cost offensive platforms compel the launch of high-cost interceptors.

Modern conflict also compresses decision time. The speed at which sensor data is fused, targets validated and strike orders authorised has shortened dramatically. Artificial intelligence-assisted targeting, satellite refresh cycles measured in minutes and secure battlefield communications reduce reaction windows.

This compression increases efficiency, but also magnifies risk. When escalation ladders are climbed at high speed, political oversight can lag operational tempo. Mis-

identification, overestimation of damage or automated threat interpretation can produce responses disproportionate to intent. In such environments, the margin between calibrated coercion and uncontrolled escalation narrows significantly.

The naval domain introduces additional strategic risk. The US maintains significant maritime assets in and around the Gulf. Enclosed maritime geography, however, compresses manoeuvre space. Anti-air missiles, swarm tactics, naval mines and long-range drones can complicate defensive geometry. A successful strike on a high-value naval asset—even limited in physical damage—would carry outsized psychological and political consequences.

Iran's asymmetric doctrine remains relevant. Proxy networks across the region may have been degraded, but they are not erased. The ability to widen the theatre through indirect pressure remains an option that would stretch defensive sys-

A NEW CODE OF SILENCE ON CAMPUS

"Silence like a cancer grows"

—Paul Simon

NCE known for intellectual risk-taking and passionate disagreements, India's university campuses today feel subdued. A new caution hangs in the air, shaping conversations and silences alike. This sinister shift has occurred not through dramatic crackdowns but through small, incremental decisions that have collectively altered the academic spirit in many higher educational institutions.

Instances of a talk quietly cancelled, 'controversial' speakers disinvited, or an uncomfortable theme dropped from the syllabus are becoming all too familiar. Each of these decisions may appear minor and even pragmatic. University administrators across the nation are making such decisions in polarised times. But taken together, they reveal the slow unmaking of the once-vibrant, plural Indian university into a space defined by anxiety and curiosity.

For decades, campuses in India were arenas of contestation. Lecture halls echoed with debates on varied subjects such as justice, development and identity. Professors frequently disagreed publicly and modelled disagreement as a scholarly virtue. From professors, students learned that knowledge grew through friction rather than consensus. Unfortunately, that ethos is fading. More worryingly it is slowly being replaced by a cautious search for safety over intellectual challenge. This becomes clear when university managements usually frame controversial decisions in the language of risk management, such as concerns about reputation, regulatory pressure or security threats.

These anxieties are real. There is no denying that administrators operate today under relentless scrutiny, not just from political actors but also from online campaigns and organised pressure groups. In such an environment, caution appears responsible, even inevitable and sometimes unavoidable.

However, we cannot afford to ignore the far-reaching consequences of this approach. This internalised censorship is a Faustian bargain. Institutions performing anxiety risk, as Asghar Ali Engineer argue, are abandoning their historic role as sanctuaries for alternative thought and counterweights to majoritarian narratives. Such institutions are slowly shifting from knowledge centres to risk-management units, prioritising institutional

JOHN J KENNEDY

Former Professor and Dean, Christ (Deemed) University, Bengaluru

survival over intellectual courage. Scholars have described this transformation as the 'authoritarianisation of civil society' in which regimes succeed not by dismantling every independent institution, but by fostering a pervasive fear that inevitably leads to self-censorship. Consequently, universities begin to police themselves, anticipating backlash even before it arrives. Over time, silence becomes habitual, and worse, intellectual neutrality is mistaken for institutional wisdom.



Universities are becoming anxious places that quietly indulge in self-censorship to avoid controversies. This is a Faustian bargain in which intellectual curiosity withers. Asghar Ali Engineer's warning that academic institutions are abandoning their role as sanctuaries for alternative thought rings truer today

It may also be worthwhile to recall German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who described universities as central spaces of the 'public sphere', where citizens debate power and imagine alternative futures. According to him, when campuses retreat from controversy, the public sphere contracts. That is precisely what is happening today on our campuses.

More often than not, it is political polarisation that starts and deepens this crisis. When disagreement is increasingly framed as disloyalty, university leadership naturally prioritises institutional preservation over intellectual vitality. Faculty wary of professional repercussions recalibrate research agendas and public engagement. When administrative

and academic leadership fail in their duty, what can one expect of students? They begin to view the university as a credentialing factory and not a civic space.

All of these trends reinforce one another. When administrators emphasise caution, faculty retreat further and students internalise restraint as normal academic behaviour. As a result, the campus transforms from a place of inquiry into a site of quiet compliance. We pay an enormous price for this. Students learn not only from lectures but from institutional conduct. A cancelled seminar tells them that certain ideas are too dangerous to examine. A disinvited speaker teaches them that intellectual challenge carries consequences. Gradually, curiosity gives way to prudence.

The national costs of such a trend are even greater. Universities are spaces where young citizens practise democratic deliberation, listening to opposing viewpoints, refining arguments, and learning to change their minds. When campuses abandon this role, democracy obviously weakens. A society that discourages argument loses the capacity for self-correction.

Is it possible to reverse this trajectory? Yes, but it demands collective resolve. Only when university leaders learn to reframe controversy as evidence of intellectual vitality rather than reputational danger, faculty members are assured of institutional protection to pursue difficult questions without fear, and students are encouraged to approach unfamiliar ideas with curiosity instead of apprehension, such a change is possible. Above all, government agencies and policymakers must recognise that democratic resilience depends on intellectually confident universities.

It is common knowledge that India's universities have endured crises before and have often recovered through academic courage and institutional reflection. Whether they can do so again depends on recognising the urgency of the present moment. The hard truth is that the issue at hand is not merely about individual speakers being disinvited or a few incidents being cancelled, but more about the intellectual culture that institutions choose to cultivate on campus.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Oil crisis

Ref: West Asia on the brink (Mar 2). The imminent danger of energy shortage will put every dependent country at greater risk leading to a cascading impact on the economy. India is now put in a very pinur situation and is yet to take a concrete route for a regular flow. Tough days are ahead. R V Baskaran, Pune

Revive debate

Ref: Hidden risks of dog licks (Mar 2). Not long ago, the issue of disease contagion via dogs sparked widespread debate, but faded over time without bringing about real change. What we need now is not just discussion but strict action and greater public awareness. S Sundareswara Pandiyan, Chennai

Dementia reality

Ref: Gentle vigil (Mar 2). As a researcher, we know that the plant Centella asiatica—already prescribed in Siddha—can significantly reduce symptoms related to dementia. Grants by the government to expand research can guide others in this pursuit. Furthermore, the situation of elderly care in India is different. Most patients are looked after by family members. I know practitioners within the medical fraternity who spend up to 15,000 per 12 hours of nursing, which is affordable for most. Dr Shanmugasari, Tirunelveli

AI applications

Ref: AI world order (Mar 1). AI has many real-world applications from which the underprivileged can benefit. Pensioners' access of public transport routes to avail medical assistance can rightly benefit from AI integration with personalised timing dashboards on their handhelds. R Sathyalingam, Hyderabad

Fishing expeditions

Ref: Burden of harsh laws (Mar 2). It has now become the norm for central agencies to go on fishing expeditions against the members of the opposition. The lack of incriminating evidence in the fragmented cases directly indicates a mere witch hunt. Aanya Singhal, Noida

Semifinal playback

Ref: Samson's galaxy (Mar 2). Kudos to India for their emphatic win at Eden Gardens. Silencing this critic, Sam's unbeaten 97 was a masterpiece in itself and a testament to his class, skill and composure under tremendous pressure. India should plug their loopholes before they lock horns with England. Dheep D Anand, Alappuzha



Uranium deal

The \$2.6 billion uranium deal with Canada marks a correction in energy vulnerability

The signing of the \$2.6 billion uranium supply agreement between India and Canada marks more than a commercial transaction; it signals a strategic correction in India's long-standing energy vulnerability. For a nation grappling with rising electricity demand, volatile fossil fuel prices, and climate commitments, the steady inflow of uranium is the missing link in unlocking the true potential of nuclear power. For decades, India's nuclear ambitions were constrained not by technological incapacity but by fuel scarcity. Domestic reserves, controlled largely by limited mining capacity, were insufficient to run reactors at optimal efficiency. Plants designed to operate at 90 per cent capacity were often forced to function far below potential. The new agreement with Cameco Corp changes this equation fundamentally, guaranteeing reliable fuel supply and enabling reactors to produce electricity at full capacity.

The implications for India's electricity landscape are profound. Nuclear energy offers a rare combination of reliability and sustainability. Unlike solar and wind, which are intermittent, nuclear power provides uninterrupted baseload electricity. This is critical for industrial growth, urban expansion, and the digital economy. With uranium supply secured, the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited can scale up generation at existing plants such as Tarapur Atomic Power Station and Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, while accelerating new reactor projects. Equally important is the geopolitical dimension. Canada's willingness to supply uranium reflects renewed international trust in India's nuclear governance framework, anchored in transparency and safeguards overseen by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This agreement strengthens India's legitimacy as a responsible nuclear power and reinforces its integration into the global clean energy ecosystem.

Critics may argue that nuclear energy is expensive and slow to deploy. But such arguments ignore long-term economics. Once operational, nuclear plants produce large volumes of low-carbon electricity for decades, insulating economies from fuel price shocks. In contrast, overdependence on coal exposes India to environmental degradation, while excessive reliance on renewables without storage risks grid instability. This uranium deal therefore represents strategic foresight. It enhances energy security, reduces carbon emissions, and strengthens infrastructure resilience. More importantly, it underscores the need for India to treat nuclear energy not as a peripheral option but as a central pillar of its energy future. If India is to power its growth ambitions and secure energy sovereignty, nuclear power must move from the margins to the mainstream.

Geopolitical bottleneck

Prolonged closure of the Strait of Hormuz would inflate India's import bill & weaken the rupee

The looming threat of closure of the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a regional flashpoint—it is a global economic alarm bell. As tensions with Iran escalate and shipping disruptions intensify, the world stands on the brink of an energy shock that could destabilise economies, fuel inflation, and test the resilience of energy-importing nations like India. This narrow maritime corridor, barely 33 kilometres wide at its narrowest, carries roughly 20-30 per cent of global oil supplies daily, making it the single most critical artery of the world's energy system. Any disruption here is not a local inconvenience but a systemic shock. Already, oil prices have surged sharply, with analysts warning of spikes beyond \$100 per barrel if supplies remain constrained. The consequences of such a surge would ripple across industries, from aviation to agriculture, pushing up the cost of everything from transport to food.

For India, the danger is particularly acute. Nearly half of its crude oil imports pass through this strait, underscoring the country's deep vulnerability to geopolitical tremors in West Asia. A prolonged closure would not merely inflate India's import bill; it would weaken the rupee, widen the fiscal deficit, and ignite inflationary pressures that hit ordinary citizens hardest. Petrol and diesel prices would climb, electricity generation costs would increase, and industries would face rising input costs—triggering a domino effect across the economy. But beyond economics lies a sobering geopolitical reality: Iran's ability to threaten closure of this chokepoint demonstrates how geography can be weaponised. Oil is no longer just a commodity; it is leverage. The mere possibility of disruption has already forced tanker operators to suspend shipments and insurers to raise premiums, amplifying market panic. Supply chains, already fragile after years of pandemic and war, risk further destabilisation.

Yet, this crisis must also serve as a wake-up call. India's long-term energy security cannot remain hostage to distant geopolitical rivalries. Strategic petroleum reserves, diversification of suppliers, and accelerated investment in renewable and nuclear energy are no longer policy choices—they are strategic imperatives. Energy independence is not simply about economics; it is about sovereignty. The Strait of Hormuz has once again exposed the fragility of the global energy order. If the flow of oil can be threatened by conflict, then the stability of entire economies can be threatened overnight. The lesson is clear: The world must prepare not merely to respond to energy crises, but to outgrow the vulnerabilities that make such crises possible.

Gor: America's envoy overreach

Last month, he descended upon Chandigarh for a high-profile tour of the Indian Army's Western Command



Prabhu Chawla
POWER & POLITICS

Recently, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal posted a telling picture on his X handle. It showed the minister flanked by the controversial US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick and Ambassador Sergio Gor in a convivial pose. The photograph captured the new informality that has suddenly infused Indo-American relations. This image conveyed camaraderie rather than deference. Such pictures were rarely shared on public platforms during State visits in the past. Ambassador Gor has made that difference.

Ambassadors, traditionally, are the invisible persuaders who whisper counsel in shadowed corridors rather than stride forth as aggressive masters commanding the spotlight. Yet, in the teeming diplomatic theatre of New Delhi, Gor, America's freshly-minted envoy to India, has shattered this cardinal tenet with a flamboyance that borders on the brazen. At a mere 38 years old, the youngest ambassador posted to this pivotal post in recent memory has arrived like a whirlwind. He started operations long before he presented his credentials to President Droupadi Murmu on January 14.

His hyperkinetic tenure suggests overreach. He has already completed visits of new installations, state capitals, corporate boardrooms, political salons. He has hosted lavish soirées at his residence. Indian ministers and MPs do not merely meet him; they trumpet these encounters as badges of prestige. One might mistake him not for the nominee of a foreign president, but for a de facto American viceroy wielding unfettered access to every corridor of power.

He is no ordinary diplomat. Gor, a Soviet-born political operative and Trump loyalist, once helmed the White House Presidential Personnel Office. He carries baggage that should have tempered such audacity. His nomination was shadowed by controversy: Elon Musk once branded him a "snake" for allegedly dragging his feet on personal security clearance paperwork while vetting thousands of others. Former National Security Advisor John Bolton dismissed him as unqualified, citing his lack of India-specific



By inserting himself into the sinews of Indian power structures, new US Ambassador Sergio Gor lends dangerous credence to the perennial suspicion that India dances to an American tune.

diplomatic pedigree. Critics painted him as the quintessential insider operative fluent in loyalty tests rather than languages of nuance. In Senate hearings, Gor thundered that Trump had made it "crystal clear" that India must stop buying Russian oil. Detractors in Washington and beyond whispered of him as one of the most vocal anti-India voices in Trumpworld.

Contrast this with the decorous restraint of his peers. Ambassadors from Europe, Japan, China and Russia glide through Delhi like phantoms. They confine to official conclaves, terse communiqués and ceremonial handshakes. Even Gor's immediate predecessor Eric Garcetti, though energetic, maintained a more measured cadence. There were State visits, but never the feverish fusion of military briefings, industrial schmoozing and parliamentary glad-handing that defined Gor's opening salvo. Where others observe protocol, Gor orchestrates dominance.

Last month, he descended upon Chandigarh for a high-profile tour of the Indian Army's Western Command headquarters alongside Admiral Samuel J Paparo, Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command. There, they were briefed on operational readiness, strategic dynamics along the western front and even Operation Sindoor—details ordinarily reserved for sovereign eyes. Indian opposition leaders erupted in outrage. Yet Gor boasted on X: "Just landed in Chandigarh. Looking forward to visiting the Western Command."

His highly-publicised itinerary didn't stop at the barracks. He has traversed states, wooed business

houses, and flung open the doors of his residence for glittering receptions. Industrialists fete him and parliamentarians preen in his presence. Former Foreign Secretary and Rajya Sabha MP Harsh Vardhan Shringla, a stalwart of Indian diplomacy, hosted an elaborate reception in Gor's honour, drawing a constellation of MPs who promptly flooded social media with proud photographs. Posts from lawmakers across various parties hailed the evening as a significant moment in bilateral ties, with images of handshakes and smiles proliferating like confetti. Ministers, too, propagate these encounters with gusto, elevating Gor beyond the status of mere presidential nominee to something approximating an American consul.

This relentless courtship of India's political, military and business elite—from four-star generals to backbench MPs, from industrial tycoons to state-level bureaucrats—has raised unsettling questions about Gor's underlying motives. Opposition parties, already wary of creeping American influence, have seized upon this spectacle as proof of Washington's undue sway over New Delhi's policy establishment. The sight of Indian ministers and parliamentarians jostling for photographs with a foreign envoy and treating access to him as a status symbol has provided fresh ammunition to critics who argue that the Modi government has ceded too much ground to American interests.

What Gor frames as bridge-building, his detractors cast as influence peddling and an orchestrated penetration of India's decision-making apparatus that risks reducing sover-

eign policy calculation to mere appendage of American strategic preferences. His royal omnipresence is no accident. It is choreography. Gor has been instrumental in advancing the India-US trade deal, negotiating tariff adjustments tied to Russian oil purchases and championing initiatives like the Pax Silet Declaration for semiconductor and AI supply chains. In his inaugural embassy address and subsequent remarks, he has cast himself as the indispensable bridge-builder.

Yet, beneath the bonhomie lies a disconcerting asymmetry. Indian leaders host him, while opposition voices question whether his interventions veer into meddling. Critics, particularly from opposition benches, have begun to voice alarm at this pattern of overweening involvement. In the Western Command visit, timed amid deepening defence pacts, has been lambasted as emblematic of a larger syndrome—where American envoys cease to advise and begin to direct. One cannot dismiss the optics: a foreign ambassador, barely credentialed, embedded in sensitive military discussions alongside a four-star US admiral. This is not diplomacy. It is dominion dressed in decorum.

His predecessors limited themselves to protocol. Gor transcends it, transforming the ambassadorial role into roving vice-regency. The peril is profound. By cultivating this cult of accessibility, inviting elites to his residence, posing for viral photographs, and inserting himself into the sinews of Indian power structures, Gor lends dangerous credence to the perennial suspicion that India dances to an American tune. When an envoy becomes more visible than the institutions he ostensibly serves, the host country's sovereignty appears negotiable. Opposition scrutiny is not paranoia; it is patriotism confronting overreach. Gor's hyperactive hegemony in New Delhi should serve as a cautionary parable.

Diplomats must remain invisible persuaders and not act as advisors. India, a civilisation of ancient grandeur and modern resurgence, deserves envoys who elevate alliance without eroding autonomy. Anything less is not diplomacy; it is dominance by another name. It's nothing but an affront to the very independence India so fiercely guards.

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

NIP monetisation & the hidden tax



Shivaji Sarkar

Indians may soon be paying more, not through Parliament-approved tax hikes, but through toll gates, power bills and user fees. With the expansion of the National Monetisation Pipeline 2 (NMP-2), the government has introduced an asset-monetisation regime that risks quietly increasing the overall tax burden.

What is being projected as innovative financing could, in practice, function as an additional layer of indirect taxation embedded into daily life. This represents more than a funding mechanism for infrastructure. It marks a structural shift away from transparent, legislated taxes towards charges citizens pay routinely without debate or scrutiny.

India already derives nearly 45 per cent of its tax revenues, according to the Economic Survey, from indirect levies such as GST and excise, the most regressive forms of taxation. Monetisation threatens to push this share beyond 47 per cent. For poorer households, almost half of every rupee spent could carry a tax or fee component. For the middle class, already paying income tax and consumption taxes, the cumulative burden could absorb much of their incremental income, fuelling inflation and eroding disposable earnings.

Indirect tax collections remain strong. GST revenue touched a record ₹2.08 lakh crore in FY25, a 9.4 per cent rise. Total indirect tax collections are estimated at ₹18.37 lakh crore, with an indirect tax-to-GDP ratio of 4.9 per cent. Yet, despite this revenue buoyancy,

monetisation is being pursued aggressively.

The NMP-2 target alone explains the concern. The Union Budget 2025-26 has set a ₹10 lakh crore target for NMP 2.0 over FY26-30, with a total monetisation potential of ₹16.72 lakh crore, more than 2.6 times the first phase.

Invisible Extraction

Indirect taxation is inherently regressive. A low-income household pays the same GST on transport or cooking oil as a wealthy one, surrendering a larger share of income. By leasing infrastructure and allowing recovery through user charges, NMP-2 embeds a new layer of quasi-taxation into everyday life. This is a shift from visible taxation to invisible extraction.

The logic

When Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman outlined the monetisation plan, the rationale appeared sound: Lease operational public assets, raise upfront resources and reinvest proceeds into new infrastructure without expanding fiscal deficits or public debt.

On paper, it looks prudent. Instead of borrowing, the government "unlocks value." But economically, the distinction is less benign. If ₹16.72 lakh crore is to be mobilised between FY26 and FY30, that money must ultimately come from users. Infrastructure generates revenue only by charging citizens. What appears as non-tax revenue in the Budget effectively becomes indirect taxation through tolls, tariffs and service fees.

A lease that functions like a sale

The government emphasises that ownership remains public and assets revert after concession periods. For citizens, this distinc-



tion is largely academic. Once a private operator controls a highway or power transmission line for decades, pricing decisions move beyond public accountability.

Infrastructure ceases to function as a public good and becomes a commercial revenue source. Assets built with taxpayer money begin charging taxpayers again for access.

Monopoly economics

The inflationary risks stem from the nature of the sectors involved. Highways, ports, rail terminals and power networks are natural monopolies. Consumers have limited alternatives. Once leased, pricing power becomes concentrated.

Private concessionaires paying large upfront fees must secure returns. The simplest route is periodic increases in tolls and tariffs. These "operate-transfer models" incentivise revenue maximisation. Efficiency gains are often cited, but rarely translate into lower charges. The predictable outcome is steadily rising user fees.

From user charges to inflation

Higher charges ripple across the economy. Costlier highways raise freight expenses, feeding into food prices. Power tariff hikes increase industrial costs. Port and logistics charges inflate imports and retail prices. Mining costs raise steel, cement and housing prices.

The effect is cumulative and structural. This is classical cost-

push inflation. Monetary policy cannot lower tolls or cap port charges. If infrastructure becomes permanently expensive, inflation becomes embedded, steadily eroding purchasing power.

Paradox of revenue abundance

The turn towards monetisation is puzzling given robust tax collections. GST contributes nearly 40 per cent of revenues, averaging ₹1.68 lakh crore a month. The tax base has expanded and compliance improved. There is no revenue collapse.

If additional funds are required for capital expenditure, progressive direct taxation or better enforcement could distribute the burden more equitably. Instead, the system becomes less fair even as collections rise.

Growth implications

Higher tolls, tariffs and user charges shrink disposable incomes, weakening consumption and hurting small businesses first. Rising logistics and energy costs erode competitiveness, compress manufacturing margins, raise export prices and slow investment.

Infrastructure meant to reduce the cost of doing business. When it raises costs, growth suffers. There is also an institutional risk. Repeated monetisation turns public assets into fiscal crutches, encouraging leasing over reform and locking citizens into permanently higher costs.

If NMP-2 raises living expenses, it becomes a hidden tax, not reform, undermining long-term growth.

The author is former senior editor, The Financial Express and Professor, IIMC. Views are personal.

Age appropriateness critical while introducing AI in schools

FROM chatbots to voice assistants and educational apps, artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly becoming part of everyday life for many families. This rapidly evolving technology offers a multitude of exciting opportunities for children to learn and engage with the world in new ways. In hindsight, it also brings with it serious risks, says a website post on UNICEF. One cannot disagree with this point. According to Ying Xu, Assistant Professor of AI in Learning and Education at Harvard University, "We've seen two consistent patterns. Children are often curious about how things work, including AI, and that curiosity makes these conversations easier than many adults expect. And even preschool-aged children can understand simple ideas about what AI

is and what it can and cannot do. Introducing such basics early can help them feel more comfortable and confident when they encounter AI tools in their everyday environments." Indian education experts echo similar sentiments. Schools should integrate artificial intelligence education and awareness in an age-appropriate manner across classes, but access should be allowed to only vetted AI tools within secure school ecosystems, they add. Shishir Jaipuria, Chairman, Jaipuria Group of Educational Institutions, said schools must educate students about data privacy, misinformation, algorithmic bias and intellectual property. "Schools should integrate AI education and awareness in an age-appropriate manner across grades. Access should be allowed to

only vet AI tools within secure school ecosystems. To effectively make AI usage safe for students, teachers must be upskilled for a better understanding of the guardrails required," he said. Jaipuria noted that the implications of AI usage on schoolchildren can be manifold. "Too much dependence on AI for ready-made answers may lead to students suspending their own critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. This intellectual outsourcing must be avoided. Moreover, there is a real risk of misinformation because of incorrect AI-generated content. Deepfakes are hard to detect and may lead children to believe false information as facts. Algorithmic bias can also reflect in AI responses in terms of gender, racial and cultural biases," he added. Alka Kapur,

Principal of Modern Public School, in Delhi's Shalimar Bagh, said introducing age-appropriate digital literacy programmes is the most prudent way to open the world of AI to the students. These programmes enable students to learn about AI, its benefits, the potential risks involved in its usage and most importantly, the AI ethics. When introduced thoughtfully, AI becomes a powerful ally rather than a double-edged sword. The biggest contribution of schools and educators can be in setting clear guidelines for responsible AI use and monitoring digital activities. "Teachers should be trained to guide students in using AI as a learning tool rather than a shortcut," he said, adding that while AI can be a valuable learning

aid, it is not without its pitfalls. "One major risk is overdependence on artificial intelligence as excessive reliance on AI may prevent students from putting on their thinking caps and making independent efforts." Another risk is the exposure to misinformation since AI tools may sometimes provide inaccurate or misleading information without verifying its authenticity," Kapur said. With technological obsolescence a constant in modern society's existence, it would be very important to see how academic institutions with a bunch of curious children harness their potential without raising undue curiosity about what the other side of hi-tech existence is all about, before they are ready to learn and absorb its merits and demerits.

ETERS

Honour killing is a national shame

The barbaric caste cruelty and heinous murder of Surya Prakash, minutes after his inter-caste love marriage with Sandhya, a progressive deputy tahsildar in East Godavari has shocked the entire nation. Hats off to Sandhya, who courageously chose love over outdated caste barriers. But her brother's caste rage led to extinguishing an innocent life, which is highly condemnable. The medieval mindsets have no place in India. Even the media should stop calling these murders as honour killing. Whose honour? Does it mean that the deceased has had no honour?

PH Hema Sagor, Secunderabad-10

Laying the groundwork early

WITH reference to the article, "Why foundational skills & early hands-on learning matter" (THI March 2). The article rightly points out that adaptability, critical thinking, and resilience are not built overnight nor handed over with a degree certificate. In an age when automation and AI are changing the rules of the game, relying solely on higher education is like putting all our eggs in one basket. Hands-on learning in laboratories and experiential classrooms help students learn the ropes early and boost their self-confidence. When students understand how different components interact, they begin to see the bigger picture instead of missing the forest for the trees. Of course, colleges fine-tune talent, but schools plant the seeds. As the author aptly conveys, fostering experimentation and resilience early on ensuring that students are ready to hit the ground in an unpredictable world.

Raju Kolluru, Kakinada

Time CBSE reorients itself

As a chemistry and biology tutor for CBSE Class 10 students, I am disappointed at the easy and straightforward questions that were asked in the Class 10 Science board exams. The CBSE Board released its sample paper for 2025-26 exams last July. They included 50 per cent competency-based questions. As teachers, we upgraded ourselves and prepared our students accordingly. We made our students solve sample papers and competence focussed questions. However, the questions asked in the science paper that was held on February 25 were very easy. They hardly required the students to think analytically and apply the concepts. Issuing Competency-based sample papers but giving easy questions does not serve any real purpose. Another thing which bothers me as a private tutor is that NCERT syllabus is not upgraded.

Purmal G Tadas, Hyderabad-50

Justice Maheshwari is bang on

WITH reference to the report titled "SC judge Justice Maheshwari exhorts citizens to stick to pleasant truth" (THI March 2), I wish to underscore the judge's poignant reminder that we must speak the truth with a silver tongue, choosing words that are pleasant and constructive rather than wielding a double-edged sword of harsh untruths. Justice Maheshwari, quoting Manu Smriti, urged citizens to cut the Gordian knot of misinformation by embracing the eternal law of right conduct-speaking truth that does not sow seeds of discord or cause unnecessary harm. She warns that spreading lies and false information can fan the flames of social discord and violate privacy. I applaud the judge's call to walk the tightrope of free speech wisely, ensuring that the digital arena becomes a platform for pleasant truth and not a breeding ground for cyber-abuse.

Raju Kolluru, Kakinada

Prioritise judicial reforms

IN the Delhi liquor scam case, the alleged accused Arvind K. Kejriwal, Manish Sisodia, K. Kavayata and others have been given a clean chit by the Delhi High Court. If they were innocent and no case could be made against them then why were they arrested in the first place? Now if the CBI or the ED appeal against the verdict in the Supreme Court and they are found guilty, will all of them be arrested again? It seems like there is no clarity in the way judicial pronouncements have been made. Judicial reforms should investigate this aspect. Justice delivery cannot and should not at no cost be compromised or diluted.

N R Raghuram, Hyderabad

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Global scientists back state's quantum materials push

BENGALURU: In a major boost to Karnataka's ambitions in advanced technologies, 34 leading scientists from premier global research institutions have written to State Minister for Science and Technology N.S. Boseriaji, expressing strong support for the proposed Quantum Materials Innovation Network (Q-MIN).

The endorsement followed the recent "Frontiers in Quantum Condensed Matter Physics (FCQMP)" conference hosted at the International Centre for Theoretical Sciences, a centre of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. In a joint communication, the scientists described advanced quantum materials as the bedrock of next-generation breakthroughs in computing, communication and sensing technologies and backed Karnataka's proposal to anchor Q-MIN within its larger Quantum City programme. Welcoming the global support, Boseriaji said the endorsement reaffirmed the State's vision of building a world-class innovation ecosystem. "Karnataka has always stood at the forefront of technological progress. This message from globally respected scientists shows we are moving in the right direction," he said, adding that Q-MIN would help create a robust research and manufacturing base. The State has set an ambitious target of building a \$20 billion quantum economy by 2035, with a focus on employment generation and technological self-reliance. In their recommendations, the scientists urged the state's Science and Technology and IT/BI departments to establish a centralised Quantum Materials Foundry, develop an integrated computational and data science infrastructure, and promote multi-institutional collaboration.

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

The 'war' has lowered the impact of Modi's visit to Israel



RAVULAPATI SETTARAMARAO

Given this backdrop, Modi's honest display of political savvy has left many bewildered, especially foreign-policy experts. Whether true or not, there used to be political whisperers that when P V Narsimha Rao was defence minister and later foreign minister, he opened up secret ties with Israeli leaders, and that those ties later strengthened into commercial and trade relations after he became India's prime minister. Known for maintaining silence, Rao was not someone who advertised his actions, so political analysts of the time believed that such diplomatic dealings remained behind the scenes. But because Prime Minister Modi has none of that political affectation, he became known in 2017 as the first prime minister to visit Israel. The clear contrast between Modi and earlier prime ministers is striking. Modi has never been deterred by thinking that diplomatic relations should be hidden or restrained — not even by a powerful adversary like Pakistan. Whether invited or not, what's wrong with talking to neighboring countries? Modi showed this pragmatism even before he became prime minister. He can embrace warmly and get along pleasantly with leaders like Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. That's why Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly



Despite the heavy losses it suffered, Iran responded to the strikes by launching missiles and drones targeting Israel and American military installations in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. Tehran has also threatened to shut down the strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway. This may cause hardship with regard to the import of oil to those countries which are in need of it, including India. However, Delhi called upon all sides to resort to 'dialogue and diplomacy' as 'safety of civilians has to be prioritised'.

praised Modi's warm embrace in his parliament, saying he looked forward to such an "affectionate hug" — a remark that captured the attention of everyone. However, by presenting the prime minister's visit to Israel as a standalone trip — without linking it to Palestine or openly discussing it with Palestinian leaders — there was a risk of upsetting countries opposed to Israel. With the Canadian Prime Minister also visiting India this month, it's clear Modi places great importance on foreign relations. Many may wonder why the Israel visit was necessary. It was quite significant that Modi told Israel's parliament that India will continue steady relations with Israel. Welcoming a ceasefire agreement in Gaza and saying that such measures are essential to sustaining peace in the region was also appropriate. It outlined, in general terms, what understandings were reached when he consulted with Netanyahu on issues like making cooperative use of water to sustain friendly relations between the two countries, how to develop agriculture, and how to nurture talent. There have been reports said Israel was sharing its advanced technology and assistance with India in areas like agriculture, water, and electronics. There's nothing wrong with reaching understandings in areas that

are mutually beneficial. The United States and Russia are no longer able to dominate other countries the way they once did. For that reason, "our standing internationally. No matter the differences back home, when our leaders project unity abroad, it strengthens our country and deepens our democracy. Incidentally, after Modi's return from Israel, the US and Israel launched a major attack on Iran on Saturday, which resulted in the killing of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Defence Minister Amir Nasserzadeh and Revolutionary Guards Commander Mohammad Pakpour. Despite the heavy losses it suffered, Iran responded to the strikes by launching missiles and drones targeting Israel and American military installations in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. Tehran has also threatened to shut down the strait of Hormuz, a strategic waterway. This may cause hardship with regard to the import of oil to those countries which are in need of it, including India. However, Delhi called upon all sides to resort to 'dialogue and diplomacy' as 'safety of civilians has to be prioritised'.

A relook at corruption in temples and abolition of the VIP 'culture'



PROF MADABHUSHU SIDDHAR ACHARYULU

spiritual administration. **Against State control:** The State Endowments department repeatedly attempted a takeover right from the mid-1990s and a major takeover move around 2006. For that, Soundararajan launched a 'Temple Protection Movement' to defend autonomy. He argued that government management commercialises temples and distorts traditions. It became a constitutional litigation battle. He strongly pleaded for the abolition of VIP darshan, all devotees stand in the same queue, no paid sevas or privileges based on the principle that faith overrules financial hierarchy. It is the equality doctrine, which means "Every devotee is equal before God." He believed monetisation leads to ritual corruption, political control, and loss of sanctity of temple worship. Thus, the Chilkur temple in Hyderabad became a counter-model to commercialised temple administration. **Constitutional philosophy: Articles 26 and 363:** Soundararajan asserted that the Chilkur temple was a hereditary denominational temple, while archakas and trustees were custodians of the deity's will and government interference violated Article 26(b) and 26(d). Under Article 26, the State cannot impose administrative takeover if the core religious character is affected. Thus, his fight became a test case for: "Can the State control temples that are denominational and self-governed?"



M V Soundararajan, the defendant and constitutional dharma

er: trustees are only earthly representatives. In the Padmanabhaswamy case arguments, historical covenants between Travancore rulers and the Deity were invoked to assert continuity of sacred trusteeship — independent of political sovereignty. This theory suggests: Deity ownership is supra-political. Temple governance is part of civilizational sovereignty. State control should be minimal and regulatory, not proprietary. This idea influenced temple autonomy movements nationwide, including Chilkur temple activism. Thus, his activism was not merely devotional — it was a constitutional protest against bureaucratic secularisation of temples. The court has repeatedly acknowledged tension between state regulatory power over secular aspects (finance, administration) and religious autonomy over spiritual practices associated with religion. But Article 26 protects core religious autonomy, and the unresolved question remains: where does "secular administration" end and "sacred autonomy" begin? This ambiguity fuels continuing litigation across India. and d) Equality vs commercialisation in worship. **VIP culture-Constitutional immorality:** Soundararajan's abolition of VIP darshan was not only a spiritual reform but a constitutional assertion of equality before the divine. He transformed Chilkur into a living experiment that propagated "Constitutional secularism does not mean state control over religion; it means protecting denominational autonomy." His life symbolises a rare synthesis of Sanatana Dharma + Constitutional Law + Social Equality. He did not merely administer a temple; he constitutionalised devotion and democratised access to God. The landmark Shirur Mutt case laid down the fundamental principle that the State cannot interfere in essential religious practices of a denomination. The case held that religious institutions have autonomy in rituals, religious management, and internal spiritual administration. This case became the constitutional foundation for priest-leaders like Soundararajan to oppose excessive State control. [Commissioner Hindu Religious Endowments Madras v Sri Laksh-

mirnda Thiruva Swamiar of Shirur Mutt, Citation: AIR 1954 SC 282;1954 SCR 1005] **Sabarimala case-Denominational vs equality:** In the Indian Young Lawyers Association v State of Kerala, this case created the deepest constitutional conflict on temple autonomy, wherein the majority view held that a) Ayyappa devotees are not a separate denomination, b) Exclusionary practice violates Article 25 rights of women, and c) Denominational freedom under Article 26 is subject to reform laws. [Indian Young Lawyers Association v State of Kerala, Citation: (2019) 11 SCC 1] It reflected the philosophical position long articulated by Chilkur's priest-tradition: courts should protect faith, not reinterpret it. **Padmanabhaswamy temple-Deity's sovereignty:** In this case, the Supreme Court held: The Travancore royal family retained shraita (custodian) rights. The deity is a juristic entity. Traditional trusteeship of the temple cannot be arbitrarily displaced by State. This judgment effectively revived the doctrine that the deity is the sovereign own-

DECCAN Chronicle

3 MARCH 2026

War escalates as Iran hits back at US allies

The escalation of the US-Israel war on Iran into a much wider open regional war with Iran retaliating to the point of indiscriminately hitting civilian targets in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Manama too has led to the crossing of so many red lines that we must fear where this needless conflagration is heading and whether there will be a cessation of hostilities anytime soon.

The ever-widening conflict also sucked in Beirut in Lebanon as Israel was hunting Hezbollah targets even as US President Donald Trump talked up the amount of ammunition his country has and how that would help pound Iran for four to five weeks "if necessary". Even then, his administration remains vague about the immediate scenarios on the battlefield and in what shape the replacement government in Tehran will take.

The death of its 'Supreme Leader' may have pushed Iran beyond the point of no return as it aimed its projectiles right across the region, including a strike on a refinery in Saudi Arabia belonging to its biggest oil extractor and refiner. Uncaring of where its relationship with its neighbouring Islamic countries may be going, Iran seems hell-bent on revenge even as it takes more intense hits to over 130 cities from two attackers in the USA and Israel.

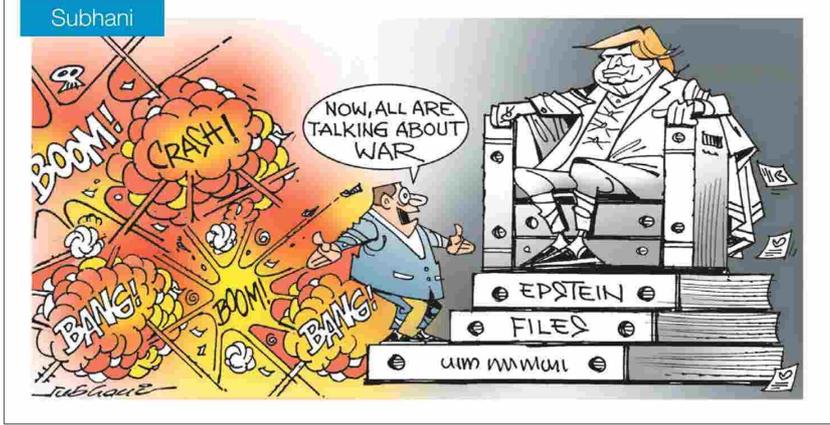
The merest straw of hope to clutch at was heard in the offer of talks by some members of Iran's new leadership, including Mr Ali Larijani, who were keen to speak with the US President, according to Mr Trump's remarks to the American media. Meanwhile, the missiles and drones are streaking across the skies of the Middle East, enveloping the region in more deadly rounds of explosive firepower.

Oil prices have surged 15 per cent since the weekend strikes, while stock markets are plunging, and countries are scrambling to ensure supplies as the Strait of Hormuz which sees the movement of an average of a million barrels a day being closed by Iran. People are stranded worldwide as the airspace over Middle Eastern hubs has been closed while airports like the world's busiest in Dubai have been shut.

The death of its 'Supreme Leader' may have pushed Iran beyond the point of no return as it aimed its projectiles across the region, including a strike on Saudi Arabia's biggest oil extractor.

As a pointless war, avowedly over Iran's crazy ambition to own nuclear bombs as well as its stockpile of missiles and relatively inexpensive kamikaze drones, rages and spreads, India's first response has been to sympathise with the USA over the deadly attacks on its two major cities as conveyed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the UAE president Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. With the situation so complex in a war that started with an attack on Iran, sympathy for all those suffering, including the Iranian people, may have been the better option.

Leaving aside formally mourning the death of a despotic figure in Ali Khamenei, not to acknowledge that the original cause of the war was a breach of international law and sovereignty and look only at the welfare and safety of the diaspora working in the Gulf, was an extremely narrow view of ties with nations of the region, especially as India's relationship with Iran, based on mutual interests, has served both nations well.



After Khamenei: Mideast is at strategic crossroads



Syed Ata Hasnain

The confirmed killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has transformed the confrontation between the US-Israel axis and Iran from calibrated coercion into a historic strategic rupture.

Reports of the elimination of the senior military and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) leadership alongside him suggest not an isolated strike but a systematic attempt to fracture Iran's command hierarchy.

Yet, even at this dramatic moment, one question demands clarity: does removing a "supreme leader" amount to removing the regime? Operationally, the strikes reflect formidable intelligence penetration and precision capability. Identifying hardened leadership locations, tracking movements, and neutralising targets with calibrated force imply sustained surveillance and coordinated strike architecture. The message to Iran's elite is unmistakable: hardened facilities and secrecy no longer guarantee survival.

But political systems are not individuals. They are networks of institutions, loyalties and coercive instruments. The IRGC remains intact. The clerical establishment retains succession mechanisms. The Assembly of Experts can appoint a successor. The government machinery continues to function. Despite visible dissent, a substantial segment of society still views the revolutionary system as a defender of sovereignty. In such moments, dislocation is easily mistaken for collapse.

From Washington and Tel Aviv's perspective, the momentum is unmistakable. Leadership decapitation, command disruption and psychological shock generate a rare moment of leverage. It is precisely in such moments that strategic overreach becomes most attractive. The argument is seductive; press forward, sustain strikes, widen internal fractures and convert operational success into systemic transformation.

History cautions that states rarely unravel in straight lines. External shock often

intermittently, with Washington and Tel Aviv targeting military and strategic assets while Tehran retaliates through calibrated missile launches or drones. Such an exchange would erode infrastructure and economic confidence without triggering full mobilisation or a ground invasion. It would not resolve the confrontation, but would confine it within tense yet managed thresholds.

A more dangerous evolution would involve lateral expansion across West Asia, remitting roughly \$50 billion annually. Around 60 per cent of India's energy imports originate from the broader region. Sustained maritime disruption could increase in the Strait of Hormuz or the Red Sea. The miscalculation risk would be high.

The most destabilising possibility remains a symbolic breakthrough — an Iranian strike that penetrates defence layers and inflicts significant damage on a high-value American or Israeli asset. Even limited tactical success in such circumstances could trigger a disproportionate escalation beyond deliberate intent.

Less visible but equally consequential is the internal dimension. Leadership removal introduces uncertainty into succession politics and elite cohesion. If the clerical hierarchy and the IRGC demonstrate unity, regime continuity can become strengthened. If hesitancy or rivalry emerges, instability may deepen independently of external pressure. Fragmentation, however, does not automatically produce liberal transformation; it may yield militarised consolidation or factional contestation.

Beyond Tehran, Washington and Tel Aviv, other powers are recalibrating rapidly. China, heavily dependent on the energy corridor, is economically invested in Iran, will prioritise stability above ideology. Beijing is unlikely to intervene militarily but may intensify diplomatic engagement to prevent maritime disruption threatening its energy security and Belt and Road interests.

The deeper lesson lies in distinguishing tactical achievements from strategic finality. Precision does not guarantee permanence.

LETTERS BOON OR BANE

The entry of Jaya loyalist and three time CM O. Panneerselvam into the DMK is a boost for DMK's prospects in the coming Assembly elections. This goes to prove that there is no permanent enemy or friend in Indian politics. At the same time, the divorce notice for Actor & TVK leader Vijay's wife Sangeetha could prove to be a setback for Vijay. At the same time, as in the case of game of cricket which is an unpredictable game, politics too is unpredictable in our country. Incidentally, the discharge of former Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal & 21 others from the politically charged liquor policy case is a real blow for the BJP.

N. Mahadevan Chennai

COMMENDABLE JOB

This refers to metro train transporting organs for transplant surgery. Kudos to the metro officials who managed passage of vital organs for transplant surgery at a private hospital, from Meenambakkam airport, to AG-DMS metro station, in a designated train, covering seven intermediate stations, in approximately nine minutes. Considering the importance of the transplant surgery, the metro personnel acted swiftly and helped to ensure seamless transit of the organs. The decision to use metro line instead of road transport for the purpose is also praiseworthy.

S.Sankaranarayanan Chennai

POOR INVESTIGATION

The discharge of Aam Aadmi's top leaders and a Telangana politician from the charges related to misuse and abuse of official position by the Delhi High Court is no doubt a 'bolt from the blues' to our investigative agencies like ED, CBI etc. The Delhi HC remarked that all the three accused get the benefit of doubt and are released since the prosecution evidence is either insufficient or cooked up or lacking in credibility. If the observations by the High Court are true then real 'aam admi's' like me are shocked at the inefficient and ineffective and lackadaisical manner in which our highly salaried persons in the investigative agencies function.

S.Nagarajan Iyer Coimbatore

Mail your letters to chennai@deccanmail.com

Safety first for Make in India

Two blasts at two units involved in the manufacture of explosives in two industrially advanced states on two consecutive days — February 28 and March 1 — killing over 40 people, are highly distressing and highlight poor regulatory oversight of units dealing with hazardous materials.

The blast at the Suryashree Fire Works factory at Vetpalalem in Andhra Pradesh is said to have occurred while workers were mixing chemicals, while the cause of the blast at mining and industrial explosives manufacturer SBL Energy Limited at Raigun in Nagpur district, Maharashtra, is yet to be ascertained.

According to data from the Directorate General Factory Advice Service and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI), three people died and 11 were injured each day between 2017 and 2020. Over 250 major explosions were reported between 2023 and 2025. A large number of accidents occurred in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where most chemical factories are located.

The most likely causes of explosions reportedly include manual mixing of hazardous chemicals, the use of cheap and highly reactive aluminium powder, the accumulation of dust in rooms, inadequately trained workers, and the illegal storage of explosives beyond permissible limits.

"These triggers could have been prevented, saving the lives of hundreds of people, if manufacturers had followed due processes, or if the government had strengthened its regulatory mechanisms. However, the poor pay slip service after blasts and announcing ex gratia to victims, no major follow-up action has been taken by governments to prevent blatant violations of safe manufacturing protocols.

Dismal working conditions in factories are one of the reasons that make Indians look down upon careers in manufacturing compared to jobs in the service sector. Unless the manufacturing sector becomes safe, no amount of Make in India push from the government will attract the cream of Indian talent to manufacturing industries, which is crucial for job creation and economic growth in the country.

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Aakar Patel

Myths & reality over 'love jihad': Why all this fuss on conversions?

There are things that this nation is agitated about and there is real news. One of the things we are agitated about, in our media particularly, and in WhatsApp groups, is demographic change and "love jihad", and the rest of it. The data does not support our worries but why should facts be relevant when we have conviction?

The *News Minute* published the latest set of numbers on conversions in Kerala. Remember that this is recorded. The letters from 2024 show that the state had a total of 963 conversions. Of these, 543 were women and 420 were men. The total number of individuals converting to Hinduism were 365 (of whom 329 were previously Christian and 36 previously Muslim). Converts to Islam were lower, at 343 (of whom 276 were previously Hindu and 67 Christian). Converts to Christianity were 255 (of whom 234 were Hindu and 23 Muslim).

There is no "love jihad" or anything else going on

in Kerala. The data will not surprise those who have been following it for some time. In my book *Hindu Rashtra*, which was published a few years ago, I looked at the numbers from the past.

On March 7, 2017, *Malayalam Manorama* reported the research by a non-profit organisation (Media Development and Research Foundation, Kozhikode) which showed 60 per cent of those who had converted in Kerala between January 2011 and December 2017 chose to become Hindus. Gender records of changed names showed that 8,334 people had converted in the seven-year period, of whom 4,988 chose to become Hindu, of which the vast majority, 4,576, were Christian and 212 Muslim. Of the total, the number of women was 2,294 and men 3,724.

Of the 1,864 who became Muslim, 78 per cent were previously Hindu, again with men and women converts being roughly equal. And of the 1,866 who became Christian, 59 per cent were Hindu, with 720 women and 776 men. Six individuals chose to become Buddhist, of whom five were Hindu, one was Christian and there were a total of two women and four men.

A newspaper report in a couple of years before that ("Nearly 6,000 converted to Islam in Kerala in 5 years: Report") quoted an "intelligence report" filed by the police showing that 5,789 people had converted between 2011 and 2015. Of these, about half were

men and half women. Hindus converting were 4,719 with 1,074 being Christians.

There will be uncles in WhatsApp groups heavily indoctrinated by the government and the voices in their own head. They may dismiss this as just being fake news. Such people should consider what happened in the Lok Sabha on February 4, 2020. A question was asked by Benny Behanan, MP from Chalkalady in Thrissur. He asked the home ministry to say whether it was aware of any cases of "love jihad" and if so, what were the details of this.

The ministry replied: "Article 25 of the Constitution provides for the freedom to profess, practice and propagate religion subject to public order, morality and health. Various courts have upheld this view including the Kerala high court. The term 'love jihad' is not defined under the extant laws. No such case of 'love jihad' has been reported by any of the Central Agencies."

A question then arises, if "love jihad" is not a real thing and the government accepts that it is not a real thing and the data on conversions shows it is not a real thing, then why is it being discussed at all, let alone at the frenzy levels we associate it with?

There are two reasons for this, in my opinion. The first is that the real news is not favourable to the narrative of New India. If we were to discuss how spectacularly incompetent the intelligence agencies are,

based on a recent case in which the United States has caught and jailed an Indian citizen, the government would not be able to preen as it does about national security. If it were to be discussed how a totally false case was filed against a party and its chief minister just because the BJP wanted to overthrow it, we would not be able to as confidently tell the world we are the mother of democracy. And so, the focus is on other things and the government wants to keep the focus there. All of that is one reason.

The other reason is that the narrative of Hindutva has become so acceptable that even the facts do not do much to dent it. An outright lie that is accepted as a lie by the government in the Lok Sabha is still material enough for the BJP to have passed in seven states since 2018 laws that tackle this myth. This has become our reality.

The latest data will come as reassurance to those who know the BJP project is misguided and damaging, and as a puzzle to those who had doubted the lie but are open to be swayed based on information and analysis. But it will likely do nothing to shift the views of those parts of the Hindutva base that have become enchanted by the voices of conspiracy and doom permanently occupying their heads.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel

الحُبُّ في حياة كُلِّ عالمٍ كان
حُبًّا والكَائناتُ الخبيَّةُ لا بُدَّ أنْ يتغيَّرا
(إبراهيم بن محمد العتيبي)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
Love dwells in every thinking being, every living thing; and all that lives must transform.

Dr. Zakyah Al-Otalbi
(Saudi literary figure, academic and cultural consultant)

Opinion

Why the UK is unlikely to join the attacks on Iran

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The American-Israeli strikes on Iran have been widely compared to the 2003 war on Iraq. As ever, there are significant commonalities and major differences.

Back in 2003, it was the UK under Tony Blair that was the junior partner in an ill-advised, ill-conceived military adventure that lacked regional and international support. It was London that propped up an American president whose motives many did not trust.

This time, Prime Minister Keir Starmer has not just opted out, he has also seemingly denied the US the use of British military bases, including Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Starmer on Saturday confirmed that the UK has had no role in the strikes. For Britain, this is less like Iraq in 2003 and more like Vietnam in the 1960s, when then-Prime Minister Harold Wilson refused to follow President Lyndon Johnson into war. Many might have thought Starmer's

record in warmly engaging Trump would mean he was a dead cert to back the American action. This has been the UK's role in recent decades. Prime ministers have feared jeopardizing what has been depicted as the single most vital economic, military and security relationship the country has.

So why the current British hesitation? It certainly does not emanate from sympathy for the Iranian regime.

Firstly, many in the British establishment share the fears of Middle Eastern leaderships: that this is an unnecessary, risky conflict. Starmer clearly would have preferred a negotiated diplomatic outcome and he issued a joint statement with France and Germany calling for the resumption of negotiations.

Secondly, many view this as an act of aggression, not something grounded in a necessity to fend off an immediate threat. What was Iran about to do that was so alarming as to lead to war? Its offensive capabilities had been seriously

compromised. Iranian negotiators were engaging in detailed talks. These had made significant progress. This means that many will view the war as illegal.

Thirdly, since the raid on Venezuela in January and Trump's threats to annex Greenland, Starmer has eased up on his close engagement with Trump. The UK did not join the Board of Peace. Starmer was also critical of Trump's tariffs and angered by his comments about non-American NATO involvement in Afghanistan.

Fourthly, America's European allies have been denied significant involvement in the Trump administration's Iran strategy. In the past, the E3 (France, Germany and the UK) was involved in the nuclear talks. Trump ditched this. He runs things his own way. So, if the European military powers were to get involved in any offensive operations, would they have any degree of input or influence? This would be highly unlikely.

Fifthly, the UK would have had to participate alongside Israeli forces, which

are still conducting a genocide in Gaza and effectively annexing the West Bank. The Israeli prime minister is also wanted by the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Finally, Starmer would be fully aware that the British public would not back a war on Iran. Opinion polls showed little enthusiasm for joining the strikes last June. Starmer would also know that his Labour MPs would in all likelihood oppose UK involvement.

This leaves the question of whether there is space left for Starmer to involve the UK in a more defensive capacity. British forces and assets are available to be deployed for protection. Starmer has confirmed that British planes are in the air in that role.

How will this affect relations with Washington? Much may depend on how the strikes unfold. If successful, Trump will happily take the plaudits. If they are a failure, reluctant allies like London may incur his long-term displeasure.

Many might have thought Starmer's record in engaging Trump would mean he was a dead cert to back the action

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Rasmi

Libya will not stabilize through the empowerment of a single faction, no matter how heavily armed or externally backed

The Libyan quagmire and foreign interference

HAFED AL-GHWELL



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Libya has never lacked for foreign meddlers, yet few have shaped its dysfunction as profoundly as the UAE. A chaotic post-Qaddafi era created an opening for assertive actors seeking pliable allies and geopolitical footholds. Abu Dhabi stepped into that opening with unmatched ambition, treating Libya as a proving ground for a regional model of power projection that prizes influence over stability, armed clients over institutions and tactical gains over long-term order.

The results have been corrosive: a fractured political arena, empowered warlords, militarized patronage networks and a state unable to reclaim its path to sovereignty and, perhaps, some form of democracy. At the core of Abu Dhabi's strategy remains Khalifa Haftar's entrenchment and the fragmentation of national authority. Haftar's strategy relies heavily on external supply lines, with the UAE delivering money, weapons, mercenaries and political guarantees.

As such, the UAE's backing has allowed Haftar to consolidate a personalized chain of command, marginalize civilian authorities and harden rival institutions. That empowerment comes with a predictable cost. National reconciliation has become hostage to the ambitions of an aging strongman whose authority derives less from internal legitimacy than from foreign patrons. Libya's parallel central banks, dueling governments and splintered armed forces are just a few symptoms of an engineered imbalance.

Moreover, Haftar's foreign sponsorship provides insulation from political compromise, giving him the bandwidth to reject power-sharing frameworks and derail negotiations. Empowered by Abu Dhabi, Haftar has consistently refused to meaningfully integrate his forces, bolstered his reliance on secrecy and coercion, and clung to a dependence on ad hoc external forces, including foreign fighters and mercenaries, to fill gaps in manpower. Naturally, this has led to the creation of a durable ecosystem

of unaccountable armed actors that no coherent state could reabsorb.

Even more troubling, the forays into Libya previewed a template for a broader Emirati strategy that fuses counterdemocratic instincts with an almost experimental use of hybrid forces. A reliance on mercenary conglomerates has created a model that rewards pliable strongmen, sidesteps multilateral oversight and opens channels of plausible deniability.

Moreover, the "Libya sandbox" also inspired Emirati strategies of merging commercial infrastructure with military utility in a way that few middle powers have managed to execute. Since 2012, Abu Dhabi has channeled about \$60 billion into ports, logistics hubs and supply chains from Senegal to Somalia.

Regional actors now face a hard truth. Libya will not stabilize through the empowerment of a single faction, no matter how heavily armed or externally backed. Stability requires a shift from foreign sponsorship of rivals toward

coordinated diplomacy aimed at unifying critical institutions, security forces, the central bank, the national oil company and the electoral framework. Abu Dhabi's preference for militarized solutions obstructs that shift.

A recalibration is possible, but only if influential Arab states step in. Saudi Arabia offers a contrasting approach rooted in stabilization, economic development and de-escalation rather than factional engineering. Riyadh's restrained posture in Libya, its improving diplomatic ties across North Africa and its growing interest in security coordination in the Red Sea basin provide an alternative to the destabilizing adventurism witnessed over the past decade by its neighbor.

A Saudi-led orientation toward responsible regional stewardship could help shift Arab diplomacy toward supporting unified national institutions as a precursor to stabilization and helping countries like Libya regain their sovereignty rather than deepening fault lines.

Opinion

Netanyahu's hexagon of alliances may remain a dream

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After months of dropping hints in the media, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last week finally laid out his vision for a "hexagon of alliances" — six alliances with various permutations but with Israel at their center. He said that this hexagon would be directed at "the radical Shiite axis" and "the emerging radical Sunni axis."

In remarks delivered on Feb. 22, he said: "We will create an entire system, essentially a 'hexagon' of alliances around or within the Middle East. This includes India, Arab nations, African nations, Mediterranean nations (Greece and Cyprus), and nations in Asia that I won't detail at the moment." He added: "The intention here is to create an axis of nations that see eye-to-eye on the reality, challenges and goals against the radical axes, both the radical Shiite axis, which we have struck very hard, and the emerging radical Sunni axis."

Netanyahu focused on the "special relationship" between Israel and India and between himself and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saying: "We are personal

friends; we speak frequently on the phone and visit one another."

During his visit to Israel last week, Modi was effusive in his praise of Tel Aviv and Netanyahu, but there was no mention of any alliance. Modi spoke several times about fighting terrorism and defense and security cooperation, but there was no reference to the security architecture Netanyahu had talked about.

India-Israel defense cooperation has been ongoing for decades, mostly shrouded in secrecy, but Modi made it public. Israel is now the third-largest source of military hardware for India, after Russia and France. In addition to India's military imports from Israel, the two countries share intelligence and have joint production agreements and close cooperation on missile and drone technologies, cybersecurity and surveillance equipment.

Greece and Cyprus were the two other countries named by Netanyahu. They have in recent years coordinated closely with Israel on economic cooperation, defense and security, including counterterrorism and intelligence sharing.

So, these security arrangements with India, Cyprus and Greece have been

ongoing for some time, albeit not stressed or highlighted. However, it is not clear why Netanyahu chose to make them public and upgrade them to a formal mutual defense system as part of his vision of a regional web of alliances.

One reason for speaking about this new web of regional alliances now is likely an attempt to get out of the isolation Israel feels as a result of the war against Gaza. By giving the impression that Israel is at the heart of these alliances, Netanyahu hopes to reduce the siege mentality that the country feels and for which he is largely blamed. Another reason could be that a general election is expected to take place this year and Netanyahu hopes to improve his and his party's popularity.

By appearing to be part of a large network of alliances, Netanyahu hopes to blunt censure for his attacks on Iran, which he is determined to continue. This network may also be a hedging strategy. Israel's declining popularity in the US could cause strains in their relations in the future.

The fundamental problem with Netanyahu's hexagon is that there does not seem to be much willingness to support it

publicly because of the potential reputational damage that comes from an alliance with Israel — a rogue state that has become a pariah among nations, with declining popularity even among its closest friends due to its policies against the Palestinians.

There is massive potential economic loss should these countries form an alliance with Israel. Take India, for example. Its trade with Israel, currently at \$3.6 billion, pales compared to its trade with the Gulf

Cooperation Council countries. Trade with the GCC, India's top trading partner, reached \$178 billion last year and is growing fast.

Finally, there is the potential legal entanglement if these countries join a formal alliance with Israel, which is accused of committing genocide in a case before the International Court of Justice, and its prime minister, who is being sought by the International Criminal Court. According to international humanitarian law, members of a formal military alliance could be held jointly accountable for actions taken by any member of the group.

So, Netanyahu's hexagon of alliances may remain just a dream, at least for the foreseeable future.

By appearing to be part of a large network of alliances, Netanyahu hopes to blunt censure for his attacks on Iran

Security arrangements with India, Cyprus and Greece have been ongoing for some time, albeit not stressed or highlighted

AI and the end of time

SANI MAHROUB



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The debate about artificial intelligence remains overwhelmingly focused on three key questions: Which jobs will disappear? Which skills will endure? And are current valuations justified? But these questions, while important, obscure a deeper one: What will replace time as the measure of value and who will control it?

For two centuries, time has been capitalism's organizing principle. In his 1967 essay "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," the British historian E.P. Thompson showed how the factory system replaced task-based labor with the discipline of the clock, enforced by bells, timetables and moral exhortations against "wasting time." Under this arrangement, workers sold hours and employers purchased them. Labor laws were structured around the eight-hour workday and pensions were determined by years of service.

The clock established a shared metric: an hour meant the same thing everywhere, for everyone. Because time was standardized, exploitation could be measured. And because it could be measured, it could be

contested. As a result, collective action became possible.

That system is now breaking down, not because workers have grown undisciplined but because AI has undermined its underlying logic. Consider, for example, a management consultant who oversees three AI agents for two hours. The agents then work autonomously for 20 hours, producing a \$50,000 report. Is the consultant paid for two hours, for 20 or a fixed percentage of the value created? The time-based framework offers no coherent answer, yet wage structures and labor laws continue to impose clock discipline on work that is no longer defined by hours spent.

Labor time can serve as a measure of value only if human time is naturally scarce. Put simply, output requires time; more time generally means more output. With scarcity built in, those who control labor control the primary source of value.

By making human time functionally abundant, AI renders that assumption obsolete. In four hours of work, an engineer can now deploy a large language model that runs autonomously for 20 more. A consultant's prompt can generate analyses that once required days to prepare. The natural

scarcity of human time, which underpinned two centuries of economic theory, is no longer a binding constraint.

As AI severs the link between time and output and the foundation of modern labor contracts starts to give way, what is emerging in its place is not a single coherent system but three distinct and incompatible ways of organizing economic life: machine time, personal time and clock time.

Each of these three temporal regimes rests on a distinct contractual logic and distributes control over value creation differently. Under machine time, workers maintain a system they do not own; responsibility is continuous, yet compensation is opaque. Personal time reverses that equation: workers own the output but depend on systems controlled by others, monetizing their expertise, access and reputation. And under clock time, workers control neither the infrastructure nor the price of their labor. Pay remains strictly tied to hours, regardless of the value created.

Intensifying global competition further narrows the space for national experimentation, as the fragmentation of time is not merely a domestic challenge but a

global contest over who controls productive systems and who bears the transition costs. Countries that move rapidly toward machine-time and personal-time regimes, such as the US and Singapore, will produce AI-intensive goods and services at lower cost. At the same time, countries that preserve clock-time protections, like Germany, France, and Spain, will face sustained competitive pressure as higher

labor costs and slower automation make their exports increasingly expensive.

But moving slowly will not necessarily preserve worker protections. Over time, market pressures will force policymakers to make a difficult choice: accelerate the transition toward machine time and personal time to remain competitive or accept industrial decline as AI-intensive production shifts elsewhere.

Taken together, these developments mark a turning point. We are entering the first open conflict over the meaning of time since the Industrial Revolution, already evident in employment contracts, platform governance, labor law and intellectual property regimes. The question is no longer whether this transition will happen, but who will control it — and who will pay for it.

The natural scarcity of human time, which underpinned two centuries of economic theory, is no longer a binding constraint

The fragmentation of time is a global contest over who controls productive systems and who bears the transition costs



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Opinion

Khamenei: The man who destroyed Iran

The supreme leader organized his existence around one big idea — resistance.

Karim Sadjadpour

In June 1989, when Ali Khamenei was elevated to the position of supreme leader of Iran, he let slip the sense of insouciance that would define his brutal 37-year reign.

"I am an individual with many faults and shortcomings," he said in his inaugural address, and "truly a minor seminarian." It was, at the time, an accurate self-assessment for a mid-ranking cleric in the hierarchical world of Shiite Islam. Over the next four decades, this seemingly unqualified cleric who rose to the top almost by chance would become one of the world's longest-serving autocrats, confounding every American president since George H.W. Bush. He would at one point become the most powerful man in the Middle East, dominating five failing lands — Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Gaza. This ambition and hubris also eventually led to his downfall. He came to govern with the hypervigilance and brutality of a man driven by the idea that much of his own society and the world's greatest superpower sought to unseat him — which, in the end, it did. President Trump announced on social media that Ayatollah Khamenei was killed on Saturday. He was 86.

Ayatollah Khamenei's ideology as a leader was simple and immovable. Resistance against "global arrogance" — what he called American imperialism — informed his belief system and his strategic doctrine. The reformist president Mohammad Khatami once told me that Ayatollah Khamenei believed the Islamic Republic required enmity with America. Under the Ayatollah's stewardship, the regime's enduring slogans — "Death to America" and "Death to Israel," but not "Long Live Iran" — made clear that its priority was defiance, not development.

Ali Khamenei was born in 1939 in the northeastern shrine city of Mashhad, the second of eight children of a cleric of Azeri origin. He often romanticized his austere upbringing, saying he frequently ate "bread and raisins" for dinner. Enrolled in religious education by age 5, he spent his formative years in Mashhad's seminary before a brief stint in Najaf and later Qom. He never legitimately attained the senior religious credentials of his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He was made an Ayatollah overnight upon succession — a source of insecurity that would shape the rest of his career.

While studying in Qom in his early 20s, he fell under the spell of Mr. Khomeini, then a fringe firebrand whose defiance of the shah attracted devoted seminarians. When the shah exiled Mr. Khomeini in 1964, Mr. Khamenei stayed behind, disseminating his mentor's teachings on Islamic government. He was arrested six times by the shah's secret police, Savak, reportedly enduring solitary confinement and torture. Those who knew him speculated that his hatred of Israel and America was forged in those cells, given the widespread belief at that time that Savak was trained by the C.I.A. and Mossad.

When the 1979 revolution deposed the shah — ending 2,500 years of monarchy

in Iran — Ayatollah Khomeini triumphantly returned from exile, and Mr. Khamenei was soon catapulted from obscurity, becoming president of the nascent Islamic Republic.

When Ayatollah Khomeini died in 1989, shortly after agreeing to a cease-fire to end a brutal eight-year war with Iraq, he left hundreds of thousands of casualties, tens of billions in economic devastation and no clear successors. Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was then speaker of parliament, helped secure Mr. Khamenei's succession, mistakenly believing the then-50-year-old cleric would be his subordinate; the rivalry between them endured for nearly three decades. Ayatollah Khamenei buried Mr. Rafsanjani both politically and literally, when the latter died in January 2017.

Ayatollah Khamenei projected an image of pious frugality, but was reported to have control of vast wealth both on seized property from Iranians. Under his reign, Iran's population has been isolated from the global financial system for decades. Its currency was among the world's most devalued, its passport among the most denied, its internet among the most censored. Brain drain

The ruler's most devastating act of violence was directed inward.

became one of Iran's top exports as some 150,000 Iranians left the country annually.

Beyond Iran's borders, Ayatollah Khamenei filled the power vacuums left by the Iraq war and the Arab uprisings, wielding the sword of the military commander Qasim Suleimani — whom Mr. Trump assassinated in January 2020 — to project hard power and the shield of his English-speaking foreign ministers to deflect pressure. While Iranians suffered under backbreaking sanctions and inflation at home, Ayatollah Khamenei spent tens of billions of dollars funding an "axis of resistance" throughout the Middle East. For much of his reign, Iran was embroiled in a three-front war against America, Israel and its own population.

Iranian power in the region peaked on Oct. 7, 2023. Ayatollah Khamenei was one of the lone world leaders to praise Hamas's attack on Israel, a decision that proved to be a profound miscalculation. In the months that followed, Israel struck devastating blows against Iran's axis of resistance: the assassination of the Hamas leaders Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Yahya Sinwar in Gaza, and the elimination of Ayatollah Khamenei's most important ally, the Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

Then, in a 12-day war in June 2025, Israel battered Iranian cities and military installations and assassinated top Revolutionary Guards commanders in their bedrooms and bunkers, paving the way for the United States to drop 14 bunker-busting bombs on Iran's nuclear sites. After days of silence, Ayatollah Khamenei resurfaced from underground, his voice raspy and his skin pale, to declare victory. It was a spectacle meant to project strength, but instead underscored for the world the regime's fragility.

Ayatollah Khamenei's most devastating act of violence was directed inward. In January 2026, as protests over the

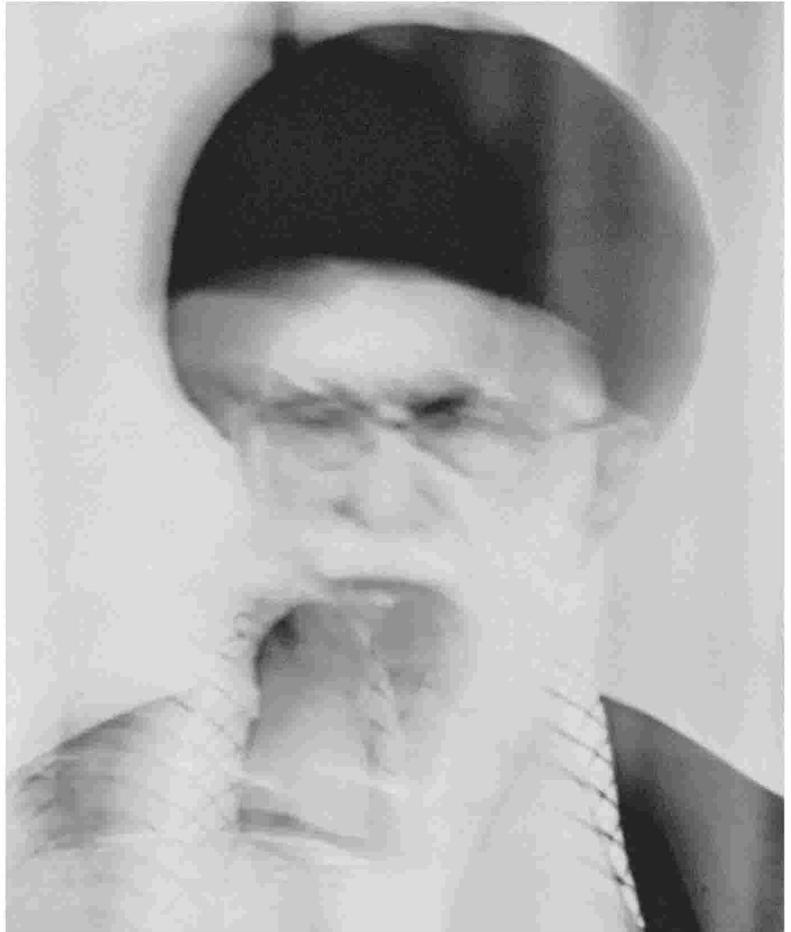


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economy engulfed the country, he ordered what now appears to be the deadliest crackdown in the regime's history, with estimates ranging from 6,800 citizens killed, according to the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency, to as many as 30,000 killed in a 48-hour rampage, according to estimates from two senior officials in Iran's Ministry of Health, as reported by Time. It was the desperate climax of a decades-long reign

of repression — the act of a man who, when cornered, understood no language but force.

Ayatollah Khamenei organized his existence around one big idea: resistance. It sustained him through prison, assassination attempts, sanctions and uprisings. His refusal to adapt sealed his country's fate. The Islamic Republic's tenure has, so far, amounted to a lost half-century for Iran. While its Persian

Gulf neighbors became global hubs of finance, transport and technology, Iran squandered its wealth on failed regional adventures and a nuclear program that brought only isolation — all the while repressing and wasting its greatest source of wealth: its people.

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Ali Khamenei in 2024. At one point he was the most powerful man in the Middle East, but on Saturday he was killed during U.S. strikes on Tehran.

Japan's era of postwar restraint is ending

Sanae Takaichi's political rise presages a stronger nation that could reshape the strategic balance in Asia.

Joshua W. Walker

TOKYO Ever since Japan's defeat in World War II, the country's place in the world has been shaped by a deliberate policy of restraint.

Under its pacifist postwar Constitution, Japan has for decades kept its military budget modest, sheltered under the U.S. security umbrella, and has avoided directly provoking an increasingly assertive China. Japan's people, scarred by the trauma of World War II, supported that approach.

But last month's landslide electoral victory by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi — a hard-liner who openly advocates a tougher approach to China and a more robust Japanese military — suggests that era may be ending. The implications for the region could be profound.

Caught between a more aggressive China and a less predictable United States, many in Japan are coming to the realization that caution is no longer enough to guarantee their security. If this trajectory continues, it is likely to result in a U.S. ally that is more assertive, militarily capable — and central to deterring China. It is crucial that the United States encourage this evolution while ensuring that it strengthens, rather than weakens, regional stability.

The changing Japanese mind-set did not begin with Ms. Takaichi. It has been years in the making, as the global landscape has shifted, particularly with China's rise as an assertive military power. China increasingly sends ships to Japanese-administered islands in the



Sanae Takaichi, Japan's prime minister, may now have stronger political leverage.

East China Sea and carries out threatening military maneuvers around Taiwan. Chinese expansionism or a conflict in the region would endanger the sea lanes and supply chains upon which Japan's trade-dependent economy relies.

With these threats in mind, Japan reinterpreted its Constitution in the mid-2010s under former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to broaden the circumstances under which it could use military force. Mr. Abe also created a National Security Council to strengthen decision-making on military matters and increased defense ties across the Indo-Pacific region. His successors, especially Fumio Kishida, continued this arc, approving the largest defense buildup since World

War II and endorsing Japan's ability to strike back if attacked — a shift once considered politically unthinkable.

Ms. Takaichi has indicated a willingness to take things even further. In November, she implied that Japan could intervene militarily if China attacked Taiwan, the self-governing island democracy that Beijing claims as its territory. It was one of the clearest public signals by a Japanese leader in years that the country could come to Taiwan's aid, and Beijing responded angrily with punitive economic measures.

Japanese voters were not intimidated, handing Ms. Takaichi and the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party a supermajority of two-thirds of the seats in the 465-member lower house of Parliament last month — the first political party to achieve that in the postwar era. That represents a historic mandate in a country whose prime ministers typically govern with narrow margins and must make deep compromises to their agendas to appease party or coalition factions.

Ms. Takaichi may now have the political leverage needed to succeed where Mr. Abe, her mentor, fell short: revising Japan's Constitution to loosen constraints on the military. Article 9 of the Constitution renounces war and forbids maintaining a "war potential." Japan has, in fact, built highly capable Self-Defense Forces over the decades, but Article 9 long served as a political guardrail, sustaining informal limits on military spending, offensive capabilities and overseas deployments.

Revising the Constitution wouldn't mean an overnight change. But the eventual consequences could be far-reaching — formally recognizing a more

conventional role for the military and clearing the way for higher spending and expanded operations beyond Japan's shores.

I've spent years talking to policymakers in Japan, where revision of Article 9 was always discussed cautiously as a distant, future aspiration. Now, in the wake of Ms. Takaichi's election win, there is a different feeling. In meetings across Tokyo that I recently took part in, Liberal Democratic Party lawmakers and cabinet officials spoke about constitutional revision as a plausible near-term objective. Japanese television commentators who once treated the topic as an abstraction now debate timelines.

Ms. Takaichi still must tread carefully, given lingering political sensitivity over the issue. Her room for maneuver could narrow further if her expansionist economic plans add to rising inflation. But the tone in Tokyo has clearly shifted. A normalized Japanese defense posture would force Beijing to reassess its behavior in the region, including its coercive activities aimed at Taiwan. Up to now, China has felt free to increasingly flex its muscles, knowing that one of America's closest allies — and one of the world's richest economies and most advanced democracies — was constitutionally prevented from exercising its full military potential.

No one in Asia is eager for an arms race, and a more militarily capable Japan will inevitably stir painful memories in places that suffered under Japanese wartime occupation, particularly China and the Korean Peninsula. But today's strategic choices must be governed by present geopolitical realities.

A constrained Japan may have been in America's interest in the decades follow-

ing World War II, but not anymore. A Japan that is willing to share more of the responsibility and cost of ensuring security in its neighborhood is likely to be welcomed by President Trump, who has pushed for U.S. allies to do just that. This is especially important at a time when American power is stretched by threats to peace around the globe and the nation is politically divided. Washington should embrace the potential for greater Japanese strategic autonomy as a sign of an alliance adapting to modern realities.

A stronger Japan is not a cure-all. If accompanied by nationalistic rhetoric or provocative actions, it could unsettle the region rather than steady it. The aim should instead be to project quiet, credible strength. This will require restraint in Tokyo, discipline in Washington, and close, careful coordination between the two allies.

An early chance to display unity will come this month, when Ms. Takaichi is expected to make her first visit to the White House for talks with Mr. Trump. That trip will come ahead of a planned visit to China by Mr. Trump at the end of the month. The two leaders have already hit it off — Mr. Trump offered his "total endorsement" of Ms. Takaichi before her Feb. 8 snap election win — and a strong show of solidarity in Washington should be used to make clear to Beijing the emerging realities.

The question is not whether Japan will act more like the power it already is — global changes are already pushing it in that direction — it is how that momentous change is managed in Tokyo, Washington and across the region.

JOSHUA W. WALKER is president and C.E.O. of Walker Society.

The New York Times

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Real despots hijack artificial intelligence



Maureen Dowd

WASHINGTON A.I. is a teenager now, roaring into the world, testing limits, rebelling against authority, itching to usurp the old guard and remake the planet in its image. Pete Hegseth, the U.S. defense secretary, is also a teenager. His hormones are raging; his judgment is shaky. Like a repentant frat boy, he had to promise the adults in the Senate that he wouldn't drink while he is in charge of the military and its 12-figure budget. He certainly lacks the maturity to guide, discipline or even understand the earth-shattering power of an adolescent A.I.

Hegseth should be focused on America's nerve-racking duel with Iran. Instead, he spent last week at war with Dario Amodei, the thoughtful chief executive of Anthropic and one of the few in Silicon Valley advocating for humanity. Anthropic is the only A.I. company operating on classified military systems; its clever chatbot, Claude, was deployed by the military to help catch Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro.

More than most of his peers, Amodei has been blunt about "civilizational concerns" — the risks of A.I. wiping us out. He even hired an Oxford-educated philosopher, a young Scottish woman, to teach Claude right from wrong. She's feeding his "soul," she said. Claude even has his own Constitution, rules for the bot's values and behavior. (Good luck!)

A fully powerful A.I. may be only one to two years away, Amodei wrote in a January essay, "The Adolescence of Technology," adding that it will be "smarter than a Nobel Prize winner across most relevant fields: biology, programming, math, engineering, writing, etc." It will be able to control "physical tools, robots or laboratory equipment through a computer." And as we can already see, with A.I. partners and suicides related to A.I., it will have a powerful psychological influence on all of us.

Americans could land in a panopticon, constantly surveilled. "It might be frighteningly plausible to simply generate a complete list of anyone who disagrees with the government on any number of issues, even if such disagreement isn't explicit in anything they say or do," Amodei wrote. A.I. could "detect pockets of disloyalty forming, and stamp them out before they grow."

About fully autonomous weapons, Amodei conjured a Hitchcockian scene: "A swarm of millions of billions of fully controlled armed drones, locally controlled by powerful A.I., and strategically coordinated across the world by an even more powerful A.I., could be an unbeatable army, capable of both defeating any military in the world and suppressing dissent within a country by following around every citizen." There would be "a greatly increased risk" of democratic countries turning A.I. armies against their own people.

President Trump and Hegseth already have a healthy disregard for democracy. Trump is trying to take over U.S. elections because he's rightly worried that his party is going to get shelacked in November. And now he's escalating his push to remove the few pathetic guardrails that exist on A.I.

Hegseth last fall revoked the press passes of all reporters who didn't agree to sign a pledge agreeing to his draconian restrictions on where they could report and what they could report on.

Amodei did not want his A.I. model to be used for surveillance of Americans or autonomous weapons without human oversight — reflecting his deepest fears.

Last Tuesday, Hegseth summoned Amodei to the Pentagon to demand that he let the Pentagon do whatever it wanted, as long as it was "lawful."

This is poppycock, of course, because Trump and Hegseth have contempt for the law when it gets in the way of their whims, power grabs and revenge plots. Their bizarre overkill with Anthropic makes me wonder what nefarious deeds they're up to.

The self-styled secretary of war offered Amodei a double ultimatum: He would invoke the Defense Production Act to compel Anthropic to give the Pentagon unrestricted use of its model, or he would designate it a supply-chain risk — a national security threat — which would put the company's government contracts, and possibly the company itself, in jeopardy.

Anthropic had a choice: be extorted or blacklisted.

On Friday, Trump unleashed hell on Amodei, denouncing the Anthropic ties that helped the Pentagon pluck Maduro out of his bedroom as "leftwing jobs."

Trump accused Anthropic of "trying to STRONG-ARM the Department of War, and force them to obey their Terms of Service instead of our Constitution."

"Therefore, I am directing EVERY Federal Agency in the United States Government to IMMEDIATELY CEASE all use of Anthropic's technology," he posted. "We don't need it, we don't want it, and will not do business with them again."

In a post on X, Hegseth designated Anthropic a supply-chain risk: "Effective immediately, no contractor, supplier, or partner that does business with the United States military may conduct any commercial activity with Anthropic," which it sees as more "woken" than OpenAI, or did Altman's buttering up of Trump work, or could his terms somehow have been different?

While Altman said OpenAI was "asking the DoW to offer these same terms to all AI companies," Amodei said in a statement Friday night that he would sue the government.

Hegseth was wrong. Anthropic has principles. It's the administration that is fundamentally incompatible with American principles.

Then, later Friday night, Sam Altman announced on X that his company, OpenAI, had reached an agreement with the "Department of War" to use the company for classified work with red lines that sounded the same as those that Amodei sought. "In all of our interactions, the DoW displayed a deep respect for safety and a desire to partner to achieve the best possible outcome," Altman chirped.

It was confusing how OpenAI could be accepted on the terms that crushed his rival. Did the administration simply have an ideological grudge against Anthropic, which it sees as more "woken" than OpenAI, or did Altman's buttering up of Trump work, or could his terms somehow have been different?

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Trump is the president of war

W.J. Hennigan

The U.S. military was once a tool of last resort for American presidents.

The tough decision to deploy armed troops for conflict in another country came after diplomacy, political pressure and other peaceful options were exhausted. This clearly doesn't hold true in the second Trump administration.

In a short video posted on Saturday morning, President Trump stood in a darkened room at a lectern in a white "U.S.A." hat and announced that the United States military had begun "major combat operations in Iran" and called for the overthrow of its government. He warned that this could be a costly fight, and that American lives could be lost.

In his attempt to project power to all corners of the globe during his second term, Mr. Trump has routinely relied on both the threat and the use of military action to coerce opponents and allies alike into giving him what he wants. Warnings of American military involvement — traditionally viewed by commanders in chief as "break glass in case of emergency" — have now become a weekly, if not daily, occurrence.

The world has watched Mr. Trump launch military operations in Iran, Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria, Iraq and Syria; capture and remove Venezuela's leader, Nicolás Maduro, from power; threaten to use military force to take control of Greenland; pressure Mexico to allow U.S. troops in the country to target fentanyl labs; and direct an air campaign to kill suspected drug smugglers at sea.

If you asked average Americans what the mission in Iran is for, you'd likely get conflicting answers. And you couldn't blame them: The president himself has given several reasons to justify the historic attack now underway.

"The United States military is undertaking massive and ongoing operation to prevent this very wicked, radical dictatorship from threatening America and our core national security interests," Mr. Trump said. "We're doing this for the future, and it is a noble mission."

In January, Mr. Trump insisted that he might take U.S. military action on behalf of the Iranian protesters who flooded the streets in outrage over their government's handling of its failing economy, deploying an armada of warships and fleets of attack aircraft throughout the Middle East. Not long after, Trump administration officials began ringing alarm bells about Tehran's nuclear weapons program — the same one that was supposedly obliterated during the last American military strike in Iran, way back in June. Diplomatic talks were hastily arranged, while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel spent weeks goading Mr. Trump to launch the offensive.

On Saturday, Mr. Trump listed the threats Iran has posed over the past four decades: taking American hostages



EXILES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

during the Carter administration, supporting militant proxies in the region, the government's bloody crackdown on protesters in January, its nuclear ambitions.

If the varied, head-scratching explanations as to why the U.S. military is dropping bombs on a far-flung country feel familiar, it's because they are. The administration also gave vague and conflicting reasons for its military intervention in Venezuela in the run-up to its raid to capture Mr. Maduro.

Mr. Trump is right to point out that the Iranian regime's horrific behavior. It has long conducted systematic human rights abuses against its own citizens and

provided financial and military support for terror groups throughout the Middle East. But the president's decision to launch an air campaign without a coherent explanation to the American public is unacceptable. He made no attempt to build an international coalition, nor to prepare the nation for war. Three minutes of his 108-minute State of the Union address — given four days before he launched one of the largest U.S. military operations in decades — were dedicated to Iran.

The effects of his decision are already being felt by the American people. Iran has launched retaliatory strikes on Israel, which joined the United States on Saturday's air operation, as well as countries that host U.S. forces: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Images posted to social media show that the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain was

hit by a missile attack, and the Middle East is braced for further retaliation. Mr. Trump's dangerous reliance on the military as the primary tool of foreign policy creates a perilous precedent. The American people must not become accustomed to their president using troops as an easy button to solve policy problems.

Worse, Mr. Trump's strongman scheme to coerce or impose his will on opponents does not appear to be joined to any long-term strategy, nor has it compelled America's allies to join his side. These strikes come some eight months after Mr. Trump bombarded the country's nuclear facilities, which, though he declared the effort successful, failed to bring an end to Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

Badr Albusaidi, the Omani foreign minister who was mediating between the United States and Iran before Saturday's attacks, criticized Mr. Trump's decision to escalate. "Active and serious negotiations have yet again been undermined," he said on social media. "I urge the United States not to get sucked in further. This is not your war."

Let us not forget that Mr. Trump, in his first administration, ripped up the multilateral nuclear agreement that constrained that very program. We should also be mindful that international weapons monitoring groups, as well as U.S. and European government officials, have been skeptical that Iran poses an imminent nuclear threat.

The impulse to use force to solve intractable problems overseas may come naturally for an administration in the wake of the military mission in Venezuela, which was widely seen as a success. According to the Pentagon, it involved months of planning and intelligence coordination with spy agencies

and took the orchestration of more than 150 aircraft launches from some 20 different bases, cyberattacks on energy infrastructure and a multifaceted Special Forces raid on Mr. Maduro.

That mission did not cost American lives — a fact that could be a result of chance as much as planning. When it comes to military action, accidental escalation is always a risk, and the bigger the operation, the greater the chance of something going wrong.

Consider the potential costs in Venezuela if a plane had been shot down, a cyberweapon had debilitated a hospital's lifesaving equipment or an American soldier had been killed. Would this require a secondary wave of military action? Would foreign nations feel compelled to intervene?

The same kinds of questions — and many more — apply to the sweeping and complex mission apparently underway in Iran in coordination with Israel. Mr. Trump has pledged to destroy Iran's missile systems and navy, take out its regional proxies and ensure it does not acquire a nuclear weapon. He called on Iranian forces to lay down their weapons or "face certain death," and told the Iranian people that "the hour of your freedom is at hand" and the government would be "yours to take" when the United States was finished with its mission.

Mr. Trump made it sound simple, but history shows that the United States' confrontations with Iran are never so straightforward. His reliance on military action over diplomacy is costly and shortsighted. The cycle of violence can't become an accepted standard.

W.J. HENNINGAN writes about national security for *Opinion*.

The outlook is grim for a freer Iran

ARIAN, FROM PAGE 1

ing the specter of sectarian bloodshed in the chaotic aftermath of an invasion. Next came the existence of a wide range of political institutions, especially functioning government agencies capable of stabilizing the country or coordinating humanitarian relief in times of war.

In Iran, rampant corruption, the system's molting out of democracy, institutions and deep popular distrust of the political elite have rendered those structures largely ineffective.

Finally, economic strength. Iran's economy today is notoriously fragile. Inflation rose above 70 percent. The current value of its currency is projected to fall 84 percent of its value in 2025 alone. It is all compounded by a worsening environmental crisis. By all measures, the Iranian economy is on the edge of disaster.

The authors of the RAND report contrasted examples of intervention in places like Germany and Japan against intervention in Libya, Iraq and Syria to illustrate how these factors shaped the eventual outcomes. Iran today could well fall into the second group, which saw chaos, strife and a breakdown of civil structures in the aftermath of U.S. military action. Mr. Trump may well succeed in eliminating key military and political figures at the top of the regime, declare victory and blame the ensuing chaos on Iranians who squander their hour of freedom. He will likely move on to the next item on his agenda, and Iranians will be left to survive in a devastated country.

My pessimistic view of military intervention in Iran, however, should not be mistaken for opposition to all forms of foreign intervention.

Some estimates suggest that the regime may have killed tens of thousands of unarmed civilians in the span of two days during demonstrations in January, and the violence is far from over. Tens of thousands more civilians, many of them children, were arrested during and after those days. Many face lengthy prison sentences. Some face execution.

This violence is not so much a deviation from the foundational norms of the Islamic Republic as a return to them. In the 1980s, when the regime faced existential threats, it respected with a similar iron fist. In 1981, after the ousting of President Abolhasan Banisadr, his supporters and those of the leader of Mujahadeen Khalq, Massoud Rajavi, protested; the regime suppressed them with the aid of the United States.

Toward the end of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's life, as the leadership grappled with the question of succession and feared the threat posed by dissident political groups, many of whose influential members were imprisoned at the time, authorities executed as many as 5,000 political prisoners. For almost half a century, Iran's leaders have responded to threats to their survival by meting out extreme violence against the Iranian people. Should they survive this time, it is unlikely to be any different.

As ordinary citizens, the decision to start or end a war of this magnitude lies beyond our control, and recent history from Iraq to Gaza suggests that in such moments street protests and online posturing do next to nothing to influence decision makers in Washington and elsewhere.

In the face of such despair, Iranians and the world must make the well-being and safety of the Iranian people a priority over ideology, and take collective, concrete steps toward that goal.

Perhaps most urgent is finding a way to keep Iranians connected to the internet. During the recent uprisings, a blackout proved deadly. Stemming the flow of information made it next to impossible for people to organize and coordinate across neighborhoods. In times of war, when community support can mean the difference between life and death and people need to find one another to coordinate and commiserate, maintaining open lines of communication is even more vital.

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The technology to circumvent these blackouts exists. Other than use of the satellite network Starlink, advocacy campaigns like Direct2Cell are working to scale and refine communication

campaigns for exiles to return.

Many exiled Iranians are highly skilled doctors, engineers and other professionals who, in the absence of functioning government agencies, could play a crucial role in stabilizing the country and alleviating suffering. Their return would also make it more difficult for the regime's surviving security apparatus to reconsolidate its grip on power and carry out arrests and executions. It will also be a great opportunity for the Iranian diaspora, itself divided by algorithm-driven rage and infighting, to find real purpose and make meaningful contributions to our country.

No matter what outcome this war yields, nations must support a global campaign to swiftly lift economic sanctions, which severed Iran from the global economy. The stated intention was to target the regime. But the sanctions net cast over the country always had a gaping hole, controlled by the Revolutionary Guards Corps. Through it, a shadow fleet exports oil and other goods to China and elsewhere. It has used the proceeds to keep its mercenaries paid and fed while forming an oligarchy that pockets significant portions of the revenue and invests it abroad.

The sanctions have not so much weakened the regime as entrenched it further, and they will continue to do so if it somehow remains in power. Lifting them would at least help alleviate the destructive effects of this new war on ordinary Iranians, who will inevitably bear the brunt of it, and assist in rebuilding the critical infrastructure likely to be damaged in the days ahead.

Whatever the outcome of the strikes, sitting back and passively watching the state actors react should not be an option. We need a new form of internationalism: grass-roots activism focused on transnational coordination. Ordinary people must have more of a say in global affairs. Iran is as good a place as any to start.

AMIR AHMADI ARIAN is an Iranian American writer and journalist.



Pete Hegseth last week demanded full control over Anthropic's A.I. technology.

OPINION

AI Frees the Corporate Phalanx



INSIDE VIEW
By Andy Kessler

In 1917, the Tabulating Machine Co. (now IBM) went back to the military's top-down org chart. It's 2026, and we're stuck with today. Everyone has a title, a boss. Clear lines of authority. Employees might as well work in a phalanx. A century later, the faults persist: Org charts add latency. They freeze strategies and processes in place. You practically have to fire the CEO to change the organization—the Journal reports about 1 in 9 was replaced last year. And org charts restrict job flexibility. Admit it, you've looked at tasks and said, "Not my job."

The interim solution was chief (insert buzzword) officers—the famed C-Suite that magically transcends the org chart. First came chief finance, operating, admin, tech and marketing officers. Then came chief revenue, people, knowledge, data, innovation, security, compliance, sustainability, product, content and legal officers. What do they even do? It's becoming comical: chief heart, well-being and happiness officers, even chief vibes and inspiration officers. Add the National Football League's new chief kindness officer. The site ChiefJobs lists 146 chief titles. Who does comedian

Bill Maher's "Chief Switching Officer" report to? Now there are too many "chiefs." They do supply a cheat code to flex authority away from the org chart's lines of command. But the real solution is to flatten the org chart, cut some layers. Communication tools like Slack try to do that so info flows evenly. The

larger the organization, the tougher it is to flatten, keeping it slow, rigid and blind. It's 2026. CEOs will simply use AI and agents to make decisions, right? Input the org chart and out pop commands for everyone. Last week, Block cut 40% of its workforce, partially because of "intelligence

Top-down org charts are a blight, but one artificial intelligence will put an end to.

tools" it has "paired with smaller and flatter teams." But as always, it's what's hidden that matters. The latest lingo bingo words are AI agents, context and business ontology. Consultants are making a fortune evangelizing these terms. But what do they mean?

Think of agents as autonomous digital bots that roam up and down a company problem, and executing its business process. How items are sold, deals are closed, or inputs are procured. The dream is to have successful agents that efficiently and automatically restructure the organization to optimize the business constantly. Possible? Eventually.

But first agents need to understand how the company really works. They need the "context"—a company's living, breathing ecosystem with "decision traces," the history of every decision made, every process considered, every process used or discarded.

Things like "we were a close second and lost that deal but are ready to step in." Where is that snippet stored today? In someone's memory. A context graph captures the sequence of decisions—the why. Not a snapshot like an org chart, but a map with millions of potential plots.

Then think of "business ontology" as a digital, machine-readable version of the company, like the New York & Erie Railroad's signaling tree. Something agents can traverse and adjust. Palantir made a multibillion-dollar business out of this at the high end, digitizing the movement of information and how people operate. This will spread to every business as it gets cheaper. But not overnight.

As old jobs, titles and charts are destroyed, people are still important to help capture the quickly changing landscape and constant decisions—each person makes 35,000 decisions a day, one study claims. Watch for the creation of new jobs and job descriptions that tap the coming flexibility, decoupling and flattening—most likely at brand-new, quick-on-their-feet companies.

Finding what's unwritten, tricks of the trade, and the changing of the guard in competitive landscape will create new winners. The future is no longer command and control but loosely coupled organizations, with task-oriented employees constantly updating and getting guidance from AI agents. Good riddance org charts. Everyone is a chief.

Write to kessler@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Hamilton Cain

A Very Public Education

Unread

By Oliver James
Union Square, 256 pages, \$28

In 2021, as Covid-19 spun its variants across the globe, a TikTok fitness influencer in California wrestled with a personal secret. At the age of 32, Oliver James could no longer tolerate the shame of a double life, the burden of "living a lie." He knew it was time to come clean. Fighting back his fear, he pressed the record button on his phone and announced to his followers: "What's up? I can't read."

Those five words launched Mr. James on an unexpected journey. He resolved to conquer his illiteracy, in part with the help of his unseen audience, who sent him encouragement as he shared videos of himself sounding out words on the page. "Unread," his brisk, conversational memoir, recounts the loops and switchbacks on his path to literacy, conveyed through discussions of more than a dozen books that shaped his quest. (His co-writer, M.P. Henry, captures Mr. James's warmth and candor.)

A black child among mostly Puerto Rican neighbors in public housing in Bethlehem, Pa., young Oliver was raised by his single mother. His Jamaican-American father was nearby but emotionally distant. He often acted out his frustrations in the classroom. Most of his teachers

were ill-equipped to handle his behavioral problems, later diagnosed as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Although his reading comprehension stalled at around the first-grade level, he was repeatedly suspended and kicked up the ladder: "I never failed a grade. If I was learning something, it was how to get by, get through, get past obstacles," he notes. Instead of mastering spelling and grammar, he was learning "how to slip through the cracks." He memorized symbols and repetitions when texting girlfriends, a trick he compares to a person who can't speak Spanish signing along to "La Bamba."

As a teenager he was enticed to join an illegal operation selling guns, a wrong turn he owns up to in "Unread." The law caught him: "a slot open, a cot waiting" in jail. He encountered all types there, some of whom he'd later recognize in works such as "Holes," Louis Sachar's 1998 young-adult novel set in a camp for juvenile offenders.

In prison, he became devoted to working out; after his release, Mr. James hung out his shingle as a personal trainer. He shared fitness tips on TikTok and began dating a woman named Anne who discerned the vulnerable man beneath the swagger: "She looked at me, and she saw me. . . . The fact that she trusted me made me want to earn her trust." The pair relocated to California, where they started a family. Restrictions due to Covid meant he spent less time at the gym and more online, until Anne gave him a copy of I.C. Robledo's "365 Quotes to Live Your Life By" (2019), an a la carte menu of advice that whetted his appetite for meatier books.

Bit by bit his literacy improved—"the technical mechanics of reading are different from reading comprehension," he observes. Mr. James doesn't break down his learning process in much detail. Rather than using a systematic method, such as phonics, he gradually picked up patterns on the page. At one point the immersion in words triggered a panic attack, "like I was hearing voices." Anne steadied him.

After confessing his illiteracy on TikTok, a fitness influencer discovered that his online audience was ready to help him learn to read.

Mr. James's tone—that of a reformed alpha male, an ex-con and traveler of a gritty road—lends his tale authenticity. He depicts his TikTok fans as a lifeline. "I'd go live to read and a couple hundred people were in there. Luckily a lot of them were educators," he notes. "It was like having a one-on-one tutor, but instead of having one, I got a hundred one-on-one tutors." In 2022 he debuted a project: He vowed to read 100 titles in the calendar year, boosted by his virtual community.

There's a glut of backstory in "Unread," steeped in the self-help language of authors like Eckhart Tolle and Eric Thomas—indeed, both of those writers are featured here. Mr. James has compiled his own self-help manifesto, one that strays into platitudes. His riffs are uneven. He mentions Anne Frank's "The Diary of a Young Girl" in passing but then movingly highlights E.B. White and Paulo Coelho. "Charlotte's Web" (1952), White's tale of a pig saved from slaughter, "instilled more respect for animals and spiders in me," Mr. James writes. "It was part of my journey to veganism." Reading Mr. Coelho's 1988 novel, "The Alchemist," he identifies with the shepherd Santiago: "That shepherd wasn't simply reading words—he was reading the world. . . . He was learning how to listen, not only with his ears but with his mind."

Despite its flaws, "Unread" is more than a bildungsroman in an era of clicks; like Tara Westover's bestselling 2018 memoir, "Educated," it's a testament to the power of knowledge to transform a life. Mr. James's pursuit of intellectual purpose is affecting, especially as he encounters books that have been childhood favorites for many readers. The author drops us into an Eden of wonder, where once upon a time we first cracked the codes of Dr. Seuss and "Goodnight Moon." That Mr. James does it publicly is a kind of marvel. For most adults, reading is a private endeavor, intrinsic to selfhood.

For decades Mr. James was among tens of millions of Americans unable to grasp the written word—more than 20% of our population, an embarrassment for a nation rooted in high literacy. Amid an educational crisis in which many children struggle with reading, "Unread" hints at a hopeful possibility: Even the TikTok generation can experience the flowering that Mr. James has. To stay concerned that books can't compete with the allure of digital devices, he offers a simple observation: Reading is as addictive as videogames were in his youth, "mind-altering, escapist, and fun."

Mr. Cain is the author of "This Boy's Faith: Notes From a Southern Baptist Upbringing."

Venezuela's Bogus Amnesty Law



AMERICAS
By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

Venezuela's National Assembly passed a law that it calls "the amnesty law" on Feb. 19. Dictator Delcy Rodríguez signed it almost immediately. Its title suggests the regime is moving toward national reconciliation by extinguishing the spurious records it created of crimes it claims its opponents committed. The text says something very different.

Yes, under this law some regime targets may be forgiven for crimes of which they were never convicted before an independent judiciary. Bravo. You're pardoned for something you never did. But many others, including opposition leader María Corina Machado, are excluded from the blanket absolution. Proclaiming this an amnesty, as one Venezuelan told me, "is pure propaganda." The question is whether the Trump administration will let the unpopular Ms. Rodríguez get away with it.

Two months ago she was the mere deputy to strongman Nicolás Maduro, and things didn't look good for the regime. U.S. sanctions meant Venezuela could sell its oil only on the black market at a discount, and Caracas was low on dollars. There was a huge U.S. Navy buildup off the country's Caribbean coast. Missile strikes on alleged

walking the process. Of approximately 1,000 behind bars six weeks ago, 568 remain in prison, according to the non-governmental organization Foro Penal. This includes 182 members of the military. Those released have been told their cases are still open, and many released political figures have been told not to speak publicly.

Ms. Rodríguez is acting rationally. She can't afford to permit the freedoms of speech and assembly that an unconditional release of dissidents would unleash. Her refusal to obey Mr. Trump's orders has the backing of hard-line Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, who formally informs many of the weapons in the country. But she also needs to create the appearance of cooperation with Washington.

Conditional release of a minority of political prisoners is far from a win for democracy.

Enter the so-called amnesty law, a Kafkaesque piece of legislation to tie the opposition in legal knots while pretending to facilitate a democratic transition.

Writing in the Venezuelan daily El Nacional last week, Ramón Escovar León, an expert in Venezuelan constitutional law, noted that an amnesty law "riddled with

exclusions" thereby "loses its reconciliatory nature and becomes a mechanism for managing the conflict in another form." The regime doubtless understands this.

"By excluding those who have 'domiciled, instigated, requested, invoked, favored, facilitated, financed, or participated' in armed actions or the use of force against national sovereignty, the law does not limit itself to sanctioning specific conduct," Mr. Escovar León writes. Ms. Machado, who welcomed the U.S. military intervention that removed Mr. Maduro, comes to mind. But many others too.

"The breadth of the language allows for extensive interpretations and, consequently, the possibility of generating new threats of legal persecution," the lawyer notes.

The law's exclusions are far from the only trouble Venezuelans face in trying to recover a free and just society. As Mr. Escovar León points out, Venezuelan laws on the books can be used to "equate opposition with terrorism—and the so-called law against hatred must be repealed if effective reconciliation is to be achieved. The end of one era cannot be proclaimed while the legal instruments that snare the previous era possible remain in place."

The amnesty law asks the U.S. to forget the regime's crimes but makes clear the regime won't forget Venezuelan resistance to its rule. That's no transition. It's more tyranny.

Write to O'Grady@wsj.com.

Al Gore's Lesson for JD Vance

By Tevi Troy

Fraud costs American taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars a year. President Trump has assigned JD Vance to address the problem, which will require him to master an odd entry, the vice-presidential task force.

The form emerged when President Ronald Reagan made Vice President George H.W. Bush head of the Task Force on Regulatory Relief. It worked with the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs to slow the rise of federal regulations. When Mr. Bush became president, he assigned Vice President Dan Quayle to head the Council on Competitiveness.

President Bill Clinton appointed Al Gore head of the most famous vice-presidential task force, the National Partnership for Reinventing Government. Under President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney headed a task force to promote dependable

The vice-presidential task force was born under Ronald Reagan.

and affordable energy. Vice President Joe Biden chaired the vaguely titled Task Force on Middle Class Working Families. Vice President Mike Pence headed the coronavirus task force. Vice President Kamala Harris was designated

border czar. Few of these efforts succeeded, but all contain lessons for Mr. Vance:

- **Hurry.** Launched at the very beginning of the Clinton administration, the Reinventing Government task force had eight years to do its job. The antifraud effort has three, so Mr. Vance must work fast.
- **Lean in.** Ms. Harris tried to back away from her assignment as border czar. This didn't spare her from being tagged with border failures.

Like it or not, Mr. Vance now owns the issue of fighting fraud. The media and his political opponents will pounce if he falters.

- **Convene.** The vice president is one of the few people who can bring together top appointees across government. To address fraud, Mr. Vance will need officials at the Treasury, Homeland Security and Justice departments and a host of other agencies to cooperate, along with state and local officials.

- **Communicate.** Mr. Gore doggedly sold his Reinventing Government effort, even going on David Letterman's late-night TV show. Mr. Vance proved willing to go on any show at any time to make the case for his boss in the 2024 campaign. He should do the same with fraud, explaining how it hurts every American and what he's doing about it.

- **Self-monitor.** Although Mr. Quayle's Council on Competitiveness aimed to reduce fed-

eral regulations, President Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Clean Air Act, which called for some 55 new regulations. As a result, the regulatory burden became heavier. Mr. Vance should take care that other administration efforts don't make fraud more likely.

- **Seek permanence.** Most of these initiatives were eliminated by the next administration. Mr. Clinton requested the Council on Competitiveness. George W. Bush said Mr. Gore's effort didn't reinvent government so much as reshuffle it. Mr. Vance should develop initiatives, private sector-based or legislatively codified, that can outlive the task force itself.

Mr. Troy is a senior fellow at the Ronald Reagan Institute and a senior scholar at Yeshiva University's Straus Center. He served as deputy secretary of health and human services, 2007-09.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Trump Enforces His Red Line on Iran

The U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran that began Saturday morning is an unnecessary act of deterrence against a regime that is the world's foremost promoter of terrorism. It carries risks as all wars do, but it also has the potential to reshape the Middle East for the better and lead to a safer world.

In his eight-minute video in the wee hours Saturday, President Trump laid out war aims that suggest a campaign of several days or weeks. He said he wants to "raze their missile industry to the ground" and "annihilate their navy." He will destroy what's left of Iran's nuclear program and "ensure that the region's terrorist proxies can no longer destabilize the region or the world and attack our forces."

Crucially, he called on the people of Iran to rise up and depose the theocratic regime that has terrorized and murdered them for 47 years. "When we are finished" bombing, Mr. Trump said, "take over your government. It will be yours to take. This will be, probably, your only chance for generations."

These war aims mean that Mr. Trump is enforcing the red lines he drew when the regime slaughtered its people as they protested in January. He said he'd come to their aid, and now he has. He also gave Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, ample chance to strike a deal on nuclear weapons and its missile force, but the ayatollah refused and he was killed in the attack.

Mr. Trump has unduly criticized his predecessors for "forever wars" in the Middle East, but he understands deterrence. In Yemen, Iran in June, Venezuela and now in Iran again, he has taken action against manifest threats in his second term that Barack Obama and Joe Biden refused to take. U.S. deterrence collapsed, and the world's rogues took advantage.

The scale of the military action means the campaign can succeed even if the regime survives. Destroying Iran's missiles and navy will make the region safer. The nuclear program will be difficult and expensive to rebuild, especially if the U.S. also continues to block Iran's oil exports, its main revenue source.

The larger gamble is regime change, and no one knows if this will happen. Air campaigns alone rarely topple a dictatorship. But if the U.S. and Israel take long enough to kill enough regime leaders, *basij* militia and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the chance for an internal coup or popular revolt might open up. Even if the result is that less radical members of the IRGC take over, they are likely to be better than the ayatollahs. Let's hope the Mossad and CIA are on the ground trying to help the opposition.

It's Too Soon for Iran 'Off-Ramps'

The first two days of the U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran have been a striking success, but the response of the Iranian regime has also revealed the reason it was necessary. The biggest mistake President Trump could make now would be to end the war too soon, before Iran's military and its domestic terror forces have been more thoroughly destroyed.

The precise targeting of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and some 40 regime leaders is a remarkable demonstration of U.S. and Israeli intelligence capability. It underscores how much last June's attack had degraded Iran's capacity to compete in the skies or mount a major retaliatory response. Three Americans were killed and five wounded on the weekend, but the risk of casualties would be greater had the President waited to let Iran rear.

Iran's retaliation also shows the risks the regime continues to pose—to its Arab neighbors, as well as to the U.S. and Israel. Iran's interim leader is Ali Larjani, a main deputy to Khamenei who runs the Supreme National Security Council. He rose in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) during its heyday under the late and unlamented Qassem Soleimani.

On Saturday Mr. Larjani promised retribution against the U.S., and you can bet he means it. He will be in charge until the religious leaders choose a successor. Mr. Larjani's prominence ensures that Iran's elected president, Masoud Pezeshkian, will continue to be a bit player. The Revolutionary Guard and the *basij* paramilitary forces still run the country.

Iran's military retaliation is notable for hitting more or less every one of its neighbors. As we write this on Sunday, Iran has fired missiles or drones on Israel, the U.A.E., Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and even Oman, which was negotiating with the U.S. on Iran's behalf. It also launched strikes, if fewer of them, on Jordan, Iraq, Syria and perhaps even Cyprus.

Some of its targets in these countries are U.S. bases, but the attacks were often directed at civilian targets, including hotels in Dubai. A senior Israeli and U.S. official tell us the U.A.E.'s leaders are hanging tough rather than urging the two nations to quit.

The attacks underscore that Iran is the main threat to the entire region. What it has been doing all along by proxy, it now does directly. This is an opportunity to rally even the region's equivocating states into a coalition for changing the Tehran regime.

All of this reveals the risks of ending the bombing campaign before Mr. Trump's stated

The biggest challenge to the military campaign will be at home more than in Iran. Critics in the U.S. are already out in force, and they will exploit American casualties like the three servicemen killed and five wounded on the weekend.

One cliché is that this is a "war of choice" and there was no urgent threat to address. But the regime and its proxies are weaker now than they have been since the end of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Would the critics prefer to wait until Iran has rebuilt its air defenses and missile stockpiles with the help of Russia and China? Then more Americans would probably die.

Critics also claim the war is "illegal" because Congress hasn't voted for it. But the Constitution gives Presidents ample room to use military force against threats to U.S. security. Members of Congress may demand a vote on a War Powers Resolution that could block military action after 60 days. We think the War Powers Act is unconstitutional. But by all means let's see who in Congress wants to side with Iran given all the Americans its forces have killed over the decades.

Another common alarm is that toppling the regime could lead to civil war in Iran and new conflicts among other powers in the region, such as Turkey and the Saudis. Events are impossible to predict, but it's hard to imagine instability greater than what the revolutionary regime has promoted for nearly five decades.

The most glib criticism is that the President who claims to be a peacemaker has contradicted himself by using force against adversaries four times in 13 months. But Mr. Trump inherited a world in which an axis of U.S. adversaries had formed and was on the march. He is pressuring that axis at its weakest links—in Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba. In doing so he is sending a message to China and Russia that the costs of testing Mr. Trump militarily are considerable.

Our main concern is that Mr. Trump may stop too soon. (See more nearby.) He will face political pressure from the Tucker Carlson right and perhaps Mr. Carlson's allies in the Vice President's circle, as well as from Democrats and most of the press. This is especially true if there are more U.S. casualties. Mr. Trump was wise to warn about this in his video remarks, but he will have to keep making the case for his war aims and that achieving them takes time.

Mr. Trump didn't begin a war on Saturday. He is fighting back against an Iranian regime that has been waging war against the U.S., Israel and the West for decades. The threat is to the regime itself, and let's hope it falls.

war aims are achieved. Mr. Trump has said he will respond to continued Iran retaliation with more bombing, but he also told Axios that he is open to "off-ramps" if the regime seeks to resume diplomacy. What precisely those ramps are isn't clear, but he told The Atlantic on Sunday that Iran's new leaders "want to talk, and I have agreed to talk." The regime may promise more seeming concessions to entice Mr. Trump to stop the bombing and give it a lifeline.

This would raise the risk of ending before Iran's navy and its missile stocks, launchers and productive capacity are destroyed. It would also leave most of the IRGC and its *basij* enforcers intact. As long as these remain in control, the regime will be able to shoot to kill protesters and cow any domestic uprising.

The longer the bombing destroys regime targets, the likelier that fissures will open in the leadership and perhaps lead to an internal coup or the collapse of the regime's willingness to slaughter its own people in the streets. The war doesn't need to continue until the regime falls, but it does need to keep going long enough to destroy far more of its military and its internal killing machine.

Critics of the bombing cite George W. Bush and risk of "forever war" a la Iraq. But no one, least of all Mr. Trump, is talking about deploying U.S. troops to Iran to install a new government. That is the job of Iranians.

The better analogy is George H.W. Bush and the first Gulf War in 1990. The coalition campaign was so successful in pushing Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait that Bush and his advisers stopped too soon and spared most of his military. The long-persecuted Shiites of southern Iraq staged an uprising against the Sunni troops but were massacred.

Saddam stayed in power and remained a threat that led to the invasion of 2003. The U.S. didn't need to occupy Baghdad in 1990. But a longer campaign to degrade Saddam's military would have given the people of Iraq a better chance of creating a safe zone in the south as the Kurds were able to do in the north with the help of U.S. air cover.

This doesn't imply a forever bombing campaign in Iran. But it does mean continuing as long as it takes to ensure that, even if the regime doesn't fall, it will no longer be a threat to its neighbors. And perhaps it can be weakened enough that its people can muster the ability to install a government that wants to be a normal nation again, rather than one that seeks to spread revolution and kill Jews, Sunni Arabs and Americans.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The State of Our Union's Political Dysfunction

Peggy Noonan dismisses President Trump's State of the Union address as "spectacle" and "propaganda," but she misses the struggle for the nation's identity. What she calls "Crazytown" is actually the division between two senses of America ("The Oprah State of the Union," *Declarations*, Feb. 28).

For nearly a century, one side has meticulously built a managed architecture of bureaucracy and safety nets. They sit in stony silence because they are watching their life's work being systematically dismantled. Conversely, the president is attempting a radical reclamation of the try-hard ethos of free-market capitalism.

To Ms. Noonan, awarding honors in the chamber is vulgar theatrics. To those of us who believe the American engine has been stalled by decades of government overreach, these moments are a celebration of the excellence only a free society can produce. When one side fights to preserve a 90-year-old legacy and the other fights to reclaim a stolen system, the decorum of the past is a luxury we can no longer afford. We

are fighting for the soul of the country, and nobody is going to be the first to stop shouting.

MARK GIANNINI
Rochester, N.Y.

The State of the Union address is meant to be just that—an annual address by the president to the American people about the accomplishments of the past year and what he proposes to achieve in the future. While it is expected that there will be some degree of spectacle, usually in the form of the judicious inviting of a handful of civilian or military guests in recognition of their heroic acts, the true import of the evening is to allow for an extended, direct presidential overview of the nation's foreign and domestic objectives. Disruptive and boorish behavior on the part of either the attendees or the president alike—including ad hominem, booing, cat-calls, signage displays and histrionics—do a disservice to the dignity of the night and to the American people tuning in.

MARK GODES
Chelsea, Mass.

Mamdani Should Keep His Policing Promise

Former New York City police commissioner William Bratton argues that Mayor Zohran Mamdani should renege on his campaign promise to abolish the New York City Police Department's Strategic Response Group ("Mamdani Should Spare These Cops the Ax," *op-ed*, Feb. 24). But the SRG is a notoriously violent, repressive and expensive unit that led the abusive and illegal response to the Black Lives Matter protests.

The SRG is tasked with policing both peaceful protests and terrorist attacks, a dangerous dual responsibility. During dozens of demonstrations, SRG officers were documented by New York Civil Liberties Union protest monitors escalating tensions and turning peaceful gatherings into scenes of mayhem. The SRG's conduct is partly why in 2023 the NYCLU, Le-

gal Aid and the State Attorney General's Office reached a settlement with the city that significantly reduces the role the SRG plays in policing protests.

Mr. Bratton claims the SRG "is the solution" to the police abuse we saw during the 2020 protests. But a New York City Department of Investigation report found the SRG's tactics during the protests "may have unnecessarily provoked confrontations between police and protesters."

Rather than following Mr. Bratton's advice to double-down on costly dissent-squelching units like the SRG, Mr. Mamdani should stay true to his convictions and disband the unit.

MICHAEL SISITZKY
Assistant director of policy
New York Civil Liberties Union
New York

Downtown Philadelphia Is Finding Its Footing

In "Philadelphia's Avenue of the Arts 2.0 Is a Risky Revival" (*Arts in Review*, Feb. 26), Michael J. Lewis is right to observe that Broad Street is due for streetscape improvements.

Philadelphia's downtown is resilient and resurgent: 130 retailers and restaurants opened here last year, fueled by a downtown residential population that has grown since the Avenue of the Arts organization was founded in 1993. Our walkable downtown concentrates residential high-rises, office towers, restaurants and shops. This may be why expansion-oriented retailers, including M.M.LaFleur, Jordan World of Flight, Vuori and Veronica Beard, increasingly choose Center City Philadelphia.

Fortunately for cities everywhere, it is no longer 1975. The Transitway pedestrianization that failed back then, as people and jobs fled to suburbia, is now a recipe for success: Center City

District's recurring Open Streets program, which removes car traffic from major shopping streets on select Sundays, raises both footfall and sales. Even without this program, foot traffic in neighborhoods just off the Avenue of the Arts is now exceeding 2019 levels, particularly on evenings and weekends.

PREMA KATARI GUPTA
CEO, Center City District
Philadelphia

Retiring the Nation's Doctor

I watched the surgeon general confirmation hearings and couldn't help but wonder why, in the 21st century, we still rely on an 18th-century relic to play the nation's doctor ("A Vaccine Sceptic for Surgeon General," *Review & Outlook*, Feb. 26).

The office of surgeon general has drifted far from its original role as an apolitical supervisor of medical personnel. Successive administrations have transformed it into a political megaphone opining on gun control, social media, housing and other contentious issues only tangentially related to public health.

Meanwhile, the surgeon general oversees the more than 6,000-member Public Health Service Commissioned Corps—a uniformed service whose deployment is slower and more costly than civilian alternatives. A 2010 Health and Human Services report found corps officers cost roughly 15% more than comparable civilian employees.

Congress should dissolve the office of the surgeon general and the Commissioned Corps, transfer legitimate public health functions elsewhere and end the politicization of public health.

JEFFREY A. SINGER, M.D.
Senior fellow, Cato Institute
Washington

Room Service Isn't Our Style

Regarding Brenda Cronin's "Random Short-Term Rentals" (*op-ed*, Feb. 26): Since 2015 my wife and I have stayed in 49 Airbnb residences. We stay for five or more nights, mostly in historic central cities, allowing us to explore on foot. Most places are unique, beautiful and acceptably clean, while the hosts have been incredibly accommodating.

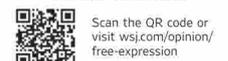
Some places have been less than perfect but never to the point where we didn't stay. Before booking we read reviews carefully and often message the host with a few questions, which gives us a sense of host reliability and accountability.

Hotels have their place, but they're not for us. We enjoy the extra room and special charm of short-term rentals.

DON SALYARDS
Winona, Minn.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Don't worry. This is how I filled out last year's taxes too."

OPINION

The Trump Doctrine in Iran and Beyond

By Seth Cropsey

The U.S. and Israeli preemptive attack on Iran, coming after years of feckless effort to end Tehran's nuclear program, could transform the Middle East. The Trump administration's strategy of careful maneuvering between Russia and China, combined with pressure on Europe to increase its share of the defense burden, has a chance to bear fruit.

Again the president has acted decisively against an exposed partner of the rival great powers. It did so in Venezuela. It's doing so in Cuba. Attacking Iran's theorists, ballistic-missile infrastructure and command-and-control systems leaves the regime weaker than ever. The assault on Iran, including an Israeli strike that reportedly killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, also solidifies

The president strengthens deterrence by acting decisively against partners of Russia and China.

the Trump doctrine, demonstrating the president's willingness to use tailored, overwhelming force to maximize deterrence and achieve long-term strategic benefits.

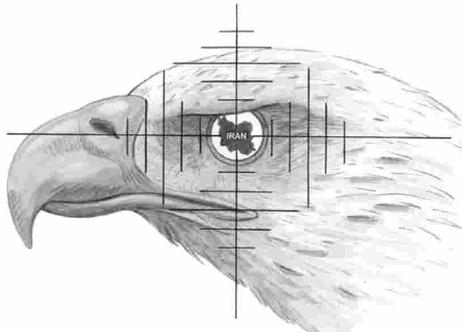
The president's strategy is coherent and prudent: By systematically pressuring exposed adversaries, the influence of strategic rivals is undercut. This explains Washington's delicate wrangling with the Chinese over trade, tariffs and military transfers to Taiwan. It also explains a generally consistent flow of weapons to

Ukraine—paid for with European cash—alongside intelligence support to sustain Kyiv's fight against Russia, even as the U.S. seeks to broker a peace.

Venezuela was a key partner of Russia, China and Iran. So is Cuba. Iran has been a key partner for both Russia and China. Applying overwhelming force against Iran makes the Trump doctrine more real and substantive while building on previous accomplishments, such as last year's Operation Midnight Hammer, which "obliterated" Iran's nuclear program, according to a senior U.S. official.

Using unique U.S. capabilities against weaker targets—whether dropping Massive Ordnance Penetrators from B-2 stealth bombers or using U.S. special forces to extract Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela—isn't simply effective military policy. It demonstrates to China and Russia that a direct confrontation with the U.S. would be extraordinarily damaging. Even the Chinese military, engaged in history's largest conventional and nuclear buildup, would suffer severely at the hands of U.S. bombers, submarines and carrier-based aircraft. The same is true of Russia, which as a military and intelligence matter still sees the U.S. as its core enemy. The strike against Iran also reminds the U.S. military of its great strategic importance, breaking radically with the escalation avoidance that has limited U.S. effectiveness since the war on terror.

The Trump doctrine's military components are one part of its effectiveness. Donald Trump is another. He has proved to be the only U.S.



DAVID GOODMAN

president willing to wage a true war of attrition against Tehran. Both Trump administrations combined crippling sanctions with spectacular displays of force. This strategy along with Israeli tenacity has left the Islamic Republic in a state of headlong decline while hollowing out its regional "axis of resistance."

Operation Epic Fury creates an opening to complete Iran's strategic degradation. Following last year's 12-day war, Iran's conventional air defenses remained severely damaged, even with its attempts to buy new short-range weapons from Russia. Iranian ballistic-missile production capacity remained high, 100 a month according to Israel, but its launchers and storage points should be significantly better mapped. The U.S. has had a year to fine-tune its targeting plans and selected countermeasures for the exact radars Iran uses.

Iran's final negotiating offer was essentially the Iran nuclear deal with only slight modifications. Strictly bound by ideology, including the notion that regime survival equals victory, the Islamic Republic wouldn't address the fundamental realities of the strategic situation. Mr. Trump recognized this and acted where none of his predecessors did.

The application of overwhelming yet tailored military force can generate a total systemic collapse in Iran. The centerpiece is a large set of refueling tankers for strategic bombers. By maintaining a continuous aerial refueling corridor, the U.S. can launch B-2, B-1, and B-52 missions from Continental bases, allowing them to deliver significant amounts of ordnance against Iranian targets.

Supported by pervasive elec-

tronic warfare assets that can effectively blind the remnants of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps command and control, and by carrier-based and regional aviation, the U.S. possesses the ability to dismantle Iran's counterforce capabilities.

The regime's aura of inevitability has melted into thin air. Without the successful Israeli bombing campaign of last summer, there would have been no protest wave earlier this year. Iran's people sensed weakness. Reports of an attempted palace coup against Khamenei seemed credible, even in a regime as closed, controlled, and unified as the Islamic Republic.

Bombs without booms are seldom primed to have strategic impact. In this case they are. The U.S. has all the levers of control—the military posture to eliminate the offensive Iranian military threat, the economic apparatus to provide a crucial lifeline to whoever and whatever follows Khamenei, and the geopolitical leverage over the Middle East—to ensure a real neutralization of the Iran regime.

Mr. Trump seeks to be known as a peacemaker. It's hard to imagine a greater accomplishment than to achieve peace while stiffening the sinews of deterrence. The administration has seized an opportunity that its previous policy made possible: the elimination of Iran's theocracy.

Mr. Cropsey is president of the Yorktown Institute. He served as a naval officer and as deputy undersecretary of the Navy and is the author of "Mayday" and "Seabindness."

Iran's Regime Is Down, but It Isn't Out

By Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh

With his decision to bomb Iran again, Donald Trump finally put the nail into arms-control diplomacy with Tehran. Negotiations started in 2002, when an Iranian opposition group revealed the clerical regime's previously clandestine nuclear-weapons program. The French, British and Germans, fearing that George W. Bush might try to down another member of his "axis of evil," started talking. The Iranians joined. They, too, feared Mr. Bush.

For Tehran, nuclear diplomacy had overwhelmingly been about deterring the U.S. and Israel—and acquiring sanctions relief and the time required to build long-range ballistic missiles, a well-armed proxy empire, and industrial-scale uranium enrichment. They got all of the above through Barack Obama's nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Given Mr. Trump's deal-making reflex and his ideology-literate understanding of men, he may again proffer another meeting to the Islamic Republic's new leaders. With Ali Khamenei's death, the regime may temporarily form a triumvirate to replace him, it may rapidly select a new supreme leader, or it

may muddle through with multiple power centers united, first and foremost, in the cause of crushing Iranians who oppose them. But those who follow Khamenei, who all passed his demanding test for loyalty, will unquestionably reject another Trump proposal.

Unlike earlier presidents, who engaged in diplomacy primarily to avoid war or the embarrassment of Iran going nuclear, Mr. Trump has shown he isn't scared of conflict. He may believe that the Venezuela model can apply to Iran, that after Khamenei's death he can find hard-edged pragmatists who will surrender the Islamic program. It's a fool's errand, and Mr. Trump may tire of it quickly. But the president might sustain his anti-Iranian endeavors because he appears to have a longstanding animus against the Islamic Republic, dating from the hostage crisis in 1979.

Unlike Bill Clinton and Mr. Obama, Mr. Trump doesn't feel guilty about the American alliance with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. He doesn't relate to the historicist's patient conviction that an Iranian Thermidor lies ahead. Mr. Trump's offensive probably wasn't about foreclosing "an imminent threat." It certainly wasn't about Benjamin Netanyahu playing Svengali, getting the president and American power

to do what Israel couldn't.

For Mr. Trump, this campaign was surely in part about restoring national honor after all the years of ignominy of watching the Islamic Republic kill Americans while Washington did nothing. Mr. Trump's speeches weave fact and fiction freely, but his war sermon Saturday probably reflects, more or less, his sincere motivations. Critics who see his Iran policy as reckless

Will a mass uprising cause it to fall? If not, America and Israel will have to remain vigilant for years.

likely never felt as acutely as the president the shame that came with Iran's unanswered malevolence. Mr. Trump's sense of pride and authority—almost Roman in intensity—works when played against the Islamic Republic, since it's been led by men who literally believe they are on a divine mission.

Some in Washington still don't understand that the 12-day war changed everything. Israel and Iran are and will remain at war—not the indirect assaults of the past, but a direct, probably protracted conflict.

An Israeli consensus has developed: The Jewish state will have a continuous need to degrade the clerical regime's proxies and home defenses, which could shield revitalized nuclear and ballistic-missile programs. Threats no longer have to be imminent to be countered.

Until recently Israelis didn't care about regime change in the Muslim world, since they had such low regard for the potential for Muslim political evolution. The Islamic Republic's unrivaled antisemitism married to ballistic missiles, dogged nuclear aspirations and lethal proxies changed Israeli minds. Only the collapse of the Islamic Republic offers the Jewish state relief from this existential struggle.

Mossad now has an Iran regime-change department; it probably has already discovered that killing the Islamic Republic's leadership is a hell of a lot easier than helping Iranians overcome security services that have shown they are willing to kill thousands to stay in power.

Ali Shamkhani, head of Iran's National Defense Council, was recently asked whether he regrets not developing the bomb in the 1990s, when he was defense minister. "I wish I had," he said. "Today it is evident that Iran should have developed this capability itself."

Shamkhani was killed Saturday, and he surely speaks for those left behind.

Whatever hesitancy kept the Iranian elite from crossing the nuclear threshold has evaporated. They understand now that they wouldn't be getting bombed if they had the bomb. The Israelis today may be willing to stand sentry in the Gulf, to "mow the lawn" frequently even inside the Islamic Republic. But they lack the resources to police Iran's far reaches. The administration knows that putting ballistic missiles and a revitalized nuclear program underground works against the Jewish state, which has difficulty in dropping anything bigger than a 5,000-pound bomb.

Without an America committed to mowing the Islamic Republic's lawn, time is on the side of the clerical regime. The great unknown variable is whether its security services will crack when confronted by a future mass uprising. As Mr. Trump intimated in his speech, Iranians will have to do the heavy lifting. If they want their freedom, thousands more are going to die.

Mr. Gerecht is a resident scholar at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Mr. Takeyh is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Trump's Road to War With Anthropic



LIFE SCIENCE
By Allysia Finley

A long-simmering feud between Trump administration officials and artificial intelligence developer Anthropic erupted last week with the president ordering government agencies and military contractors to stop using its systems because they posed a "supply-chain risk." Don't mistake the catalyst of this blow-up for the cause.

The Trump team is going to war with Anthropic because they view the company and its CEO, Dario Amodei, as political adversaries, and more importantly, belligerents in a larger battle over regulation of AI.

Yet the warring camps in this fight don't fall neatly along partisan lines.

Triggering the administration's nuclear response on Friday was Anthropic's high-handed refusal to give the Defense Department carte blanche to use its technology as it sees fit. Anthropic drew a red line on "mass surveillance" of U.S. citizens—which implied ill intent by the Trump team and fully armed automated weapons.

President Trump responded by accusing "the Leftwing nut jobs at Anthropic" of "trying to STRONG-ARM the Department of War." Defense Under-secretary Emil Michael called Mr. Amodei a "liar" with "a God-complex" who "wants nothing more than to try to personally control the US Military and is ok putting our nation's safety at risk."

Yet hours after the Trump team nuked Anthropic's contracts, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman announced an agreement with the Pentagon that he said included the same red lines as Mr. Amodei had set. That suggests Trump officials are up in arms about more than Anthropic's insisted limitations on the use of its technology.

Mr. Amodei joined OpenAI soon after it was founded a decade ago as a nonprofit, but left in 2020 to start Anthropic after clashing with Mr. Altman. In his view, OpenAI was attempting to accelerate AI without sufficient guardrails on its use. Mr. Amodei turned Anthropic into an AI juggernaut by creating off-the-shelf AI tools for businesses, especially for coding. He has also sought to differentiate Anthropic from rivals by touting its focus on "safety." This marketing strategy naturally didn't endear him to others in his industry, since it implied that they were moving too fast and in the process breaking things.

The Anthropic CEO said as much in public interviews, often warning that rapid AI advances risked causing widespread social and economic upheaval. AI presents a "serious civilizational challenge" that could cause "mass unemployment" and inequality, he wrote in a January essay. Foresadowing his red lines, he urged "limits to what we allow our governments to do with AI, so that they don't seize power or repress their own people."

Mr. Amodei's alarmism irked Trump officials, especially in light of his prior criticisms of the presi-

dent. In a 2024 Facebook post, Mr. Amodei compared Mr. Trump to a "feudal warlord" and said he "represents a serious and legitimate threat to the rule of law." He urged Americans to vote for Kamala Harris and Democrats for Congress who will investigate the "corrupt tricks Trump has done."

Many Silicon Valley leaders lean left, but most fiercely oppose government efforts to regulate AI. Mr.

Officials have already clashed with CEO Dario Amodei over his support for heavy AI regulation.

Amodei broke with his competitors by endorsing a Biden executive order that imposed federal oversight of AI models. Anthropic also lobbied for regulation of AI by states such as New York and California and opposed the administration's efforts to pre-empt state laws.

All this made Mr. Amodei persona non grata in the Trump administration. David Sacks, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist who serves as Mr. Trump's AI czar, accused Mr. Amodei and other "AI doomers" of stoking public fear to encourage government control of AI. "These are committed leftists. They're Trump haters," Mr. Sacks said last May.

Mr. Sacks also accused Mr. Amodei of trying to hamstring competitors. "Anthropic is running a sophis-

ticated regulatory capture strategy based on fear-mongering," Mr. Sacks tweeted in September. "It is principally responsible for the state regulatory frenzy that is damaging the startup ecosystem." He had a point, though the drive to regulate AI isn't partisan.

Republicans such as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former Trump aide Steve Bannon have backed government regulation of AI. Mr. DeSantis has warned that "AI will be harmful to children just like social media has been." On the other hand, Elon Musk joined Mr. Amodei in supporting an expansive AI bill in California in 2024, which Rep. Nancy Pelosi opposed and Gov. Gavin Newsom vetoed. Both Democrats said the legislation could hamstring innovation.

Trump officials are right that the sort of AI regulation Mr. Amodei has advocated could amount to unilateral disarmament by slowing innovation. Anthropic admitted as much last week when it dropped its own "safety pledge," saying that they "didn't really feel, with the rapid advance of AI, that it made sense for us to make unilateral commitments" if "competitors are blazing ahead."

The Chinese, Russians and other U.S. adversaries won't handcuff themselves with regulation. Yet coming government agencies and contractors from using Anthropic tools—which Pentagon officials favor for their dexterity—will handcuff the U.S. and could damage national security. The Trump team has more important wars to fight than with Anthropic.

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EDITORIALS

We won't miss the Supreme Leader of Iran. But does Donald Trump have a real plan?

Retirement experts note the folly of retiring from something, which drives what most people do, and the wisdom of retiring to something, a rarer but far superior choice.

The analogy holds when it comes to what just happened this weekend in Iran.

Especially if you look at what took place in Venezuela, the previous example of Donald Trump-led regime change, albeit on a smaller scale than his disruptive and deadly new initiative in Iran, the 17th most populated country in the world. Trump gets the "from" far better than the "to."

Trump and his Israeli partners knew what they did not like in Iran and we don't disagree.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei led a repressive, theocratic, medieval regime that sponsored terror, threatened the security of Israel, repressed women and brutally murdered thousands of brave Iranian dissidents, a situation met mostly with silence from the river-to-the-sea protesters because it didn't easily fit their anti-colonialist narrative. Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed Khamenei, found dead in the rubble of Tehran this weekend after yet another example of the precision of Israeli intelligence and the depth of its sources, as "an outstanding statesman who made an enormous personal contribution to the development of friendly Russian-Iranian relations."

Putin is entitled to his opinion. But we won't miss the man or his enforcers. Or his plans for a nuclear weapon. Nor will those celebrating on the streets of Tehran who are rightly hailing what looks to them like a very helpful blow in the direction of winning their own personal freedoms, although that group is by no means all of Iran's 93 million people.

Still, as the European Union's chief diplomat, Kaja Kallas, rightly put it on Sunday morning: "What comes next is uncertain. But there



Smoke rises up after a strike in Tehran, Iran, on Sunday. VAHID SALEMI/AP

is now an open path to a different Iran, one that its people may have greater freedom to shape."

One can only hope that turns out to be the case.

Indeed, Trump and his Israeli partners have a moral and practical obligation to do all they can to ensure that is the case. To pay attention to the "to."

Whatever Americans think about what occurred this weekend, with the attendant death, economic disruption and other horrible human costs of war, to wish for anything other than that is to betray the brave Iranian people and its worried but hopeful diaspora, amply represented in our city.

We only wish we had more confidence in Trump's follow-through skills.

We've said many times before that we don't care for how Trump operates. Here is a president who promised a time of peace and yet whose rabid personal ambitions

have stoked one destabilizing global conflict after another, the new one being the riskiest of them all. He operates on the global stage like a despotic real estate gambler, a volatile leader who dispenses with the requisite advice and consent of Congress, and perhaps even his own generals, and who thinks that leadership means shooting from the hip, ever confident in his own hunches. Such leaders are always vulnerable to outside manipulation and while Israel certainly has any number of very good reasons for wanting, even needing, regime change in Iran, Trump is inclined to forget that, in the era of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli and U.S. interests are not always the same. Nor are those of the Iranian people.

Trump's presence in power makes the world a less safe place and only years from now will we fully understand the true, long-term consequences for Ameri-

ca's global standing. It's perfectly logical to believe that and yet also be glad that the Khamenei regime has been skillfully ousted, if that indeed proves to be the case.

There's the rub, of course.

Has it?

If we look to Venezuela, the most recent example of a Trump foray, we don't exactly see the coming of nirvana. The current interim president, Delcy Rodríguez, is the former vice president, and the Venezuelan National Assembly remains dominated by lawmakers sympathetic to the ideas of the ousted former president, Nicolás Maduro. Rodríguez might have deftly massaged Trump's ego as needed with flattery born of the need for self-preservation, but she told NBC News last month that she still believes Maduro is that nation's "legitimate president." Not exactly what Trump was promising.

So that's the nightmare

scenario here: the Revolutionary Guard, a many-headed-hydra, simply reasserts control, perhaps with some rhetorical concessions to stop the U.S. bombs from raining down on Tehran, and then goes about reasserting its brutal interpretation of Sharia Law and killing and repressing the Iranian people as usual. Or, perhaps even more likely, Iran devolves into a morass, a chaotic power struggle that destabilizes the entire powder keg of a region. Such an outcome would have broad economic consequences and allow despots yet unknown to reassert control even as Trump moves on to, say, Cuba.

There is reason to worry. But the world only spins forward and Americans, who elected Trump, now have to hope that the consequences of that election result in a better scenario for Iran and its long-suffering people.

May they progress to the freedom they deserve.

What Chicago's Loop needs, in a single word



A person walks through Federal Plaza in the Loop on Jan. 29, 2025. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The annual meetings of the Chicago Loop Alliance are no place for truth-telling about the self-evident problems of the Chicago Loop. As Friday's big gathering at Willis Tower made clear, this is a nonprofit group filled with vested interests whose job it is to promote the fortunes of Chicago's struggling central district.

Nonetheless, we were gratified to see a new focus on the promotion of arts and culture, clearly key to the future of a downtown Chicago unlikely ever to return to the teeming hub of office workers that has defined its history. One need only look at the relative fortunes of our downtown north of Monroe Street, where

the streets are filled nightly with attendees on those theater-heavy blocks, with "Hamilton" arriving back this coming week, compared with those below that dividing line.

South of Monroe, Loop sidewalks at night are mostly empty, thanks to the emptying out of the traders who once populated this area and the struggles of the educational sector that was supposed to replace them.

Still, the room was filled with those trying to promote and improve things all over the Loop. One of them was the departing and widely admired president and CEO of the Chicago Loop Alliance, Michael M. Edwards. In his brief parting remarks,

his choice of a single word to describe what the Loop needs the most struck us as very much on the money.

The word? Confidence. Edwards was using that term to encompass such crucial constituent elements therein as the perceptions of public safety, cleanliness, economic vitality and, he said, "beauty."

Beauty is not a word we hear at lot around town. Yet our famous Loop is indeed a beautiful place.

And, yes, a thriving Loop must instill confidence, just as it deserves the confidence of all Chicagoans justly proud of their city.

We could not have put it better ourselves.

ON THIS DAY 41 YEARS AGO THE TROUBLE WITH AMTRAK

Since its creation in 1971 to save the American passenger train from extinction, Amtrak has been able several times to avert its own demise by adroitly making use of pork-barrel politics. The thus-far-successful strategy has been to operate its routes through as many congressional districts as possible to build support for subsidies on Capitol Hill.

Unfortunately, that has meant Amtrak has been stretched too thin to make much of an impact on the nation's transportation market. The political advantage gained from running one daily train through places like Lamy, N.M., Wolf Point, Mont., and Shoshone, Idaho, is offset by the disadvantage of being unable to run reasonably frequent service between major cities. For example, the Chicago-Denver market has the same frequency of service as the Trinidad, Colo.,-Emporia, Kan., market. The 20 million passengers Amtrak carries would make it the fifth largest airline in the nation, but almost 55 percent of those

passengers ride along a single route on the East Coast between Boston and Washington.

Although Amtrak almost breaks even on service in that corridor, it loses almost \$700 million a year nationally. It is that federal subsidy that the Reagan administration wants to eliminate to help reduce the deficit. The administration is correct. The nation can no longer afford to subsidize as inefficient an operation as Congress has required Amtrak to be.

If Congress refuses to eliminate the subsidy, it should at least cut the subsidy in half to force Amtrak to consolidate its service on a few routes linking major cities. The three West Coast routes could be consolidated into a single Chicago-St. Louis-Kansas City-Denver-Salt Lake City-West Coast route with three daily trains.

Seven hundred million dollars is a lot of money to spend subsidizing trains to places few people want to go.

Tribune editorial board,
March 2, 1985

EDITORIAL CARTOON



MIKE LUCKOVICH/THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

OPINION



Slot machines stand inside Bally's Casino at Medinah Temple in Chicago on April 11, 2024. One of the conditions of the agreement between Bally's and the city of Chicago is that unregulated video gambling terminal licenses would remain illegal in the city. CHRIS SWEDA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Video gambling terminals spell bad news for Chicago

By Julie Darling and John Bosca

In December, the Chicago City Council passed a provision in the 2026 budget that legalizes licensing of unregulated video gambling terminals within the city limits. This maneuver, pushed through behind the scenes with little knowledge of the public, opens the door to big problems for our city. Every Chicagoan should be alarmed.

In a time of great financial instability and uncertainty for our city, legalizing unregulated video gambling terminals will only worsen our problems. When the city of Chicago finally forged an agreement with Bally's corporation to create a Chicago casino, it was with the intent to create a new source of consistent revenue that would bolster our under-

funded police and fire pensions.

One of the conditions of the agreement between Bally's and the city, however, was that unregulated video gambling licenses would remain illegal in Chicago. Now that aldermen have legalized them, the contract between Bally's and the city will be reopened, jeopardizing a \$4 million payment guaranteed to the city each year from Bally's.

In other areas in Illinois where video gambling terminals have been operational since 2012, Illinois casinos have seen a 37% reduction in gaming revenue. With an expected similar result here, Bally's could see a yearly total tax loss of \$260 million. The city stands to lose some \$70 million in revenue yearly. Who's going to have to pick up the tab for these losses? That's right—

you and me, the taxpayers of the city.

You might be wondering: But wouldn't video gambling generate enough revenue to make up for any losses at the casino? In a word? No. The city of Chicago only stands to gain 5.15% of the revenues from the terminals, versus 22.3% from casino gaming. Our aldermen should have done this math problem before irresponsibly legalizing these licenses, but in the chaos of budget season, this slipped through.

There's another problem, which is the signal this maneuver sends to other companies considering doing business here. We want to be a city that's known for being a great place for companies to invest and create economic prosperity and new jobs. Instead, we're renegeing on a deal we only

just made a few years ago, and creating chaos for a company that should be one of our strongest partners. Bally's agreed to a series of community benefits that we should all support—including contributing hundreds of thousands of dollars to neighborhood-based initiatives. Now, we're sending a terrible message to other companies that Chicago's government just can't be trusted as a partner.

Perhaps most importantly, the proliferation of gaming terminals in bars and restaurants will create a real strain on safety in our neighborhoods. Bally's—like all casinos—has a high level of security presence at its single location in Chicago. But video gambling terminals lack the same strong, embedded security measures that casinos provide. It's safe

to assume we'll begin to see increased crime as new volumes of cash move from potentially thousands of small locations around the city. Of course, there's been zero discussion among the City Council about the cost we taxpayers will have to bear to pay for additional Chicago police resources these terminals will necessitate. This plan hasn't been thought through by the very leaders who passed it.

Aldermen can still fix their mistake by simply repealing the video gambling legalization they so irresponsibly passed at the end of last year. Aldermen, do the right thing, before this error leads to an even greater mess for us all.

Julie Darling and John Bosca are representatives on the Casino Community Advisory Council.

Public servants are under attack. Here's why their work matters

By John Atkinson

Across the nation, public servants carry a burden that few in the private sector ever shoulder: a persistent (and loudly expressed) perception that they do not work hard, they are overpaid, they are lost in the swamp of bureaucracy, or worse, that they simply do not care.

These assumptions were amplified on the national stage last year when the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) took an axe to the federal workforce. Rather than collaborate with tenured employees who had firsthand insight on what processes needed to be reworked, DOGE told thousands of workers that their civic efforts were worthless and the country would be better off without them. In doing so, it continued a politically convenient narrative that has since had a chilling effect on state-level jobs and devastating impacts on real people. For instance, just hours after 2,400 Veterans Affairs jobs were dissolved, health care appointments for Illinois veterans were cancelled due to staffing shortages. We should all be concerned that the only efficiency DOGE delivered was deeper mistrust and disregard for those who keep our most fundamental systems running.

Public servants hold various roles in every pocket of government, from aides in the highest federal offices to staff in prominent state agencies to local bus operators, nurses and school district staff. For the last several years, I have been able to see inside Illinois' own state government—first at the Board of Higher Education (IBHE) and



Current and former Department of Labor workers and their supporters rally in protest of workforce cuts by the Department of Government Efficiency outside their office headquarters on April 14, 2025, in Washington. CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY

State Universities Retirement System (SURS), and now at the Illinois Economic Development Corp. (Illinois EDC).

From the outside, these may seem like abstract institutions or line items in a budget. From the inside, they are made up of people who work relentlessly, often invisibly, to improve the future of their communities.

What I see every day is not indifference or complacency; I see professionals who work nights and weekends, who answer emails and take calls around the clock, who willingly navigate a sea of red tape, all to ensure their

neighbors have every opportunity to succeed. These are people motivated not by bonuses or stock options, but by a sense of responsibility to help Illinois become stronger, fairer and more prosperous—and a belief that their work matters in making that happen.

Through Illinois EDC's partnership with the state, and my previous work as chairman of both IBHE and SURS, I've witnessed firsthand the unique drive that propels public servants. These teams work tirelessly to achieve tangible results and improve outcomes for all: expanding access to education, attracting

investment, bringing jobs to every region across the state, supporting businesses, and nurturing the conditions that result in long-term competitiveness and economic growth.

This work requires innovation, technical expertise, creativity, negotiation and persistence. It also requires patience—because success in equitable development is often measured over years, not news cycles. Public servants show up to work knowing that success is often anonymous, while failure—real or perceived—is readily attributed to "government." They show up knowing that praise is

rare and criticism is constant. And they do it anyway.

The truth is that state government is not some distant, unfeeling bureaucracy. It is a network of Illinoisans who live in our communities, send their kids to our schools and want the same things everyone else wants: good jobs, safe neighborhoods and a future worth staying for. Many could earn more and work fewer hours elsewhere. Still, they choose public service because they believe in the place they call home.

That doesn't mean government is perfect or beyond critique. Accountability matters. Efficiency matters. Results matter. But dismissing public servants as lazy, overpaid or uncaring ignores the reality of the people doing the work—and undermines our ability to attract the talent needed to govern well. We cannot afford to drain the pipeline of hard-working people who are willing to go beyond dreaming of a better future.

As Illinois' continues to grow its economy, strengthen its institutions, and compete on a national and global stage, we should be intentional about recognizing the value of people who choose to serve. Behind every program, every deal, every policy, there are dedicated professionals doing hard work on behalf of the public—often without recognition and always with care.

Public service is not the absence of ambition. For many, it is the very existence of ambition directed toward something larger than themselves.

John Atkinson is chairman of the Illinois Economic Development Corp.

OPINION

The economic common ground America isn't talking about

By Justin Callais and Clay Routledge

These days, it can feel like Americans across the political divide cannot agree on much of anything.

But there is encouraging news: When it comes to the economic foundations of human progress and flourishing, we are not as divided as we might think.

Political polarization has become a defining feature of American life. More and more people are avoiding dating or befriending those with opposing political views, and growing numbers describe those on the other side as closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent.

This divide extends to economics, where debates over capitalism versus socialism are often defined by what team you are on rather than honest thinking about how to improve living standards.

Of course, political parties have long differed along economic lines. However, that divide has grown in recent decades, largely driven by Democrats souring on capitalism and becoming more favorable toward socialism.

According to Gallup, from 2010 to 2025, Republican views on capitalism and socialism remained fairly stable, with favorable views of capitalism hovering between 71% and 74% and favorable views of socialism staying mostly below 20%.

Democratic views shifted more notably. Favorable views of capitalism fell from 51% to 42%, while favorable views of socialism climbed from 50% to 66%. This and similar polls suggest that the majority of Democrats now prefer socialism over capitalism.

Look beneath the surface, though, and a different story emerges.

A 2019 Gallup poll found that while only 60% of Americans had a positive attitude toward capitalism, 87% had a positive attitude toward free enterprise, and 90% had a positive attitude toward entrepreneurs. The building blocks of capitalism appear to enjoy broad support even if the label doesn't.

Our team at the Archbridge Institute's Human Flourishing Lab wanted to explore this further. If you describe the core



People walk by the New York Stock Exchange on July 5, 2024, in New York City. SPENCER PLATT/GETTY

mechanics of capitalism and socialism without using those loaded labels, which system do Americans actually believe will advance human progress and flourishing?

To find out, in our latest Progress Pulse survey of over 2,000 American adults conducted in partnership with The Harris Poll, we presented two viewpoints. One held that businesses competing freely in the marketplace, driven by private companies and entrepreneurs, are the best way to solve today's big challenges and improve people's lives. The other held that government agencies coordinating resources and setting priorities are the better path forward.

The results revealed more consensus than these polarized times might suggest. Though political differences emerged as expected, clear majorities of both Republicans (76%) and Democrats (60%) chose free markets, private companies, and entrepreneur-

ship over government coordination and planning. Economic freedom won out across every demographic group we examined, even among young adults, who are often assumed to be socialism's most receptive audience. Nearly 6 in 10 adults under 25 chose free markets, private companies and entrepreneurship.

So what is going on? Part of the answer likely lies in how the meaning of these terms has shifted in public discourse. On the political left, capitalism has become increasingly associated with inequality, corporate power and corruption, and instability, while socialism is framed around equality, fairness and security. Entertainment media, long dominated by those on the political left, tend to depict capitalism as a destructive force. Inspiring entrepreneurial stories are told regularly, yet rarely acknowledged as products of the economic system that

made them possible. The result is a strange disconnect. Many who have grown skeptical of the word capitalism still embrace and celebrate the economic freedom that defines it.

Two paths forward are worth considering. One is rehabilitating the term capitalism, making a sustained case for what it actually means and what it has achieved. The other is simply bypassing the arguments over labels and centering public conversations on the ideas most Americans already embrace, namely entrepreneurship, innovation, free enterprise and individual agency. Given how deeply the word capitalism has been politicized in an already-divided country, the latter may be the more pragmatic near-term strategy, which could pave the way for an eventual reclaiming of the term itself.

Social psychologists use the concept of superordinate identity to describe a shared framework that transcends group divisions.

When people tap into that kind of larger identity, they are more likely to set aside tribal loyalties and work together toward shared goals. Republicans and Democrats remain divided on many policies and priorities. However, our data suggest there is a shared economic foundation for a superordinate American identity. A belief in economic freedom that cuts across party lines could be the basis for more productive conversations about how to expand opportunity and remove barriers to entrepreneurship and social mobility.

Progress requires cooperation. And cooperation is facilitated by finding common ground. Most Americans already believe in the engine of prosperity. They just do not always agree on what to call it.

Justin Callais is chief economist and Clay Routledge is executive vice president and COO at the Archbridge Institute, a nonpartisan think tank.

Voice of the People

Increase density with care

The image of a glass tower rising above Boston's South Station is striking. The project rests on decades of layered planning, established air rights and a transit hub designed to absorb extraordinary density. It is downtown-scale development supported by downtown-scale infrastructure.

Chicago is debating density in neighborhoods that function differently. In these neighborhoods, mobility is a layered system of buses, elevated trains, commuter rail, pedestrians, bicycles and cars that all intersect in constrained corridors. Floor area ratio measures bulk, not merely height.

In downtown contexts, high intensity is accompanied by alley service, wide rights of way, coordinated intersections and transit capacity calibrated to match it. Those conditions help manage loading, traffic and operational impacts before they spill outward and burden surrounding streets, intersections and neighborhoods.

Where those conditions are absent, bulk demands careful justification. The issue is not growth. It is proportionality between mass and infrastructure.

Air rights may define Boston's tower. In Chicago, infrastructure must define intensity. It's called good planning, and we want more of it.

— Tim Carew, Chicago

BUILD plan problems

Another half-baked political plan: Gov. JB Pritzker unveiled his BUILD (Building Up Illinois Developments) plan, which would strip local governments of their zoning powers, allow builders to build multi-unit buildings on currently zoned residential lots, reduce the lot size requirement and add additional buildings to current sites. This is an effort to increase the supply of affordable housing. There are serious consequences to these actions.

Congestion is exacerbated by inserting multifamily units

in place of single units. Fire spread becomes more probable by reducing side yard setbacks.

Flooding is exacerbated by increasing the impervious area. Emissions are worsened by increasing the number of vehicles and appliances as well as with the reduction of vegetation. Utilities such as water, sewer, gas and electric may not support the increased load. In more rural areas, there is needed separation of wells and septic systems.

The governor is trying to place the blame for Illinois's problems on local governments but is, in fact, giving residents another reason to leave the state.

— Bill Shafer, Hennepin, Illinois

Do something, mayor

We're a year out from the mayoral primary, and what can Mayor Brandon Johnson claim he's done to make Chicago better? He'd probably say the reduction of crime, but it is down across the country. That's like taking credit for jobs when there's a national economic upturn. Like President Donald Trump, Johnson has spent his time playing to his base. Like Trump, he has responded to criticisms by attacking the critics. I could go on.

There are so many small things he could do, but he'd have to leave his progressive bubble to do them. I'll name two: Nobody wants to get on the "T" and listen to someone blasting something on their phone. Announce that the police will ticket those with their phones on speaker. Second, people in my neighborhood ride electric scooters and bikes on the sidewalk. Announce that they'll be ticketed.

We're a year out. Do something, mayor.

— Gene Sweet, Chicago

Black Chicagoans' plight

In his Feb. 26 op-ed ("Pritzker's budget does little to help Black and brown Illinoisans"), Chicago businessman and thinker Willie Wilson writes movingly of the plight of Black

Chicagoans, who according to his essay constitute 53% of Chicago's homeless population and 54% of those who died while in Cook County custody between January 2020 and November 2025. And they have a median net worth of exactly zero, according to the 2024 "Color of Wealth in Chicago" report.

While Wilson urges more legislative solutions and government spending, the simplest and most obvious solution to these tragic numbers is twofold. Reform Chicago's public school system and stop funding programs that subsidize a culture of dependence.

The sad truth is that Chicago Public Schools (like much of the city of Chicago at this point) is run by the Chicago Teachers Union, which has amply demonstrated for decades that it cares more about high teacher salaries and out-of-control pensions than it does students and their education.

Somehow the CTU's power needs to be cut back to the legitimate union function of negotiating wages, hours and working conditions and not the ability to oppose charter schools and other educational reforms and set public policy. Sadly, that won't happen as long as a former CTU member and organizer sits in the mayor's office.

Then the city, state and country as a whole need to ask themselves if over 60 years of "Great Society" programs are helping or hurting our most vulnerable communities.

— David L. Applegate, Huntley

Excellent city service

While criticism of government services in Chicago is often warranted, the city's tree-trimming program demonstrates what effective public investment can achieve. Increased funding for the Department of Streets and Sanitation's Bureau of Forestry has led to expanded crews and enabled a coordinated, citywide approach that is both efficient and fair.

By trimming all trees within a

geographic area at the same time, the program ensures consistent service across neighborhoods while protecting the long-term health of Chicago's wonderful urban tree canopy. Even outside the typical April-to-December season, crews have continued working during this month's mild weather to remove dead branches and hazardous trees along parkways and medians — proactively improving safety, reliability and quality of life for residents city-wide.

With more than 500,000 parkway trees, their work is never-ending as they also treat insect and disease threats while safeguarding and strengthening tree health.

Kudos to the department leadership for developing and executing a tree-trimming program rooted in service to all Chicago residents.

— Tom Tunney, former alderman, 44th Ward, Chicago

Tyler Technologies mess

I have been following the problems and finger-pointing for blame with the revamp of the Cook County property tax system. The latest nasty exchange between Cook County Treasurer Maria Pappas and Tyler Technologies makes it clear to me that Tyler has not properly performed project management, including changing management, nor even close to it.

Tyler is supposed to be providing the information technology expertise for this project. A big part of that is of course project management. A big part of project management is the planning and preparation and involvement of all the areas that the new system touches.

Tyler should have had designated partners with authority in all those areas including Pappas' area. Pappas should have had a partnership relationship with

Tyler, and Tyler should have made sure that that was the case. I think it is now safe to point the finger of blame at Tyler, and it should own the fact that it mismanaged this project and its management.

— John Captain, Antioch

Phones in classrooms

The lawmakers in Springfield are working on ensuring cell-phones are not allowed in classrooms during instructional time. Seems to me it should have been that way from the start, when teachers were at the mercy of district policy. The trend these days is to allow developing young minds to have adult privileges. It's a shame.

Now that the children are wholly addicted, as with any addiction, there will be withdrawal. Who is ready for that emotional crisis? And it will be just that.

Any person with common-sense could have seen this coming. Hmmm.

— Cynthia Marks, Palos Park

Thank you, Title IX

After watching the Winter Olympics, as well as the most recent University of Hawaii Rainbow Wahine basketball game and a few matches of the University of Hawaii SandBows beach volleyball a recent weekend, I said to myself numerous times: "Thank you, Title IX." That 1972 law banned sex discrimination in all U.S. educational settings.

Equal opportunity is right and good for all of us. When I went to school, women's sports were an afterthought, maybe a tennis team or a field hockey team. No team basketball, volleyball, fencing, softball, let alone hockey. I had team experiences growing up that helped shape who I am, and I'm glad so many women and girls have that opportunity today.

Thank you, Title IX.

— Mark Wieting, Glen Ellyn

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