



Two plus one

Anti-incumbency is not a strong factor in two States and one UT going to polls

Public campaigning for the April 9 Assembly elections in Kerala, Assam and Puducherry concluded on Tuesday and voting will take place in a single phase across all three regions – 126 seats in Assam, 140 in Kerala, and 30 in Puducherry. The results will be declared on May 4. In Kerala, the incumbent LDF led by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan is seeking a third consecutive term. No alliance has achieved such a feat in the State, but the LDF mounted an audacious campaign premised on a claim that 'there is no alternative' to the LDF. The emergence of the BJP – it won its first Lok Sabha seat in the State in 2024 – as a notable force in the State has further confused the Kerala electorate. Each of the three formations has accused the other two of having an understanding beneath the open posturing. The UDF is attempting to convert the momentum that it gained in the Lok Sabha and local body elections into an Assembly victory. The LDF is counting on its 10 years of welfare governance. The Congress has replicated its model of guarantees covering key vote blocs such as college students and women. The party managed to resolve the internal disputes over ticket distribution, but senior leaders are angling for the Chief Minister's post, counting their chickens before they hatch. The CPI(M) had to contend with at least four of its senior leaders leaving the party and contesting as UDF candidates.

In Assam, the campaign has been dominated by Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, who is seeking a second term and a third for the BJP-led NDA. He has formulated a strident version of anti-Muslim rhetoric, Hindutva, and indigenous identity politics and welfare schemes, particularly the Orunodoi direct benefit transfer to around 40 lakh women. Other promises by the BJP are measures against illegal encroachment, implementation of the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, a Uniform Civil Code excluding tribal areas, and two lakh government jobs. The campaign concluded with the Congress responding in kind to Mr. Sarma's highly personalised campaign against Congress's campaign leader Gaurav Gogoi. Mr. Sarma has been alleging that Mr. Gogoi has links with Pakistan. The Congress alleged that Mr. Sarma's wife holds three passports – the UAE, Antigua and Barbuda, and Egypt – and may be preparing to flee in the event of defeat. A six-party alliance led by the Congress is fighting on an uneven battlefield in Assam. In Puducherry, an NDA government led by All India N.R. Congress (AINRC) leader N. Rangasamy has been in power since 2021. With only 30 seats, the personal standing of individual candidates could play a bigger role in the outcome than grand politics in the Union Territory.

Systemic reckoning

Sattankulam verdict should sensitise the police against use of excessive force

Delivery of justice to hapless victims of police brutality requires a combination of an actively engaged judiciary, the courage of victims and witnesses to speak out against the khaki fraternity, and a determined investigation to assemble irrefutable evidence. All these factors prefigured to uncover the truth behind the custodial killing of an innocent trader, Jayaraj, and his son Benicks, who were tortured at the Sattankulam police station in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, six years ago. Relying on the CBI's scientific evidence, despite early attempts to destroy it, a trial court in Madurai has now convicted all nine policemen arraigned in the case. A tenth accused had died earlier of COVID-19. While the awarding of the death penalty to the convicts militates against the principle of rehabilitative justice, the conviction sends a strong message to those in uniform who assume the power to wield force against unarmed citizens as if it were a statutory right. This case might have passed off as yet another suspicious custodial death but for overwhelming evidence of torture and public outrage. The police picked up Jayaraj on false charges of violating lockdown conditions during the pandemic, and Benicks was detained later when he confronted them for assaulting his father. The two men were stripped, brutally beaten overnight, and even forced to clean their own blood with their clothes. After registering an FIR on trumped-up charges, the injured men were produced before a government doctor, who dubiously issued a "fit for remand" report. The jurisdictional magistrate too mechanically remanded them to judicial custody, ultimately leading to their deaths.

That the policemen felt entitled was evident when a Judicial Magistrate found the atmosphere at the station hostile and "intimidating". Justices P.N. Prakash and B. Pugalendhi of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, having taken *suo motu* cognisance, in an extraordinary direction, asked revenue officials to take control of the station to safeguard evidence. The turning point came when a head constable, Revathi, testified against her colleagues. The CBI established that blood samples recovered from the station matched the victims' DNA, while call data records confirmed the presence of both the victims and the accused at the time of the crime, sealing the case. The trial court appears to have applied uniform proportionality in assigning culpability to all accused. This may not withstand scrutiny in higher courts, as seen in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, where the Supreme Court, in 1999, upheld the death sentences of only four of the 26 convicted by the TADA court. Nonetheless, the convictions should help sensitise the police force that excesses will not go unpunished.

Delimitation, women's reservation, political dynamics



Zoya Hasan

Professor Emerita,
Centre for Political
Studies, Jawaharlar
Nehru University

In September 2023, Parliament passed the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, or the Nari Shakti Vandana Adhiniyam, which commits to reserving one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas for women, including in constituencies already earmarked for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. However, this potentially transformative measure falls short of immediacy: its implementation is deferred until after the next Census and the subsequent delimitation exercise.

During parliamentary debates, the Congress party, along with several other Opposition parties, demanded its immediate operationalisation, ideally for the 2024 general election. Women's rights groups criticised the government for tying the quota to delimitation after the new Census, arguing that it creates unnecessary delays. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government rejected this, maintaining that such a major change, without updated Census data and delimitation, would undermine both fairness and feasibility.

The shift now seems more deliberate

Less than three years later, that position appears to have shifted. Recent reports suggest that the government now plans to amend the Women's Reservation Act, 2023 by initiating a delimitation exercise based on the 2011 Census, rather than waiting for a fresh Census and a subsequent delimitation process tied to it. At the same time, the size of the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies may be expanded by nearly 50%, increasing the Lok Sabha's strength from 543 to 816 seats. In the absence of any formal articulation of the basis for such an expansion, questions arise about its implications for representational balance and political fairness.

Taken together, these developments – particularly the proposed increase in seats – point to a decoupling of women's reservation from the next Census, expected to include caste enumeration beyond the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and the delimitation exercise that would follow. While this shift is framed as a means of expediting implementation, it also suggests a more deliberate political reconfiguration underlying these far-reaching structural changes.

The timing is telling. Acting at this juncture allows the government to claim credit for a long-pending reform that previous administrations failed to implement, even if it entails departing from the sequencing that it had earlier defended. It has clear electoral implications, likely to mobilise women voters in upcoming Assembly elections across key States/Union Territory, consolidate support ahead of the 2027 contests, and position the Bharatiya Janata Party as the party that delivered on women's reservations and gender justice. This claim could, in turn, become a chief plank of its campaign for the 2029 general election.

Implementing women's reservation without waiting for the Census or delimitation exercise could undermine representation and the intended reforms

Delimitation, however, remains contentious, questioning whether representation should be based solely on population or also consider economic, social, and demographic factors. A strictly population-based approach would strengthen the parliamentary power of northern States where fertility rates remain relatively high, while reducing the relative influence of southern and peninsular states that have stabilised population growth and significantly drive India's economy and employment. This dynamic is likely to deepen the existing north-south divide, driven by demographic asymmetries and uneven development outcomes, placing additional strain on the federal compact and the balance of inter-State representation.

These conflicting concerns stem from the constitutional freeze on delimitation, leaving constituency boundaries and seat allocations unchanged since the early 1970s. After nearly five decades, the government now appears set to lift this freeze, proposing a roughly 50% expansion of the Lok Sabha alongside proportional increases in State Assemblies. This approach is intended to reassure southern States by preserving their relative share of seats and thus reducing resistance to delimitation. Yet, even with a uniform expansion, the absolute seat counts of northern States would rise significantly, further tilting the existing balance of power in their favour. For instance, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar together could approach 180 seats, while the five southern States (Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana) combined may reach around 195, raising the possibility that the northern bloc could still wield disproportionate political weight. In a first-past-the-post system, where numerical strength ultimately determines both electoral victory and seats gained, such an increase risks entrenching structural disadvantages for less populous regions, even if formal proportionality is preserved.

The issue of data

These distributional concerns are compounded by the question of data. Basing women's reservation on the 2011 Census is problematic, particularly when a new Census is already underway. India in 2026 bears little resemblance to its 2011 demographic profile: migration, rapid urbanisation, and the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly reshaped population patterns over the past decade and a half, altering both urban and rural constituencies. Proceeding with outdated data risks misrepresenting current realities at the very moment when foundational decisions on delimitation, seat expansion, and the operationalisation of women's reservation are being made. Yet, the urgency to move ahead suggests a calculated political judgement: that the imperative of delivering women's reservation will outweigh resistance, as few can afford to oppose its expeditious implementation, leaving little

room to contest either the process or its sequencing. The issue is further complicated by what the next Census itself may reveal. Widely expected to be a landmark exercise, the availability of caste data could sharpen demands for greater representation of disadvantaged caste groups, particularly given their demographic strength. It may also amplify calls for sub-quota within women's reservation, especially from Other Backward Classes (OBCs), including Muslim OBC communities that remain underrepresented. Several political parties and women's organisations have already voiced such demands. By moving ahead without waiting for the 2026-27 Census, the government appears to be postponing these pressures, but only temporarily.

A further concern is the lack of clarity on how women's reservation will operate in practice. While the amendment mandates a one-third quota, it defers critical details, especially the rotation of reserved constituencies. This is not a minor issue: rotation determines who can contest, from where, and with what continuity, shaping both accountability and constituency development. Earlier proposals cautioned that frequent rotation could disrupt these goals, yet the current framework leaves the design unresolved. Reports suggest that in smaller States and Union Territories with one or two Lok Sabha seats, the rotation of reserved constituencies may operate differently, resulting in less frequent turnover, while in larger States, some seats could remain reserved across successive terms. However, the law itself provides only for rotation after delimitation, leaving the precise mechanism to be defined.

The need for deliberation

None of this diminishes the core premise: women's reservation is long overdue and politically imperative. Evidence from other countries suggests that quotas can be effective, and there is little reason to believe that India would be an exception. Taken together, women's reservation, seat expansion and delimitation are not isolated changes; they will jointly reshape who is represented, from where, and in what proportions. Seen in this context, they mark a foundational reordering of the electoral map – one that will redraw constituencies, recalibrate the weight of States, and reconfigure the social composition of legislative bodies. Far from a marginal or technical adjustment, this is a structural shift that could rebalance political power across regions, social groups, and genders. Precisely because of the scale of this shift, implementation must be preceded by thorough deliberation grounded in the latest data. Departing from the logical and constitutionally settled sequence risks distorting representation and seat distribution, thereby weakening the very reform it seeks to advance. India stands on the cusp of one of the most significant transformations of its representative system since the early decades of the Republic.

A closer look at Asim Munir's West Asia diplomacy

To give the devil its due, Pakistan's Chief of Defence Forces Field Marshal Asim Munir's recent diplomatic avatar has shown a sense of anticipation of the incipient conflict and hyperactivity in its wake. He was everywhere: soothing Trump 2.0 at the signing of Pakistan's Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SDMA) with Saudi Arabia, and selling weapons to the Libyan warlord and the Sudanese Army Chief.

But his most ambitious rainbow chase has been the self-proclaimed role of an indispensable mediator in Iran's war with the United States/Israel. So, if he eventually fails to ford the Strait of Hormuz, it would not be for lack of trying.

The gaze of detractors

However, his detractors – there are many in India – are themselves guilty of a transactional approach in judging his diplomatic hyperactivity. In their opinion, the energetic Field Marshal's regional diplomatic overreach is doomed to fail for reasons ranging from the intrinsic weaknesses and preoccupations of Pakistan, the constant shapeshifting in the West Asian command, to a propensity for glib talk. They are itching to see it fail and then claim the proprietary rights to the outcome.

Such predictions are overblown on two grounds. First it is the process and not the product. The entire exercise is aimed at exorcising the ghosts of Islamabad's pattern of shortchanging its glib partners. Whether the Pakistani leopard can change its spots is a separate question. Second, they half expect Field Marshal Munir's wading into Trump-kissed regional diplomacy would, at one stroke, solve many of Pakistan's current troubles – from a sclerotic economy and diplomatic doghouse to internal political disorder. This may be an unrealistic outcome.



Mahesh Sachdev

Former Indian
Ambassador
specialising in West
Asia and oil matters

Pakistani diplomacy has left no stone unturned in wooing Trump 2.0, flipping a decade-long mutual antipathy with the U.S. that followed the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011. Indeed, this multi-pronged charm offensive has been handsomely rewarded, and Asim Munir has become Mr. Trump's favourite Field Marshal. Then moving on to being a messenger-cum-mediator between Washington and Tehran, seamlessly replacing Oman and Qatar, as the latter faced Iran's retaliation for hosting the U.S. military bases.

An overreach

In Asim Munir's scheme of things, all this greater realpolitik is to set off a perpetual motion machine meant for multiple ends. In the short run, he hopes to monetise its "peace-making" role to curry favour with both Washington and Beijing, becoming a useful conduit for their planned first Summit next month. He would also attempt a reset with the post-war dispensation in Iran. Islamabad has already leveraged its putative links with Iran to host a brainstorming meeting with the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Egypt on March 30, which may lead to an Islamic NATO. In a less noticed, but significant move, Asim Munir recently paid a low-key fence-mending visit to Abu Dhabi, miffed by Islamabad's growing proximity with rival Saudi Arabia.

At a different level, Islamabad also hopes that its overreach would fulfil its long-standing ambition to be counted in the senior league of the Islamic world. Last, but not least, Pakistan also hopes that being the paw of various fat cats would earn it cash rewards and bail it out of perennial penury. If all that happens, Asim Munir would have transformed himself from being an ambitious top-gun to surpass the iconic Ayub Khan, the only other Field Marshal and President of Pakistan.

Pakistan's Field Marshal is being watched to see whether he will emerge as an indispensable mediator or a useful idiot

There are reasons to believe that Asim Munir's diplomatic activities may not get sustainable tailwinds to fully realise its goals. It is mainly because too many factors are beyond his control. Well-informed U.S. media reported last evening that Iran has stopped engaging in talks to halt the fighting. It may turn out later that sceptics in Tehran were cynically "blowing hot, blowing cold" about the "Islamabad talks", to keep Mr. Trump off-balance and expose his unreliability as a regional security provider. This could take the wind out of Pakistan's self-image as the only country with cordial ties with both Iran and the U.S.

There are multiple ethnic, geopolitical and orientational differences between Tehran and Islamabad. Second, the portents do not point to any possible de-escalation in the conflict, which currently seems headed in the opposite direction. The current prognosis is for either a war of attrition or for Mr. Trump to declare a fictional victory and quit the arena.

The broader view

Either way, Iran may use the leverage of the selective closure of the Strait of Hormuz to serve its own multiple goals, from revenue accretion to keeping the littoral states under pressure and forcing the U.S. to relent on the sanctions. In either of the two scenarios, the stakeholders would have little use for Asim Munir's diplomacy. Pakistan's long restive land border with Iran and a significant Shia minority have forced its hand in being more kinetic in response to Saudi Arabian calls for mutual defence. In case Mr. Trump averts his eyes to the Gulf and looks for more manageable targets, his ardour for his favourite Field Marshal may cool further. This would then allow the redoubtable Pakistani Field Marshal an opportunity to rue the verity of a century-old aphorism: "War is too important to be left to the generals".

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Forever wars

An Israeli peace activist recently described Gaza, Iran and Lebanon as fronts in "one forever war". That phrase captures a tragic truth many prefer not to confront: these conflicts are no longer isolated eruptions of violence but parts of a continuous, self-sustaining

cycle driven by fear, retaliation, political survival, and hardened narratives on all sides. Each round of fighting is justified as necessary, defensive, and unavoidable. Yet, every strike plants the seeds of the next. Civilians pay the highest price while leaders speak in the language of

security, deterrence, and survival. What makes this "forever war" so dangerous is not only the destruction that it causes but also the way that it reshapes thinking. It convinces societies that peace is naive, that empathy is weakness, and that perpetual conflict is the

natural order. Voices calling for dialogue, and political courage are often dismissed as unrealistic. Yet, history shows that "forever wars" end only when people dare to imagine an alternative and demand that leaders pursue it. Jagjit Singh, Los Altos, California, U.S.

Sattankulam case

The well-reasoned judgment in the Sattankulam case brings closure to a gruesome murder which was committed with impunity by those who are expected to uphold the law, procedures and guidelines related to interrogation.

That the CBI took painstaking efforts to establish the offence merits commendation of a high order. The sanctity of human rights has prevailed. V. Johan Dhankumar, Chennai

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

Limits of neutrality in addressing caste

The interim stay by the Supreme Court on the UGC Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulation, 2026, as reported by the Supreme Court Observer, arrives at a pivotal moment. These regulations emerged from *Abeda Salim Tadiw Union of India*, a pending case before the Supreme Court concerning caste-based discrimination and student suicides in higher educational institutions. The case highlights institutional failures in creating an equal and inclusive learning space.



Priva Chaudhary
Research Associate,
CLPR

When discussing caste discrimination in higher education, it is essential to clarify what is being addressed. The 2026 regulations under 3(c) define "caste-based discrimination" as discrimination based on caste or tribe against members of the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. This specificity is not exclusionary; rather, it is necessary to recognise caste as a continuing structure of marginalisation rather than isolated incidents.

Why neutrality fails

The definition has been criticised for excluding "general category" students, with suggestions to adopt a caste-neutral definition that includes them, in line with Article 14 of the Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law. However, this reasoning misunderstands both how caste discrimination operates in practice and how equality is understood under the Constitution.

The Constitution does not mandate an abstract, one-size-fits-all neutrality. Article 15 not only prohibits discrimination but also empowers the State to make "special provisions" for socially and educationally backward classes, SCs and STs to ensure substantive equality. Equality, in this framework, is substantive rather than formal.

The UGC guidelines must be supported by monitoring, regular audits, and meaningful oversight

Formal equality assumes that discrimination operates symmetrically and that all social groups require identical protection. However, caste discrimination is structural, embedded in graded hierarchies that shape access to dignity, resources, and institutional power. Including "general category" groups into a caste-neutral definition risks collapsing this structural inequality into a universal grievance framework, where systemic oppression is equated with isolated interpersonal bias. Such neutrality does not expand protection; it dilutes the law's ability to address caste as a system of power.

For decades, SC and ST students have experienced social exclusion, unequal treatment, humiliation, and institutional bias. In several cases, such structural discrimination has led to mental distress and suicides. These realities, reflected in the pending case under which the equity regulations were formulated, show that the framework is grounded in systemic concerns, not isolated incidents.

A caste-neutral definition would flatten unequal social positions into a formal notion of sameness that the Constitution itself does not endorse. Articles 14 and 15 permit differential treatment precisely to remedy historical and social disadvantage. Treating caste-based oppression as symmetrical across groups disregards the hierarchies through which caste operates and shifts the focus away from structural exclusion to abstract individual grievances. Therefore, defining caste-based discrimination through historically marginalised groups is not arbitrary. It recognises that discrimination operates through power structures that advantage some while disadvantaging others. This is not "reverse discrimination," but an acknowledgement that equality requires fairness in practice. A caste-neutral approach would obscure these structural

realities and weaken the law's capacity to address caste-based exclusion in higher education.

Enforcement matters more
The equity regulations in higher education, including a focused definition of caste-based discrimination, are not meant to exclude others from protection. Rather, they aim to create a baseline of dignity and inclusion for those who have historically been excluded. This approach aligns with Articles 14 and 15, which allow differential treatment to remove disadvantage and achieve substantive equality. In a society shaped by caste, constitutional equality cannot be achieved through context-blind neutrality.

More importantly, the question is how effectively they may function on the ground. The failure to address caste-based discrimination lies largely in weak implementation and poor institutional accountability.

Instead of diluting the scope of the UGC regulations, the focus should be on strengthening them — by ensuring independent complaint mechanisms, time-bound inquiries, transparency in outcomes, and clear consequences for institutional non-compliance. The UGC guidelines must be supported by monitoring, regular audits, and meaningful oversight. A framework meant to prevent caste-based harm cannot succeed unless institutions are made answerable for how they respond to discrimination in practice.

Shifting the debate away from enforcement and towards abstract concerns about neutrality risks missing the core issue. For students facing everyday exclusion, the question is not inclusive definitional purity, but whether the system will respond when discrimination occurs. Strengthening the functioning of the UGC framework is therefore essential to fulfilling the constitutional promise of equality and dignity in higher education.

Kerala polls ignore a Gulf lifeline at risk

Kullu Thamam hides a looming disruption to remittances and livelihoods

STATE OF PLAY

Rejimon Kuttappan



As Kerala heads to the polls on April 9, a glaring paradox looms over the State. This is a land defined by migration. For generations, lakhs of Keralite families have built their homes, hopes, and futures on the salaries earned by sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers in the Gulf. The remittance economy is not a side story in Kerala's development; it is the story.

Lifeline under threat

Today, that same lifeline is under threat. Since late February, the escalating Iran-U.S.-Israel conflict has turned Gulf airspace into a dangerous theatre of missiles, drones, and interceptors. Airports in Dubai have been hit. Missile debris has landed in residential areas of Manama. Air routes have been suspended, forcing thousands of Indians into exhausting overland journeys through Saudi Arabia.

Indian workers have reported watching drone strikes from their apartment windows. Constant safety alerts and sirens restrict their movements. Many have been forced to stop work without clarity on whether the leave is paid or unpaid. Companies are openly warning workers that salaries will be delayed, halved, or withheld until the crisis ends. Recently hired workers are also being terminated.

Over 2.2 million Keralites live and work in the Gulf. Yet this war is almost absent from the election campaign. Neither the Communist-led Left Democratic Front nor the Congress-led United Democratic Front has issued any serious policy statement on the crisis.

Kerala's political class continues to treat the Gulf as Delhi's foreign policy matter, even though it is the most critical domestic issue for the State.

Why has this life-and-death crisis failed to become a poll issue? The answer lies in two uncomfortable truths.

First, a powerful narrative of false reassurance has been carefully built. In the Gulf, Indian businessmen with vested interests, along with large sections of the Kerala media, keep repeating the phrase *Kullu Thamam* (All is well), Gulf governments 'announcing' investments, businessmen saying no panic, and Kerala media outlets reliant on Gulf advertising downplay the crisis, focusing on safety systems while ignoring wage cuts, food prices, and growing fear.

But *Kullu Thamam* is a dangerous half-truth. Small business owners are struggling to pay wages, parents are worried about children's education, and low-paid workers are facing sharply higher prices for Indian vegetables due to disrupted supply routes.

Illusion of calm

Second, currently, most families continue to receive their monthly remittances. As long as the cash flows, the distant war feels like someone else's problem. But this calm is deceptive and dangerously so.

In 2023-24, Kerala received \$23.4 billion in inward remit-

tances, the second-highest among Indian States after Maharashtra. Yet the real story lies in how deeply these inflows sustain the State. Remittances account for a staggering 17.1% of Kerala's GDP, the highest share among major Indian States and more than three times Maharashtra's 5%. By comparison, the national average stands at just around 3%.

This is not just another economic statistic. It means that nearly one-fifth of Kerala's entire economy is directly powered by money sent from the Gulf. Entire towns and villages, real estate booms, gold sales, educational institutions, and daily consumption all float on these remittances. When that lifeline falters, the impact will not be gradual. It will be swift and brutal.

The real shock is coming. When companies invoke force majeure clauses, when construction projects stall, when visas renewals freeze, and recruitment stops, the impact will reach Kerala within weeks. If the conflict drags on, and all signs suggest it will, April and subsequent months will bring severe uncertainty.

When that moment arrives, the illusion of *Kullu Thamam* will collapse. Kerala's political leaders will realise too late that the State's biggest economic crisis was unfolding in plain sight while they were busy with seat-sharing and personal attacks.

The Keralites in the Gulf are not just a diaspora to be celebrated at NRK events and airport welcomes. They are the backbone of Kerala's economy. Their crisis is Kerala's crisis. This election is the time to acknowledge that reality, before it is too late.

Rejimon Kuttappan is a labour migrant rights expert

Amid welfare pitch, Kerala ranks highest in most indicators

The growing economy has outperformed other States in social, educational, and health parameters

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Nitika Francis

Kerala is set to hold its Legislative Assembly elections on April 9, and the results will be announced on May 3. The stage is set for a tight competition between the incumbent Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), with the NDA trying to make inroads into the State's Assembly constituencies this year.

The three competing political fronts have released election manifestos which bet heavily on welfare via pensions. An analysis of key indicators shows that Kerala fares better than most in several indicators spanning health, economy, and education.

Table 1 shows Kerala's ranking among other States in select economic indicators and its actual value as per the latest year. Kerala has demonstrated solid economic growth over the past decade, and ranked seventh among 23 States in per capita net State domestic product.

Data shows that economic development permeates Kerala's rural population as well. The average daily wage rate in the State is ₹868, the highest among all States.

The State also ranks second among others in terms of Human Development Index (HDI), which takes health, education, and standard of living into account.

Table 2 shows Kerala's rank across various health indicators. As per data from the National Family Health Survey for 2021-22, Kerala recorded an Infant Mortality Rate of 4.4, the lowest in India. The nationwide average was nearly eight times this figure, 35.2. Kerala also recorded the lowest Maternal Mortality Ratio in the country.

have access to hygienic methods of menstrual protection. When it comes to children, only about 78% of Kerala's child population have received all basic vaccinations, ranking 12th out of 29 States. However, it has the second-lowest share of children aged 0-5 years whose growth is stunted, closely following Sikkim.

Kerala is also a frontrunner when it comes to education-related indicators (Table 3). The State ranks among the top-performing States for the Adjusted Net Enrolment Rate (ANER) in elementary education (%). This indicator, as per the World Bank, refers to the number of pupils of the school-age group for primary education, enrolled either in primary or secondary education as a share of the total population in that age group.

Similarly, the State's Gross enrolment ratio in higher secondary is higher than the all-India average of 57.6%. It is one of the top three States for this indicator. GER refers to total enrolment in a particular level of school education, regardless of age, as a share of the population of the official age group for a given level of school education.

With a ratio of 1.44, the State ranks first among 29 States on the Gender Parity Index in education (GPI). The indicator is the ratio of female to male students enrolled at a specific level of education.

The State is among the top-performing States for infrastructure indicators (Table 4). As per data, the share of urban households living in kachha houses in the State is null, less than the country's average of 0.9%. It ranks second among 28 States with respect to internet telephony in rural areas.

But Kerala lagged a little behind on environment-related indicators. The State was among the top 10 States that generated high amounts of plastic waste per thousand population. It was also one of the top nine States in terms of per capita fossil fuel consumption. (With inputs from *Devyanshi Bihani*)

Report card

The data for the tables were sourced from the National Family Health Survey (2021-22) and the NITI Aayog SDG India Index (2023-24)

TABLE 1: Kerala's values and ranks in terms of Human Development Index and economic indicators

Indicator	Kerala's value	Kerala's rank	India average	Top States/U.T.s
Human Development Index (2023)	0.86	2 out of 29	0.732	Goa (0.862), Kerala (0.86), Delhi (0.837)
Per Capita net domestic product (₹)	3,08,338	7 out of 23	2,05,324	Delhi (4,93,024), Telangana (3,87,623), Karnataka (3,80,906)
Average daily wage rates in rural areas (₹)	868.7	1 out of 18	398	Kerala (868.7), T.N. (573.2), Himachal Pradesh (516)

TABLE 2: Kerala's values and ranks across various indicators related to health

Indicator	Kerala's value	Kerala's rank (out of 29)	India average	Top States/U.T.s
Share of women aged 15-19 who have begun childbearing (%)	2.4%	1	6.8%	Uttarakhand (2.4%), Kerala (2.4%), Goa (2.7%)
Infant mortality rate	4.4	1	35.2	Kerala (4.4), Goa (5.6), Sikkim (11.2)
Share of population with unimproved sanitation facility (%)	0.2%	2	19.3%	Mizoram (0.1%), Kerala (0.2%), Sikkim (0.3%)
Share of children aged 0-5 years whose growth is stunted (%)	23%	2	36%	Sikkim (22%), Kerala (23%), Manipur (23%)
Share of children with all basic vaccinations	78%	12	77%	Odisha (91%), T.N. (89%), H.P. (89%)
Women using a hygienic method of menstrual protection (%)	93.3%	6	77.6%	T.N. (98.4%), Delhi (97.1%), Goa (96.8%)
Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 1,00,000 live births)	19	1	97	Kerala (19), Maharashtra (33), Telangana (43)
Households with at least one member covered by a health scheme (%)	57.8%	10	41%	Rajasthan (87.8%), A.P. (80.2%), Goa (73.1%)

TABLE 3: Kerala's values and ranks across various indicators related to education

Indicator	Kerala's value	Kerala's rank (out of 29)	India average	Top States/U.T.s
Share of women (aged 15-49) who have done no schooling (%)	0.8%	1	22.6%	Kerala (0.8%), Mizoram (5.3%), Goa (5.5%)
Share of men (aged 15-49) who have done no schooling (%)	2.3%	1	10.7%	Kerala (2.3%), Goa (3.2%), Mizoram (3.4%)
Drop out rate (%)	5.5%	6	12.6%	Manipur (1.3), H.P. (1.5), T.N. (4.5)
Adjusted Net Enrolment Rate (ANER) in elementary education (%)	100%	1	96.5%	Multiple States (100%)
Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher secondary (%)	85%	3	57.6%	Delhi (94.9%), H.P. (94.1%), Kerala (85%)
Gender Parity Index (GPI) for higher education	1.44	1	N/A	Kerala (1.44), H.P. (1.33), Nagaland (1.28)

TABLE 4: Kerala's values and ranks across various indicators related to environment and infrastructure

Indicator	Kerala's value	Kerala's rank	India average	Top States/U.T.s
Plastic waste generated per 1,000 population (tonnes/annum)	3.39	10 out of 23	3.04	Goa (18.93), Delhi (16.9), Telangana (12.57)
Per capita fossil fuel consumption (in kg.)	191.61	9 out of 21	166.43	Haryana (341.95), Gujarat (339.23), Himachal Pradesh (271.79)
Percentage of urban households living in kachha houses (%)	0%	1 out of 29	0.9%	Kerala (0%), Haryana (0.2%), Maharashtra (0.2%)
Internet subscribers per 100 population in rural areas	160.19	2 out of 28	38.33	Goa (174.98), Kerala (160.19), Sikkim (104.35)

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 8, 1976

"City within city" in Government Estate

Madras, April 7: The Madras Metropolitan Development Authority is likely to take up special projects like development of a city centre in the Government Estate on Anna Salai and a commercial centre abutting the Quaide Millat College for women.

Draft proposals for these areas are ready and are being forwarded to the Tamil Nadu Government for its consideration.

It is proposed to develop the area inside Government Estate (27 hectares) in a big way as a shopping and office complex.

At present, this location is cluttered by miscellaneous uses and lends itself for redevelopment.

There will be business and commercial offices facing Anna Salai and Wallajah Road with a city centre complex built around Rajaji Hall and Kalaivan Arangam. Residential accommodation will also be provided to make this area a "city within a city". Details are being worked out.

It is proposed to prohibit location of cinemas and other similar uses which generate peak pedestrian flows three or four times a day on the western side of the road. Since the city centre will be coming up, the planners feel that it is necessary to ensure a very high level of architectural standard. Not only the facade of the buildings require to be controlled but also the bulk and shape of the buildings in the area need to be regulated.

Being a shopping centre it is proposed to permit arcaded verandahs of approved design which would be three metres wide within the front area.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 8, 1926

Baron Rothschild fined

A special correspondent to "The Times of India" cables from Naples:

Baron Maurice de Rothschild, it is stated, has been fined 370,000 lire (about £3,700) and Etторе Pisanì and Alfredo Campanelli, two commission men, have been fined 120,000 lire (about £1,200) each for violating the law prohibiting the export of works of art without permission.

It is stated that in conjunction, they exported the famous statue "Mother of Venus."

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Crops damaged due to unseasonal rains in Maharashtra

2.05 in lakh hectares. Unseasonal rains and hailstorms have damaged crops on more than 2.05 lakh hectares of land in Maharashtra, officials from the agriculture department said on Tuesday. According to preliminary estimates, crops on 1.22 lakh hectares were damaged in the second half of March, and 82,704 hectares in early April. PTI

Flights cancelled by Indian carriers to West Asia since war began

10,000 Over 10,000 flights by Indian carriers to West Asia have been cancelled since the war broke out in the region, a senior civil aviation ministry official said on Tuesday. Flights to West Asia by Indian carriers have come down to around 80-90, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Civil Aviation, Asangba Chuba Ao, said. PTI

U.K.'s cap on interest rates for student loans from September 2026

6 in per cent. Britain said on Tuesday that it would cap interest rates on millions of student loans at 6 per cent from September 2026, saying conflict in West Asia risked pushing up inflation and sharply increasing borrowing cost. The student loan system in England and Wales has drawn criticism and Prime Minister Keir Starmer had said that he would look at ways to make it fairer. REUTERS

Number of weeks for which TRP reporting has been withheld

4 The government has extended for four weeks its order to withhold the reporting of Television Rating Points (TRPs) for TV news channels to "curb display of sensationalism and speculative content" amidst the West Asia conflict. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had on March 6 issued the first directive to Broadcast Audience Research Council to withhold reporting of the TRPs. PTI

The share of women in the electoral roll of Assam

49.98 in per cent. Women nearly equal their male counterparts in the electoral rolls of Assam and outnumber them in 16 out of the 35 districts, but they constitute a mere 59 out of the 722 candidates in the fray for the Assembly polls. Women outnumber men in campaign rallies and meetings. PTI

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On India's updated climate pledges

India's announcement of its revised Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement prompts scrutiny of its existing climate mitigation actions and the need to factor in the country's developmental costs alongside those of meeting its climate commitments

FULL CONTEXT

T. Jayaraman

India's announcement of its revised Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement — the term applied to the mitigation and other climate action targets that countries voluntarily commit to under the agreement — represents a considered step forward when India's energy and development policies are encountering serious headwinds. It is clear that the government has opted for continuity and incremental advance with respect to India's earlier NDCs. It is also clearly confident that its commitments will nevertheless be more than adequate in relation to its equitable share of global climate action, in keeping with climate justice and within its expected commitments as a developing nation.

Three climate goals

As the press communique after the Cabinet approval of the updated NDCs noted, there are three specific enhancements that have been committed. The first is an increase in the reduction of emissions intensity of its GDP, from 45% below 2005 levels by 2030 to 47% below 2005 levels by 2035. The second is ensuring that 60% of installed capacity for power generation is from non-fossil fuel sources, while the third is the enhancement of forest and tree cover carbon sinks to 3.5 - 4 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent above 2005 levels.

India's climate policies are best understood in the context of its structural constraints as a lower middle income developing country, that determine its available choices for climate action. Over the last three decades, these constraints have not substantially changed, which is also why India continues to insist on the relevance of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). But apart from these, given the structure of the Paris Agreement that requires renewed and enhanced commitments to climate mitigation every five years, short-term considerations have also begun to have a considerable weight in the formulation of the NDCs. The rapid deterioration of the global environment for climate action over the last year has undoubtedly brought this issue to the fore.

Enthusiasm for climate action

Structural constraints have not, however, dampened enthusiasm for climate action in India, both at the level of the Centre and the State governments. There is a considerable range of activities designed to set India on the path to low-carbon development, drawing significant public and private sector efforts and resources, including electric vehicles, enhancement of energy efficiency, promotion and deployment of non-fossil fuel sources of electricity generation, new technologies such as green hydrogen and more recently, the active promotion of carbon capture and storage efforts.

But given India's developmental levels today, it is clearly premature for India to convert all such efforts into the significantly more onerous and accountable commitments that are the NDCs, the progress towards which is to be reported every two years in the Biennial Transparency Report (BTR) to the UNFCCC.

A section of global and domestic public opinion has raised the issue of the



A drone view of solar panels and the NTPC (National Thermal Power Corporation) power plant in Solapur, Maharashtra. REUTERS

adequacy of India's NDCs relative to a global temperature goal of 1.5 degree warming above pre-industrial levels (the more ambitious part of the Paris Agreement's goals). Some have downplayed the new targets, one commentator going so far as to call it "a walk in the park". Others call for increased generation from renewables as the metric and not installed capacity. Even some sections of opinion that have welcomed the NDCs, appear nevertheless to be uncertain on whether these new commitments are genuinely the best that India can make at this time.

The cost of going green

All the above variants of the "India can (must) do more argument" ignore some critical realities that contextualise India's climate actions. Given that India's natural energy source is overwhelmingly coal, it is inaccurate to view improvements in emissions efficiency of GDP and the corresponding bending of its emissions trajectory as a "natural" corollary of India's growth story. Priority to electricity from renewable sources comes with significant costs, including backing down readily available and often cheaper or comparably priced coal-based thermal power, further tilting a playing field that privileges renewable energy to sustain our climate commitments.

Renewable energy (RE) projects including utility scale battery storage have begun to make their appearance in India's power sector. But the corresponding scaling up of India's battery storage capacity, required for ensuring the stability of generation even from the proposed 2030 RE targets will run into a few trillion rupees at least. Part of such expansion would have to be funded by the government, deploying resources that would have been utilised in other sectors. At the very least, the deployment of such large-scale battery systems is not immediately feasible. The most globally

widespread option of energy storage in reverse pumped hydropower systems, has very limited scope in India at present. Additionally, environmental concerns, and water needs for competing uses such as irrigation, as well as the regulatory challenges faced by all large hydro projects are likely to preclude any rapid expansion.

Optimistic RE projections, not only in India but even globally, have run into the lack of transmission capacity and the challenges of grid balancing, with the associated costs often omitted when referring to the cost-effectiveness of RE power.

Since, for India, coal is the mainstay of power generation when solar and wind cease, unlike the large-scale gas and hydro available elsewhere, the full utilisation of the available RE capacity will inevitably have to be "curtailed", while adding to the operation and maintenance costs for thermal power operated in this cyclical fashion. These add further to the true cost that India bears for the pursuit of its climate commitments.

Improving energy efficiency in other sectors is also being pursued vigorously, including the introduction of mandatory emissions intensity targets in key industries. The early ramp up of electric vehicles, while the jump from BSIV to BSVI vehicle emissions standards was just coming into place, was another leap-frog moment, whose cost to the economy must not be underestimated. Since the 26th Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework on Climate Change at Glasgow, every Central government budget has seen a range of initiatives and resource commitment across various aspects of climate mitigation. Indeed, a major knowledge gap today is that while future costs of increased mitigation action are routinely calculated, the cost burden attached to India's mitigation initiatives undertaken so far, in the absence of any significant climate finance, have yet to be

estimated in a reliable manner.

Accounting for India's developmental future

At a more over-arching level, India's mitigation challenge cannot be based on a simple extrapolation of the current structural features and trends of its economy.

India's developmental future needs room for further large-scale growth in manufacturing and industry, expansion in the provision of goods and services to its population at adequate levels beyond the minimum, and an urban transition that has only just begun. In this context, the "India can do more" arguments that rely on such extrapolation of economic trends and the persistence of current structural features, miss the urgent need to hedge India's developmental future.

India cannot commit its NDCs to preserving the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels, when the goal is rapidly slipping out of reach. This a trend that India cannot reverse, given that its per capita emissions are a third of the global average. Even otherwise, under the voluntary emissions reduction NDCs of the Paris Agreement, the benefits of India's reduction in emissions below any business-as-usual baseline, are distributed primarily to the big emitters globally, due to their inadequate efforts, and proportionately less to India, especially when the largest historical emitter has walked out of all climate treaties and seeks to dismantle climate action both at home and abroad.

India's climate commitments have to be strategic and circumspect, while its NDCs are formulated in informed self-awareness of its, to use the language of the Paris Agreement, "national circumstances." *(T. Jayaraman is with the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru. Views expressed are personal.)*

THE GIST

India's climate policies are best understood in the context of its structural constraints as a lower middle-income developing country, which shape its choices for climate action.

The country has implemented several decarbonisation initiatives, including electric vehicles, deployment of non-fossil fuel power sources, and technologies such as green hydrogen.

However, India needs room for further large-scale growth in manufacturing and industry, which must be factored in alongside the future costs of its climate commitments.

KEYWORD



United Nations peacekeepers with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon drive past firefighters clearing the road at the site of an overnight Israeli airstrike in the area of Naqoura in southern Lebanon on March 27. AFP

Talking peace: why mediation still matters in a world at war

With the war in West Asia in its second month, discussions on mediation have gained prominence. History is replete with instances of mediation, with individuals and states helping conflicting parties reach agreement, alongside the development of international conventions

Dhananjay Tripathi
Tabshir Shams

Conflict resolution is an integral component of international relations, both in the academic and general sense. With the war in West Asia entering its second month, discussions around mediation have gained prominence. A significant section of the international community is keen on bringing a resolution to end this war. Although the possibility of mediation in the Iran conflict is shrouded in ambiguity, the debate intensified following reports suggesting a potential role for Pakistan. Without delving into the specifics of Pakistan's involvement, which still remain unclear, it is more useful to examine what mediation is and why it continues to be a relevant and effective tool for conflict resolution.

Understanding mediation
Mediation has deep historical roots, with one of the earliest recorded instances dating back nearly 4000 years, when the Sumerian king Mesilim mediated a dispute between the city-states of Lagash and Umma. Despite its long history, mediation remains a complex process, and scholars have offered diverse perspectives on its dynamics. One of the most influential contributions is by Jacob Berchovitch, who developed the Contingency Model of mediation. Based on empirical research, he argued that the success of mediation depends on multiple factors, like the nature of the parties, the characteristics of the dispute, and the role and capabilities of the mediator. He emphasised that effective mediators must possess credibility as well as personal attributes such as communication skills, intelligence, and patience.

Another major contribution is by I. William Zartman, who introduced the 'theory of Ripeness'. According to Zartman, mediation becomes effective only when a conflict is 'ripe' for

resolution, particularly when parties face a 'Mutually Hurting Stalemate'. The Lancaster House Agreement (1979), which led to Zimbabwe's independence, illustrates this dynamic, as negotiations occurred when all parties had reached such a stalemate. Additionally, the concept of biased mediation challenges the assumption of neutrality. It suggests that mediators can be effective precisely because of their power and leverage, enabling them to offer incentives or exert pressure on conflicting parties to reach an agreement.

Legal position on mediation
The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which led to the adoption of the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes, marked a significant step in the development of mediation as a diplomatic practice. They promoted the peaceful resolution of conflicts by encouraging the use of mediation, good offices, and arbitration, and by legitimising third-party involvement in disputes. The conventions also established the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), providing an institutional mechanism for arbitration. While they did not fully codify mediation as binding international law, they laid the normative and institutional groundwork that later influenced the dispute resolution frameworks of the League of Nations and the United Nations.

The United Nations framework provides important principles and guidance for mediation, particularly through the UN Charter, which emphasises the peaceful settlement of disputes, and through various resolutions supporting mediation practices. Chapter VI of the UN Charter provides the framework for the peaceful settlement of disputes. Article 33 explicitly calls upon parties to resolve disputes through peaceful means such as negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, or other agreed methods. The United Nations has further

strengthened the role of mediation through General Assembly Resolution 65/283 (2011), which emphasises its importance in conflict prevention and resolution and calls for enhanced mediation capacity. This was complemented by the UN Guidance for Effective Mediation (2012), which outlines key principles, including preparedness, consent, impartiality, inclusivity, national ownership, coordination, and the need for implementable agreements. In practice, the UN and its affiliated actors have facilitated numerous mediation efforts across conflicts worldwide. Additionally, since 1948, the UN has undertaken over 70 peacekeeping missions, with around a dozen active operations in recent years, often working alongside mediation initiatives to maintain international peace and security.

Instances of mediation
There are several good examples of individuals and states playing an important role in mediation; however, success relates to their stature. For instance, Kofi Annan's mediation in Kenya in 2008 helped prevent further instability and led to a power-sharing agreement. Mediation at times, opens channels of communication that are often absent during conflict, as seen in Norway's role in facilitating the Oslo backchannel negotiations between Israel and Palestine.

Mediation also creates political space for negotiation, witnessed in the Camp David Accords (1978), where the U.S. succeeded in bringing Egypt and Israel together, despite deep hostility. It can reshape perceptions of conflict, as in the Colombian Peace Process (2016), where political solutions gained prominence over military approaches.

Furthermore, mediation helps manage time and information, as evidenced by the tightly controlled U.S.-led negotiations of the Dayton Agreement (1995) in Bosnia. Mediation also relates to trust between

parties, as demonstrated in the Good Friday Agreement (1998), mediated by former U.S. senator George Mitchell. Finally, mediation provides opportunities for face-saving, allowing conflicting parties to enter negotiations without appearing weak, which is often critical for successful conflict resolution.

On the West Asian crisis
Drawing on the theoretical insights of Berchovitch and Zartman, it can be argued that while media reports suggest that Islamabad may serve as a venue for dialogue between the U.S. and Iran, this should not be interpreted as Pakistan playing the sole mediatory role. Mediation processes in international conflicts are often multi-layered, involving several actors and countries like Turkey and Egypt are also reportedly engaged in facilitating dialogue.

Moreover, Pakistan's close strategic ties with the United States may limit its credibility as a neutral mediator in the eyes of Iran. Instead, Iran is likely to prefer a relatively more independent and influential actor. In this context, China emerges as a strong choice for Iran. As a major importer of Iranian oil and a country with significant economic investments in Iran, China holds considerable leverage. It also facilitated the 2023 rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, that adds to its credibility as a mediator. Additionally, China's consistent anti-war stance and its broader economic and political influence in international affairs, position it as a capable and acceptable intermediary. An early resolution of the conflict is desirable. However, all will depend on the strategic calculation of the U.S. and Iran and their willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue.

(Dhananjay Tripathi is an Associate Professor, and Tabshir Shams is pursuing an MA, Faculty of International Relations, South Asian University, New Delhi.)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of the expression "Hobson's choice"? (S. Balasubrahmanian, Chennai)

Thomas Hobson (1544-1633) owned a stable in Cambridge, England. He used to rent horses to people who required them. Hobson was a very methodical man. He insisted that all his horses be exercised in regular rotation. When he rented a horse to someone, he made sure that the same horse wasn't rented out again before the others had done their job. When a horse that had been rented was returned to him, it was placed at the back of the line. This was Hobson's way of ensuring that all horses did an equal amount of work. The horse that was next in line to be rented out was placed near the stable door. When a customer came to hire a horse, he was asked to take the horse nearest the stable door. If the customer was not satisfied with the horse and wanted another one, he was told that he could either take the horse that had been offered to him or none at all. In other words, the person who wanted to rent a horse had no choice at all. And that's what the expression "Hobson's choice" means: no choice at all. You can take what you are offered or nothing at all. Here are a few examples:

Venkatesh didn't really want to stay in that particular hotel, but it was a case of Hobson's choice. All the other hotels were full.

If you want a cream coloured shirt, I am afraid it's Hobson's choice. We have only one at the moment.

Is it O.K. to say, "I, along with them, am going to school"? (S. Balaji, Parangi Pettai, T.N.)

The usual rule is when phrases/clauses are introduced by constructions like "as well as", "along with", or "in addition to", the verb that follows is determined by the noun that precedes these constructions. If the noun that precedes them is singular, then the verb is singular too. In other words, such constructions do not function like "and". Here are a few examples:

Murali, as well as his three sisters, is studying at Geethanjali. (Murali is studying at Geethanjali.)

The children, in addition to their father, are watching the movie. (The children are watching the movie.)

So, it is O.K. to say, "I, along with my brothers, am going to school".

What is the meaning of "body language"? (A. Umar, Kadayannallur, T.N.)

Did our cricket players in Australia look happy? They looked a pretty dejected lot, didn't they? How did you know they were dejected? Their shoulders drooped, they walked rather slowly, there was no smile on their faces.... You get the point, don't you? That's what body language is. It's a way of showing your emotions or feelings to other people through your body.

Is it O.K. to qualify the word "integrity" with words like "highest"? (P. Unnikrishnan, Udyogamandal)

Yes, it is. Here are some examples from dictionaries:

My husband was a man of the highest integrity. (Collins Cobuild).
Published in *The Hindu* on March 21, 2000

THE DAILY QUIZ

April 7 marked the commemoration of the genocide that occurred in Rwanda in 1994. Here is a quiz on the events leading to that grim chapter in the country's history

Mohammed Hidhayat

QUESTION 1
Name the three ethnic groups in the East African country.

QUESTION 2
These groups share a common ethno-linguistic background. What language family do they belong to?

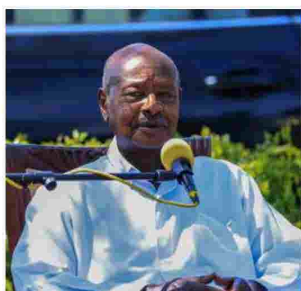
QUESTION 3
Before independence, Rwanda (ruled by a Tutsi monarchy) was colonised by which two European powers, both of whom formalised ethnic divisions?

QUESTION 4
The long-standing tension between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi escalated into a civil war in 1990. Which Tutsi rebel group

formed by exiles in Uganda emerged victorious? (Hint: It has been the de facto ruling party since 1994)

QUESTION 5
Media was used to sow future seeds of violence in the final years of the internal war. State-owned _____ provided initial support to Radio RTLM, a private Hutu-owned station, which spread hate propaganda against the Tutsis, characterising them as subhuman. Fill in the blank with the name of the radio station.

QUESTION 6
An assassination on April 6 set off the genocide. Hutu extremists blamed Tutsi rebels (a claim still disputed) and launched a coordinated campaign of violence. Identify the designations of the two leaders killed in the plane attack.



Visual Question: Many exiled Tutsis had served in the guerrilla force, National Resistance Army, that overthrew Uganda's government in 1986. Name the Ugandan leader who has remained in power since then. AFP

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Name of the campaign for the World Health day in 2025. **Ans: Healthy beginnings, hopeful futures**

2. Name of the summit being held in Lyon from April 5 to 7, 2026. **Ans: One Health summit**

3. The theme of the Global Forum of WHO Collaborating Centres, which being held from April 7 to 9, 2026. **Ans: Collaborating for a Healthier Future**

4. The theme for this year's World Health Day. **Ans: Together for health; Stand with science**

5. The WHO Western Pacific Regional Office (WPRO) developed and publish the regional guidance document *Responding to outbreaks of antimicrobial-resistant pathogens in healthcare facilities: guidance for the Western Pacific Region*, in collaboration with this institute. **Ans: Doherty Institute at the University of Melbourne**
Visual: This institute has been supporting WHO's work on obesity prevention, nutrition, and physical activity, and since this year. **Ans: Leibniz Institute for Prevention Research and Epidemiology, since 2016**
Early birds: Tamal Biswas | Arun Kumar Singh | Ambarin Aslam | Jinsia Fathima | Abhay Krishnan

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

Word of the day

Furtive:

marked by quiet, caution and secrecy

Synonyms: sneaky, stealthy, surreptitious

Usage: He slipped a furtive look at the document on the table.

Pronunciation: https://newst7.live/mh5BOX/furtive

International Phonetic Alphabet: /fɜːtɪv/

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

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY -
RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

EC failed Bengal voters, SC should look again

IN SEPTEMBER last year, when the Election Commission of India published the electoral roll for Bihar after a contentious exercise, apprehensions of mass disenfranchisement were put to rest. Nudged by the Supreme Court, the poll body released a list in which the delists were largely attributable to death, migration, and duplication. The process raised hopes that the EC had learnt its lessons — that future Special Intensive Revisions would be routine exercises in electoral hygiene. That hope has been belied in West Bengal. What has unfolded over the past three-and-a-half months is a troubling story of mass deletions, procedural opacity, and a system that, flying in the face of due process, shifted the burden of proof onto the very citizens it is meant to enfranchise. The numbers are stark. When the SIR began in December, West Bengal had 766 crore registered voters. The roll frozen on Monday lists only 67.7 crore — a fall of 11.62 per cent. Of the more than 60 lakh whose eligibility was under adjudication since February, as many as 27.6,393 — more than 45 per cent — will have no say in the Assembly elections. Most of them had fulfilled the documentation requirement. Democracy rests on the idea that every citizen has an equal right to choose their representatives. That principle has been compromised.

Yes, these 27 lakh citizens have a right to appeal. But the appellate process is cumbersome when elections are imminent. The window for redressal of the machinery too overwhelmed, and as this newspaper has reported, people have been left in the lurch by appellate agencies. It was here that the SC's intervention was needed — especially on the foundational question of inclusion. The Court did engage. It allowed tribunals to accept fresh documents. But its Monday decision is disappointing. Its reasoning — "Appellate authorities will formulate a fair procedure... That may take a month, that may take even 60 days. We cannot, on that contemplation, allow some people because they were earlier mapped" — gives the EC the benefit of the doubt. It is, in effect, the Court's virtual acceptance of disenfranchisement in this electoral cycle.

This is a departure from the Court's own Bihar standard, where it pushed the Commission towards transparency, compelling it to own and justify its deletions. In Bengal, that sustained scrutiny was absent when it mattered most. The EC has a storied record of reaching out to every voter, of erring on the side of inclusion. In West Bengal, with a process skewed against the voter and framed by a shrill rhetoric of disenfranchisement, lakhs were disenfranchised. Every valid voter deleted from the roll, everyone who now has to navigate the intimidating machinery of redressal, is a blot on the poll panel's record. The SC has always been the last line of defence for the citizen's franchise. That role is not diminished by a frozen roll or an electoral calendar. The Court needs to look again, not to reopen a process, but to ensure that no eligible citizen loses her vote because of institutional failure.

A conviction, a reckoning in Tamil Nadu

AMONG THE several tragedies and tales of suffering during the pandemic years, the killing of P Jayaraj and his son Benicks in police custody in Sattankulam, Tamil Nadu, in June 2020, stood out. Their deaths were not a result of medical negligence, but of a culture of impunity that has been a stain on the state's police and the country's criminal justice system as a whole. Six years on, the conviction of nine police officers for the murders by a Madurai court is welcome and will, hopefully, provide a measure of closure to the victims' families. It should also be the beginning of a deeper reckoning. Jayaraj was picked up outside his shop for allegedly violating Covid curfew rules (the CBI later found this charge to be false). Benicks went to inquire about his father a day later, and he, too, was detained. Both were severely tortured and sent back to their in-laws. The case, handed over to the CBI, became a test for the justice system vis-à-vis police impunity. Tamil Nadu accounts for the highest number of custodial deaths (judicial and police custody) among the southern states (490 between 2016 and 2022). Several other states, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan, also have an inglorious record in this respect. Jayaraj and Benicks' deaths, abhorrent in themselves, are a particularly chilling example of a rot that runs deep.

The Constitution, laws and several committee reports address the rights of the individual and the importance of due process. The rights under Article 22 — an arrested person must be informed of their legal crime, presented before a magistrate and provided with legal counsel — were expanded by the Supreme Court in *D.K. Basu v State of West Bengal* (1997). It laid down mandatory procedures to prevent custodial torture. Judicial magistrates are the first and arguably the most important line of defence. The National Human Rights Commission and state human rights commissions can also pick up the baton. In Sattankulam killings, as with many others, these guardrails fell short. This chasm between the best intentions and rules and the reality of the police station must be bridged. That, in the long run, can turn a policing system into one that serves the cause of justice.

A mark on speed gun is only the beginning

ASHOK SHARMA'S first training ground was a corridor outside his house in Rampura, 80 kilometres from Jaipur. He only wanted to hit his elder brother, Akshay, hard. When he got the ball in school cricket, batsmen hit a goal post. Last weekend, Sharma, 23, clocked 154.2 kph for the Gujarat Titans against the Rajasthan Royals. Like in every IPL season, a new name got attached to a new number on the speed gun. Not far back, there were a couple of tearaways — Delhi's Manoj Yadav and RK's Umran Malik — with explosive bursts to the crease. They could make the cricket ball fly.

Sharma is not an unusual story in Indian cricket. Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammad Shami, and Mohammad Siraj inspire youngsters to pursue the most risky, back-breaking career choice. The talent is emerging from places that would struggle to find mention in cricket's traditional power map. Bowlers from cricket's outposts aren't merely bowling fast; they are crossing the 150 kph barrier. Yadav had breached the 150 kph mark, so did Malik. But they learnt that frightening pace doesn't guarantee a regular place even in IPL sides. Ashok Sharma's brother Akshay, who gave up his career so his brother could have one, understands this. "I don't want my brother to be a one-season wonder boy," he says. The corridor in Rampura led to IPL's Ahmedabad franchise. Whether it leads to the India jersey depends on what Sharma does after the world stops tracking his speed and starts counting his wickets.

In Delhi's support for Arab Gulf, a return of the Bombay school of thought



RAJA MANDALA
C RAJA MOHAN

WHETHER THE Iran war escalates into a more devastating confrontation or cools into a diplomatic mode this week, one fact is now beyond dispute: The Gulf has moved decisively to the very top of India's strategic priorities. Geography alone should have made this happen long ago. The Gulf is not a distant theatre; it is India's immediate neighbourhood, separated only by a narrow stretch of water and tied to the Subcontinent through deep economic, social, and security ties. India's approach to the current war suggests that Delhi will no longer treat the Gulf as a peripheral region.

The Gulf's new centrality also revives an older debate in modern India's strategic imagination — the contest between the so-called "Bombay School" and "Ludhiana School". The terms may sound strange to contemporary ears, but they capture two enduring ways of thinking about India's geopolitics.

The story begins in the late 18th century, when the British Raj, newly ascendant in the Subcontinent, confronted a dramatic external shock: Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798. His ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East exposed the vulnerability of the Indian empire's western approaches. The result was

the birth of the "Great Game", the prolonged contest between Britain and its European rivals for influence across the territorial arc from the Levant to the Hindu Kush. Out of this crucible emerged two distinct strategic visions. Both saw the need for defending India well beyond its territorial borders. They diverged on questions of geographic focus and policy instruments.

The Bombay School, shaped by the commercial dynamism of the emerging Parsi and Gujarati capitalists operating in the space created by the empire in western India and the Arabian Sea, saw India's security beginning at sea. Its leading figures — John Malcolm and Mountstuart Elphinstone — viewed Persia and Arabia as the natural outer ring of India's defence.

Their instincts were outward-looking and maritime. Malcolm's early 19th-century missions to Tehran sought to anchor Persia in a British-Indian orbit through diplomacy and trade. Elphinstone, as governor of Bombay, expanded the East India Company's naval presence in the Persian Gulf and concluded security arrangements with the Arab coastal principalities — the entities that would later become the Trucial States. For the Bombay School, the key to India's security lay in controlling sea lanes, shaping littoral politics, and projecting influence across the Gulf. Ports, commerce, and naval power were its natural instruments.

The Ludhiana School — where the East India Company agents were located before gaining full control of the Punjab — was continental in orientation. Figures such as Henry Lawrence, John Lawrence, and Claude Wade operated in a world shaped by tribal politics, feudal forces, and shifting alliances in the effort to prevent

The Bombay School saw India's security beginning at sea. Its leading figures — John Malcolm and Mountstuart Elphinstone — viewed Persia and Arabia as the natural outer ring of India's defence

European penetration through Central Asia and Afghanistan. For them, Afghanistan was the lynchpin. The defence of India required forward fortifications, tribal militias, and political manipulation in the highlands beyond the Indus.

The First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42) was the decisive collision between these two schools. The Ludhiana logic proved resilient. As the Raj consolidated the Punjab and fretted about Russian expansion, the Ludhiana School entrenched itself.

After 1947, Pakistan inherited this tradition. Its quest for "strategic depth", the search for a protectorate in Afghanistan, its reliance on tribal proxies, and its entanglement with extremist forces all flowed from the Ludhiana worldview. Rawalpindi's neglect of Karachi — once a vital node of the Bombay Presidency's maritime universe — reflected the same landlocked worldview. It was only China's rise and its maritime ambitions that put Pakistan's coastline back on the strategic map.

Independent India, too, drifted toward the Ludhiana mindset. Partition created new land borders with Pakistan that had to be defended. Delhi's socialist turn diminished the role of trade, ports, and maritime strategy. The three great port cities — Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras — ceded primacy to a land-centric capital.

Economic reforms in the 1990s and the new focus on trade put the maritime world back in the reckoning. But the persistent demands of contested land borders kept Delhi's

strategic gaze fixed on the continent. It was the rapid rise of the oil-rich Gulf — and the massive flows of labour, remittances, energy, and capital — that gave unacknowledged heft to the Bombay School.

Today, nearly 9 million Indian workers, nearly \$50 billion in annual remittances, and critical energy and logistics dependencies tie India inextricably to the Gulf. The region has become a vital extension of India's economic and social space. Revolutionary Iran's confrontational politics after 1979 limited Delhi's engagement with Tehran, but the Arab Gulf steadily assumed the centrality that Persia once held for Malcolm and Elphinstone.

The revival of the Bombay School does not mean India can ignore the challenges on its northwestern marches. The enduring hostility with Pakistan remains real. The task for Delhi is not to choose between maritime and continental imperatives but to integrate them — to anchor maritime India firmly in the Gulf while maintaining credible military deterrence on the land frontier.

Meanwhile, the rise of political moderation and economic openness in Arabia stands in sharp contrast to Iran's oppressive theocracy and Pakistan's persistent use of religious extremism and violent proxies to destabilise India. In subtle but significant ways, the Arab Gulf's positive political evolution offers India a counterweight to the destabilising impulses emanating from Pakistan and Iran. Delhi's strong support for the Arab Gulf in the current war, in essence, about the return of the Bombay School.

The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express. He is associated with the Motwani Jodha Institute of American Studies, Jindal Global University and the Council on Strategic and Defence Research

Phule's life and thought, a constitutional project



ANURAG BHASKAR

AS WE mark the beginning of the bicentenary year of Mahatma Jotirao Phule, born on April 11, 1827, he is rightly remembered as a social reformer, educator, fierce critic of caste, and pioneer of women's education. Yet, to stop there is to miss the deeper significance of his work. Phule's life and thought can be understood as a constitutional project. Even if it did not produce a legal text, it reimagined the foundations of social order on the principles of equality, dignity, and the redistribution of power.

Born into a Shudra community, Phule experienced firsthand the injustices of a graded society. Yet, what transformed experience into critique was his encounter with new intellectual resources. Reading English classic texts furnished him with a vocabulary through which he could begin to articulate claims of rights, equality, and justice. A transformational moment was his engagement with Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in 1847.

Paine wrote that every individual possesses certain natural rights due to "his existence", and certain civil rights for "being a member of society". Paine also understood a constitution as a foundational structure of political power. A constitution is a "body of elements" containing the principles on which government is organised, with the ultimate purpose of promoting "the general happiness". Phule's subsequent interventions aimed at promoting the rights of all through institutional and structural efforts: The establishment of schools for women and oppressed castes, the opening of public wells to those deemed "untouchable", and advocacy for widow remarriage alongside a critique of child marriage.

Phule was also a keen observer of global constitutional developments. In his seminal work *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), 1873, he situated the struggle against caste oppression within a transnational history of emancipation. In the preface, Phule referred to the abolition of slavery in the US and dedicated the book to "the good people of the United States, as a token of admiration for their sublime disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion against slavery," and with an earnest desire

that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Shudra brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom". This positioned Phule as one of the earliest Indian thinkers to envision constitutional responses to the oppression of marginalised communities.

His focus on equality and equitable measures is also evident in his submissions to the Education Commission of 1882. Phule argued for compulsory primary education up to the age of 12. He insisted that higher education must be within the reach of all, and proposed targeted government scholarships for those communities "amongst whom education has made no progress", alongside "more liberal" and proactive measures to advance women's education.

Phule's constitutional imagination extended to the material conditions of labour and agrarian life. In *Shetkaryacha Asud* (Cultivator's Whipcord, 1883), he exposed how caste domination operates within the agrarian economy. The Shudra farmer, he wrote, is so burdened by exploitation and deprivation that even the possibility of sending his children to school is foreclosed. At the same time, he directed sharp criticism at colonial administrators, observing that White officers had neither the time nor the inclination to inquire into the conditions of the cultivators.

What emerges from Phule's writings and interventions is a deeper insight: That social hierarchy, economic exploitation, and state indifference are mutually reinforcing. He identified the failure of governance to respond to systemic injustice. In doing so, he implicitly called for a reordering of state priorities to focus on the lived conditions of the most vulnerable.

Phule passed away in 1890, but his ideas continued to inform India's evolving constitutional imagination. B R Ambedkar drew upon his vision of social transformation and gave it concrete expression in constitutional guarantees. Phule's bicentenary places upon us a renewed responsibility to confront the continuing challenges of inequality.

Bhaskar is the author of *The Foresighted Ambedkar: Ideas That Shaped Indian Constitutional Discourse*

When a funeral is monetised, deceased are denied dignity



NILANJANA BHOWMICK

DO NOT think anything in recent years has shaken me more than seeing images related to actor Rahul Arunodaj Banerjee's death circulating across social media these last few days. Within hours of his death, this unthinkable tragedy was turned into a "trending topic". Gamers chased his family's grief. They pointed the lens directly at his wife Priyanka, also an actor, scrutinising her grief, turning it into content on everyone's phone to be watched, dissected, and criticised.

The trolls came soon after: Why is she not crying? How can she be so composed? Did she just smile? What is she wearing? In this country, women are watched closely even in ordinary life; in public grief, they are watched even more cruelly. And that is exactly why the cameras have been following her, because a great deal of this content is aimed at provoking trolls who actually power the influence economy — the more trolls, the more views, likes, and comments. What is most dispiriting is how quickly social media erupts into the same script every time a tragedy strikes: Morphed videos and pictures, people faking last moments for views and likes, the hounding of family members, private pain turned public and profitable. We have seen this before, when singer Zubeen Garg died in a similar tragic accident, and years earlier, after Sushant Singh Rajput's death by suicide.

The fixation with celebrities in India has always been all-consuming, but it once had some boundaries. What is disturbing now is how completely those boundaries have collapsed. And it is no longer only the famous who are denied dignity and privacy in death. Everyone, it seems, is fair game now because the algorithm rewards the most voyeuristic, vulturous material by pushing it everywhere. Open the analytics on any social media app, and it shows you what performs well, your content and everyone else's, then nudges you to make more of the same. And once someone is drawn into that economy, it becomes difficult to leave it behind: They keep making the kind of content that earns.

Recently, a popular vlogger documented her mother-in-law's last journey in detail, even using an image of her dead body as the thumbnail for one of her videos. She said she wanted to document it for her children. Why do we need to document everything? What happened to keeping some things in memory? But that instinct, to keep some things private, held in memory, now feels incongruous with the world social media has built. The commercialisation of tragedy is not new. Indian television media has been doing it for decades now. That is where this became normalised: TV eroded whatever shared understanding remained that death demanded some dignity — because the person is no longer here to consent, object or defend themselves — all in the hunt for TRP. Social media has finished the job in its hunt for virality.

Dear all, we have now moved from commercialisation to monetisation. And anyone with a phone can monetise tragedy — yours, theirs, or someone else's.

Bhowmick is the author of *Bless Our Mothers Told Us and How Not To Be A Superwoman*

40 YEARS AGO

April 8, 1986



Sobhraj, David Hall nabbed in Goa bar. Throwing drama over Bombay cops. (File against terrorism: PM)

Sobhraj nabbed in Goa bar

CHARLES SOBHAJ, the international criminal, was nabbed in a country-wide dragnet since his dramatic escape from Delhi's Tihar Jail on March 16, was arrested by the Bombay police from a liquor bar in Mapusa, Goa. The re-arrest proved as dramatic as the jailbreak. A team of plainclothesmen grappled with the 42-year-old convict, who attempted to whip out his revolver in a daring but futile escape attempt.

the police interrogate him and his arrested accomplices in the next few days. Sobhraj and the three men arrested with him, David Hall, Ajay Singh and Dev Kumar 'Jaggi' are expected to be produced in court. Team of Delhi Police officers headed by the Crime Branch chief, Amod Kanth, rushed to Bombay armed with a production warrant from the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, Subhash Wasan, to produce the four arrested men in court by April 9.

250 activists held in Punjab

MORE THAN 250 activists of the All India Sikh Students Federation (AISF) and the United Akali Dal were arrested in Punjab in a crackdown on militants to curb their ac-

tivities in view of the threatened Sarbat Khalsa on April 13, Baisakhi day. The arrests came in the wake of apprehensions that the militants would set up their activities in the state on the eve of Baisakhi. The state, meanwhile, passed two consecutive peaceful days without any untoward incident.

PM speaks on Punjab violence

THE NATIONAL Integration Council, which was specially convened to discuss escalating violence in Punjab, began with an appeal by the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and the Home Minister, P V Narasimha Rao, for a concerted effort on all fronts to root out terrorism in Punjab.



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SIR is a test case for electoral democracy. SC order on Bengal can affect its course



DESKHAAL
YOGENDRA YADAV

THE FINAL figure came at midnight: 27,16,393. The Court order did not mention on it. It simply directed the ECI to "publish a supplementary list tonight". It did not spell out what the list was about. That was understood. One day, a historian might record this oddity. The Supreme Court of India put its stamp of approval on the deletion of 27 lakh voters in West Bengal without saying a word about it. The order of April 6 talks about the Appellate Tribunal, its composition, its process, its infrastructure and, thoughtfully, about the honoraria and incidental expenses of its members. But it did not name the act that was to be appealed against — disenfranchisement.

This was unlike other cases of large-scale exclusions in the SIR on the grounds of death, migration or absence. This case was about persons who had applied for inclusion under the SIR process and were listed on the draft SIR rolls, but whose names were deleted through a new and hasty process widely questioned for lack of procedural transparency. They had a right to appeal. But there was no way an appeal could be heard and decided in time for elections. As per law, voters' lists were to be frozen from April 7. The apex court has to decide whether these 27 lakh names stand deleted for this election. Or, find a way to ensure that this does not happen, either by permitting them to vote this time or by postponing the election dates till the final disposal of these appeals.

The Court was presented with a heap of evidence — anecdotal, documentary, statistical — to prove that these deletions were deeply flawed. The adjudicators were not required to look at all the documents submitted by an elector. The names of a former judge, family members of the ill-

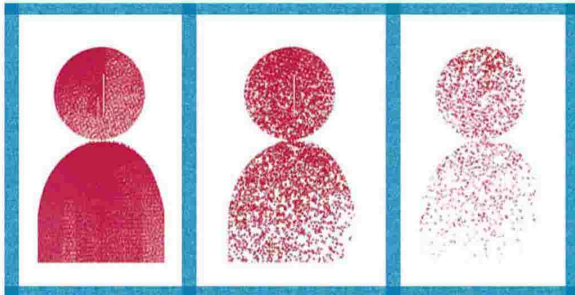


ILLUSTRATION: C S SAKSHIWAR

trators of the Constitution, a Kargil veteran, a decorated soldier, serving government officials, scores of people with Indian passports — all were deleted despite producing the required documentary proofs. It was also pointed out that these deletions had an odd pattern. One-third of all the cases put up for adjudication were from two Muslim-majority districts. As many as 95 per cent of the names deleted in Nandigram, for example, were Muslims.

In the face of all this, the Court, in effect, told these 27 lakh persons: Sorry, your name stands deleted. Now go try your luck with the Appellate Tribunals. Yes, you may not be able to vote this time. But your right to vote is not being taken away permanently.

The Court did not go into the dramatic implications of this order for the coming West Bengal assembly election. These 27 lakh voters translate into about 5 per cent of the expected voters in this election. Last time, the TMC won 36 seats with margins of less than 5 per cent. The impact will be higher this time if these deletions are concentrated in some areas. This one decision of the Court could flip the election's overall outcome. The Court also did not seem to worry much about the implications of such a deletion, through a semi-judicial process, for the citizen-

The Court in effect told these 27 lakh persons: Sorry, your name stands deleted. Now go try your luck with the Appellate Tribunals. Yes, you may not be able to vote this time. But your right to vote is not being taken away permanently

ship rights of the individual for entitlements other than voting.

Admittedly, the Court was dealing with a politically fraught and messy situation. The TMC has been alleging, right from the beginning, that the ECI was asked to carry out a hatchet job on behalf of the BJP. Somehow shove off about 5 per cent of its loyal vote bank, mostly Muslims, from the electoral rolls. Everything the ECI has done in the extraordinary saga of the SIR in Bengal has lived up to this alleged script. There was no reason to believe that the pre-SIR voters' list in the state was inflated. Bengal had 7.66 crore names, almost exactly the same as the 7.67 crore adult population of the state at that time. Yet, besides the exclusion of 58 lakh names for non-submission of enumeration forms, the ECI insisted on strict verification of all "logical discrepancies", which it took lightly in other states. It appointed an army of micro-observers and roll observers from outside the state to double-check the draft list prepared by the state election officers. Apparently, even their objections and the deletion of another 7 lakh names were not good enough for the ECI, which conjured a list of another 60 lakh names that needed further verification, lead-

ing to yet another deletion of 27 lakh.

The apex court faced the unenviable task of intervening in this messy situation. But in all fairness, the Court has had more than a due share in the making of this mess. It allowed the rewriting of the voters' list just four months before the elections. It permitted the strange practice of issuing notices to electors based on software-generated "logical discrepancies". It watched as the ECI invented new rules of the game for West Bengal. It allowed the ECI to get away with not publishing a machine-readable list of deletions. It passed an extraordinary order, using its special powers under Article 142, to bypass the statutory EROs in favour of a hastily put-together mechanism of adjudication that could only add to the confusion. It allowed this adjudication to go on for a period that would clearly impinge on the election schedule, leaving no time or forum for appeal. The end result is a mess with tragic consequences.

More than the electoral outcome, this order could affect the trajectory of electoral democracy. The Court's final order in the main SIR case (ADR and Others vs Election Commission of India), awaited since the conclusion of the hearing in January, is of no more than academic value now (Full disclosure: This writer is one among the many "Other" petitioners in this case). The Court has made it clear in many other related and ongoing cases that it would brook no impediments in the path of the SIR. More telling is how the Court has allowed the SIR in Bihar to be extended to the entire country, while its constitutionality was still being adjudicated.

This is not just one legal battle, but a test case. Today the judiciary is the last frontier, the only institution that can prevent Indian elections from going down the Bangladesh or Pakistan route. The SIR case is to electoral democracy what ADM Jabalpur was to fundamental rights. That is why the apex court's order in this case could dampen the spirits of all those who cherish the hope that the highest court will not fail the Constitution and the country, which it unfortunately did 50 years ago.

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

On extremism, let's not be selective in our outrage



MANOJ JHA

THE RECENT discussion in the Lok Sabha on Left-Wing Extremism was both serious and necessary. For decades, the Indian state has grappled with insurgencies that challenged its authority through violence. Yet the very seriousness of that debate throws into sharp relief a deeper, more uncomfortable question: Can a constitutional democracy afford to be selective in its moral and political anxieties about violence? If our commitment is genuinely to the Constitution, then the answer must be a unequivocal no. To treat violence differently depending on whether it is directed against the state or carried out in the name of the majority is to abandon the very neutrality that the Constitution demands.

Max Weber defined the state as the entity that claims a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. However, this monopoly is not absolute; it is conditioned by legality and accountability. When non-state actors, whether insurgents or vigilante groups, resort to violence, they undermine this monopoly. But while insurgent violence openly contests the authority of the state, vigilante violence often operates in a grey zone, implicitly drawing legitimacy from majoritarian sentiment or political patronage. This ambiguity makes it, in many ways, more insidious. When individuals or groups take it upon themselves to enforce their version of justice, whether in the name of religion, culture, or nationalism, they signal a breakdown of institutional trust.

India's constitutional vision sought precisely to guard against such breakdowns. The idea of constitutional morality, invoked by B.R. Ambedkar, was meant to ensure that the spirit of the Constitution would prevail over the impulses of the moment. Crucially, it demanded that the state remain even-handed in its response to threats, refusing to privilege one form of violence over another. It is here that the current asymmetry in public discourse becomes troubling, as Left-Wing Extremism is rightly condemned for its use of armed struggle and its rejection of democratic processes. Yet, the rising instances of Right-Wing Extremism manifested in vigilantism, hate crimes, and the normalisation of coercive majoritarianism often do not receive the same sustained institutional attention. This is a question of constitutional fidelity.

Contemporary developments underscore the urgency of this concern. Across multiple regions, there have been recurring instances in which vigilantes targeted individuals on the basis of identity, mobs assume quasi-sovereign authority as arbiters of justice, and public discourse increasingly normalises exclusionary and hostile idioms. We have seen upright police personnel, judges, and even god Samarth being punished for standing up for the rule of law. These developments cannot be dismissed as isolated aberrations. Rather, they must be situated within a broader transformation of the normative and discursive environment. When elected officials deploy violent metaphors, such rhetoric lowers the threshold of legitimacy for coercion and signals tacit sanction for extra-legal forms of violence.

It is in this very context that the Union Home Minister's sweeping and reckless confession of recognised parliamentary parties with Maoist and Naxalite extremist outfits must be called out. These parties that have participated in free and fair elections for decades, held constitutional offices, and governed states in full accordance with the law of the land. A minister of his seniority and stature is expected to know, and even duty-bound to uphold, the fundamental distinction between lawful political opposition and armed insurgency. To deliberately blur that line is intellectual dishonesty and a dangerous subversion of constitutional norms that lends an air of official sanction to the very politics of demonisation that corrodes democratic life.

As a fresh start, there must be a candid recognition that extremism is not a singular phenomenon. It manifested in multiple forms, each shaped by its own dynamics, yet unified by a common thread: the willingness to deploy violence in pursuit of political or ideological ends. Any meaningful response, therefore, must be equally multidimensional, addressing not only insurgencies but also the social, economic, and political conditions that allow other forms of extremism to take root and endure. Equally important is the need for consistency in institutional response. The question before Parliament extends beyond the procedural matter of convening another debate. It is, at its core, a question of normative reaffirmation: Whether there exists a genuine commitment to confront all manifestations of extremism with equal clarity, consistency, and resolve.

The writer is a Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), Rashtriya Janata Dal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump's threats

PEPPERED WITH profanity and religious references, Trump's warning to Tehran over the Strait of Hormuz is nothing but an impulsive provocation ("When Trump makes America grate again", IE, April 7). Being the most powerful leader in the world, he must realise that his words can cause irreparable damage. His bid to weaponise faith reeks of sheer desperation; it's an admission that he has bitten off more than he can chew.

S S Paul, Nadia

Cancer's many faces

WHILE THE Global Burden of Disease (GBD) data underscores a grim reality, the crisis is as much about structural logistics as it is about clinical intervention ("Don't overlook cancer among children", IE, April 7). In India, the most significant barrier isn't just late diagnosis, but "treatment abandonment". Unlike adult cancers, childhood malignancies require prolonged and intensive hospitalisation. For a family at the margins, the medical bill is often eclipsed by the non-medical costs, like the loss of daily wages. This "logistical exhaustion" leads many to stop treatment.

Ritika, Hyderabad

On air, thinking ahead

EACH YEAR during the winter, Delhi becomes an unfit place due to poor air quality ("With new plan, Delhi may see less polluted winter", IE, April 7). People are impacted in so many different ways because of large-scale pollution. Any plan to resolve it is very welcome. What is different about the new plan that was announced on Friday to handle the yearly air crisis is that it will identify pollution sources, developing a monitoring system that reinforces accountability as a part of strategy, which is different from previous, reactive attempts. We need more action that produces results.

Hanza Khan, New Delhi



RAGHU RAMAM

ON THE night of November 14, 1940, hundreds of German bombers headed towards the British city of Coventry. The British high command learnt of the impending raid but were faced with the devil's alternative. They could either evacuate the city, saving thousands of innocent civilians, or protect a vital strategic advantage. The legend holds that they chose the latter.

By late 1940, Bletchley Park had cracked the Enigma cipher, accessing every significant German military communication. The intelligence it yielded, codenamed Ultra, was the Allies' most precious strategic asset, eventually shortening the war by years. But Ultra came with a painful constraint: It could only be deployed when its yield could be attributed to other sources. When Germany suspected Enigma was compromised, it would change and the Allies would go blind.

Whether that exact calculation was made on that night remains historically disputed. What is undisputed is that commanders face this brutal arithmetic in war: Losing a city to win the war or the cold calculus of a thousand deaths today to prevent a hundred thousand tomorrow. It is cold-blooded murder either way, only the quantum varies.

Thirty-six years later, Israel codified this into a doctrine. By the mid-1980s, Hezbollah had discovered Israel's Achilles' heel — not its tanks or its air power, but its soldiers. A nation's fierce public attachment to its servicemen is not

A nation's attachment to the soldier is virtue & weakness

merely a necessary social virtue. It is also a vulnerability that has traditionally been weaponised. In 1986, after three Israeli soldiers were captured in Lebanon, the IDF formalised its response: The Hannibal Directive. Its essence was stark: A dead soldier is a tragedy but a captured soldier is a strategic catastrophe. The directive authorised overwhelming force to prevent the capture of an Israeli soldier, even if that force risked killing him. A dead soldier cannot be traded and cannot set a precedent of kidnapping.

The Glad Shalit exchange of 2011 proved that argument. The 19-year-old tank gunner was captured in 2006 and exchanged for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners after five years in Hamas custody. Hamas called it a victory. More damaging than the numbers was the signal: Israel's public sentiment could be weaponised. Every asymmetric organisation leverages this equation, as India learnt painfully in Kandahar in 1999. On October 7, 2023, Hamas took over 250 hostages with the purpose of leveraging them for demands.

The macabre truth of war is, soldiers, when taken hostage, have disproportionate damage potential on their own war effort. On April 5, an F-15E Strike Eagle was downed over Iranian territory. While the crew has been rescued after three days of frantic search, any Glad Shalit-like hostage situation, especially of a high-value asset like a fighter pilot, gives tremendous leverage to Tehran.

Soldiers, when taken hostage, have disproportionate damage potential on their own war effort

The writer is founding CEO, NATGRID, and a former soldier



VEENA IYER

LET'S CONSIDER two women — one in a remote tribal village, delivering at home in the dark, with no trained personnel nearby; the other in a private hospital in a top-tier city, being wheeled into an operating theatre for a caesarean she probably didn't need.

Together, they describe the shape of a crisis hiding inside India's maternal health success story. India's progress is real. The maternal mortality ratio has fallen from 130 per lakh live births in 2014-16 to 93 in 2019-21, and over 33 years, maternal deaths have reduced by 86 per cent — against a global reduction of 48 per cent. These are extraordinary numbers.

Missing link in India's natural-birth story: Midwives

But it also shows us something sinister. In 2008-09, C-sections accounted for about 6.4 per cent of institutional births in India. By 2024-25, that figure had crossed 27 per cent. The WHO recommends 10-15 per cent as the optimal population-level rate. In private hospitals, the average is now 47.4 per cent. In Telangana, the rate hits 60.7 per cent.

What is driving the scalpel? The answer is partly financial. The cost for a C-section in a small-town private hospital is roughly Rs 40,000, while in large cities it often crosses Rs 1,00,000. Deliveries account for 70 to 80 per cent of the earnings of private gynaecologists. Cultural factors compound this: In parts of India, many women prefer surgical delivery; some families request surgery to align with auspicious dates.

The case against unnecessary caesareans is real. The immediate risks to the

mother are well-established: infection, haemorrhage, adhesions, and complications in future pregnancies. Less widely known is that caesarean significantly increases the risk of scar endometriosis — a condition where endometrial tissue implants itself along the surgical wound, causing cyclic pain that can develop years after the birth.

For the child, the science is more tentative. The disruption to gut microbiota at birth is real, but also partially reversible. Exclusive breastfeeding has been shown to restore it. The long-term signals are harder to dismiss: C-section children are more likely to develop respiratory tract infections, asthma, and obesity.

Researchers are, however, careful to note that the underlying conditions that led to the caesarean birth in the first place may be responsible for these. But that caution cuts both ways — if we cannot prove clear causation, we cannot dismiss the associations.

This is where the conversation about midwifery becomes urgent. A trained professional midwife is not simply a substitute for an obstetrician at a normal birth. She is the person who holds space for a normal birth to happen — who recognises that labour is not a medical emergency, who sup-

ports a woman through it without the clock-watching and liability anxiety. Professional midwives are trained to identify risk conditions, often refer to specialists when medically indicated, making surgical intervention the exception, not the default.

India took a right step with the Nurse Practitioner in Midwifery programme in 2018. Approximately 1,500 midwives have been produced to date, far fewer than the nearly 90,000 midwives we would need for the public health system alone.

The woman in a remote tribal area and the woman in the city need the same thing: Someone who knows how to bring a baby into the world safely — and when not to reach for the scalpel.

The writer is associate professor, IIPHG, Gujarat. Views are personal

IT IS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF VENEZUELA CRUDE PURCHASE IN THE LAST 6 YEARS

12 mn barrels of Venezuelan oil may reach India this month

Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, April 7

INDIA IS likely to take delivery of around 10-12 million barrels of Venezuelan crude oil this month, the highest in over six years, according to data from commodity market analytics firm Kpler. It comes as the raging war in West Asia has affected global oil and gas flows. This month will also be the first since May of last year to see Venezuelan crude oil being delivered at Indian ports, the data shows. These barrels, although just a fraction of the country's crude oil imports, are expected to provide some relief and strengthen its crude diversification strategy.



India depends on imports to meet over 88% of its requirement, and processes over 5 million barrels a day of crude.

LONG HAUL

THE INDIA bound Venezuelan oil cargoes were most likely purchased before the West Asia war began

THE COUNTRY was a regular buyer of Venezuelan crude oil prior to the imposition of the US sanctions on Caracas in the year 2019

VENEZUELA Was New Delhi's fifth-largest supplier of oil in 2019, providing close to 16 million tonnes, or about 117 million barrels, of crude to Indian refiners

India depends on imports to meet over 88% of its requirement, and processes over 5 million barrels a day of crude. Over 40% of the imports come from West Asia through the Strait of Hormuz, where vessel movements have been on halt since early March.

Notably, the India-bound Venezuelan oil cargoes were most likely purchased before the West Asia war began, underscoring how diversification of crude supply sources is coming in handy at a time of global crisis.

India imports oil from over 41 countries, with the sourcing slate having expanded considerably over the past few years. This has helped reduce dependence on West Asian crude, which is why the crude oil and petrol, and diesel stocks in the country have been adequate. The replenishment comes at a time when In-

dian refiners are actively diversifying their crude slate, particularly in response to uncertainties surrounding the Strait of Hormuz. However, April-arriving cargoes were likely secured well before the recent disruptions, underscoring a longer-term strategic shift rather than a purely reactive move.

"This trend highlights the growing importance of proactive diversification in global energy markets. Securing an alternative supply in advance is increasingly seen as a competitive advantage," said Sumit Ritolia, manager, modelling & refining at Kpler.

With the US capturing Venezuela's then president Nicolás Maduro early in January, Trump had said that Washington would take control of Caracas's oil sector. After that, global commodity traders Vitol and Trafigura were authorised by Washington to sell Venezuelan oil globally, which had been

under US sanctions. "More importantly, heavier Venezuelan barrels tend to yield higher proportions of distillates, particularly middle distillates such as diesel and jet fuel. This is significant in the current environment, where distillate markets remain structurally tight. As a result, these imports not only diversify sourcing but also strengthen India's ability to sustain strong distillate output," Ritolia added.

India — specifically private sector refining giant Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) — was a regular buyer of Venezuelan crude prior to the imposition of US sanctions on Caracas in 2019. Following the sanctions, oil imports from Venezuela stopped within a few months. According to India's official trade data, Caracas was New Delhi's fifth-largest supplier of oil in 2019, providing close to 16 million tonnes, or about 117 million barrels, of crude to

Indian refiners. The bilateral trade between India and Venezuela was \$6.40 billion in 2019-20, of which Indian imports — primarily crude oil — were worth \$6.06 billion.

In October 2023, the US eased sanctions on Venezuela's petroleum sector, authorising oil exports without limitation for six months. This RIL and a few other Indian refiners to restart oil imports from Venezuela. But then, imports stopped as the sanction waiver was not extended by Washington after its understanding with Caracas on the conduct of free and fair presidential elections in Venezuela broke down.

A few months later, RIL was able to restart Venezuelan oil imports after obtaining a sanctions waiver from the US. But in the summer of 2025, the company halted oil imports from Venezuela after Trump administration threatened higher tariffs on countries buying Venezuelan crude.

Wilson's mixed-bag innings at Air India draws to a close a year before end of his term

Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, April 7

CHANGE IN THE AIR

WILSON TOOK charge at the newly-privatised Air India in 2022

BEFORE JOINING Air India, Wilson was the CEO of Singapore Airlines' low-cost airline arm Scoot

HIS RESIGNATION comes just weeks after IndiGo's CEO Elbers stepped down in an operational meltdown in December

WHILE AIR INDIA awaits the announcement of its next CEO, IndiGo has announced the current IATA DG Willie Walsh as its chief



WITH WILSON packing his bags at Air India, the two largest airlines in the country will soon have new leaders in the cockpit

AIR INDIA'S first post-privatisation chief executive Campbell Wilson has resigned, but will stay on till his successor is found by the airline.

Wilson has helmed the Tata group airline through a turbulent period that has seen the carrier embarking upon an ambitious transformation programme to shrug off its legacy image of a rundown government-owned airline, placed world record-breaking aircraft orders, faced challenges due to post-pandemic supply chain woes, suffered a tragic plane crash that killed 260 people, faced intense regulatory heat, grappled with heavy financial losses, and continues to struggle with external headwinds like airspace closures due to geopolitical conflicts.

"Mr Wilson had conveyed his intention to step down in 2025 to Air India Chairman N. Chandrababu Naidu and, since then, has been working to ensure the organization and leadership team is on a stable footing for the transition. He will remain in the role until his successor is announced and in place," Air India said in a release.

In May last year, before the AI 171 crash, Wilson had told *The Indian Express* that a transformed and new Air India should be "consistently visible" by the end of 2027, and that was confident that the "reality of Air India will change, so will its perception". Whenever that change happens, Wilson — who led

Air India through the most critical phases of its transformation programme — will not be in the corner office at the Air India headquarters in Gurugram.

Wilson, who has been interested in cricket, often said that Air India's transformation is a test match, not a T20. And Wilson is now retired hurt.

A soft-spoken New Zealander and a Singapore Airlines veteran, Wilson took charge at a newly-privatised Air India in 2022. Before joining Air India, Wilson was the CEO of Singapore Airlines' low-cost airline arm Scoot. As his resignation was expected by the airline's board and parent Tata Sons, the latter has been scouting for a new CEO to replace Wilson for a few months now, it is learnt. Air India said that its board has constituted a committee that will find a successor in the coming months. Wilson's resignation

After IndiGo, Air India hikes fuel surcharge for most routes

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, April 7

AIR INDIA on Tuesday hiked the fuel surcharge on all domestic routes of over 1,000 km, with most global routes seeing a much steeper hike, close to the heels of increase in jet fuel prices.

India's largest airline IndiGo had announced changes in fuel surcharge on similar lines on April 1.

This move by the carriers, which will make flying costlier on most routes, is in line with the decision by the Centre and public sector oil marketing companies to pass on only a fraction of the actual increase in jet fuel prices for domestic flights of scheduled airlines, which will bring the full price hike of over 100% for international flights.

As ATF prices surged in the international market due to the raging war in West Asia, the Air India group, which includes full-service airline Air India and budget carrier Air India Express, has already introduced a flat fuel surcharge of Rs 399 for all domestic routes from March 12.

As per the latest revision, which will be effective from 09:01 am Wednesday (April 8), the flat surcharge on domestic flights has been replaced with a distance-based tiered structure varying between Rs 299 and Rs 899. For most of the airline group's international flights beyond South Asia, the surcharge has been hiked from the earlier range of \$10-200 to \$50-280.

Except for flights to Europe, UK, North America, and Australia, where the revised surcharge will take effect from April 10, the overseas route will see the revised levy from 09:01 am on Wednesday. As per the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, given the surge in global prices of jet fuel, the price in India was expected to more than double over a significantly better hand product than what flyers were accustomed to.

Wilson's resignation also comes as the war in West Asia has hit international aviation, compounding challenges for Air India. Air India's ambitious transformation programme to turn it into a world-class airline is not complete yet, and has been hit by delays due to slow aircraft deliveries, refurbishment of the carrier's legacy wide-body fleet is also delayed due to inadequate availability of seats and some other materials. But most of the narrow-body fleet of the airline is now either refurbished or new, boasting of a new brand identity and a significantly better hand product than what flyers were accustomed to.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

Tata Trusts CEO urged Srinivasan, Vijay Singh to step down at Noel Tata's request

George Mathew
Mumbai, April 7

TATA TRUSTS Chairman Noel Tata had last week told CEO Siddharth Sharma to ask Vijay Singh and Venu Srinivasan if they would like to voluntarily step down from the Bai Hiraibai Jamssetji Tata Navsari Charitable Institution (BHJNCI), as they felt that irrespective of the legal opinion and past precedent, it was open to anyone to question the appointments of non-Zoroastrians made to the Trust, a source in the Tata group said.

Venu Srinivasan, Chairman Emeritus of TVS Motor, stepped down from the Bai Hiraibai, following a request from Sharma. However, Vijay Singh declined to quit.

CEO Sharma had discussed the continuation of Srinivasan and Singh in the Trust with Noel Tata on April 2, 2026, and they felt that in view of the specific clauses

TRUST DEFICIT

EX-CJJI HJ Kania had expressed the opinion that there was no legal or doctrinal prohibition preventing non-Zoroastrians from being included as members of the trust

TATA TRUSTS is sticking to its stand that Bai Hiraibai specifically prohibited non-Zoroastrian trustees on the Trust

contained in the Trust Deed. It was open to anyone to question the appointments of non-Zoroastrians in the Trust. Former Chief Justice of India HJ Kania had earlier expressed the considered view that there was no legal or doctrinal prohibition preventing non-Zoroastrians from being inducted as members of the Trust.

Tata Trusts is apparently sticking to its stand that Bai Hiraibai specifically pro-

hibited non-Zoroastrian trustees on the Trust, as also those who were not resident in the Bombay Presidency or Navsari.

Both Noel and Sharma took a stand that a legal opinion cannot be a substitute for a judicial pronouncement, sources said.

Vijay Singh and Venu Srinivasan were the only two Trustees on the Trust who did not meet these criteria.

Srinivasan's resignation came shortly after former Sir Ratan Tata trustee Mehli Mishra formally challenged the appointment and continuation of Srinivasan and Vijay Singh before the Maharashtra Charity Commissioner as both of them happen to be non-Zoroastrians.

Meanwhile, the Charity Commissioner of Maharashtra has written to Tata Trusts regarding the affidavit filed by Mehli Mishra.

Sharma called up Venu

Srinivasan on April 2, conveying to him this position, as also the fact that a legal opinion had previously been taken on this subject.

Tata sources said in Justice Kania's opinion, the government's decision of the trust did not impose any explicit restriction barring such appointments, thereby leaving room for a broader and more inclusive interpretation of eligibility for trusteeship.

In line with this understanding, RK Krishnakumar, who was a Director of Tata Sons and several Tata companies, was subsequently appointed as a trustee in the year 2000, during the tenure of Ratan Tata as the head of the Tata Trusts.

This appointment was seen as a practical affirmation of the earlier view, demonstrating that the trust was willing to adopt a more expansive approach in its governance practices.

SEBI gives breather to IPO-bound firms

ENS Economic Bureau
Mumbai, April 7

THE MARKETS regulator has granted a one-time relaxation related to public issue timelines as well as minimum public shareholding (MPS) requirements of companies on Tuesday. The move comes as the IPO market sees a slowdown triggered by the West Asia conflict.

It has decided to grant one-time relaxation to extend validity of the SEBI Observations letters — representing IPO clearance — expiring between April 1, 2026 and September 30, 2026 till September 30, 2026. The SEBI allows delays and change of fund-raising plans by companies in the wake of the self-off in markets.

The regulator said it has received representation from the Industry Body on difficulties faced by the issuers in mobilising resources and ac-

cessing the capital market in the backdrop of ongoing geopolitical tensions.

Companies will have to get an undertaking from lead manager to the issue, confirming compliance with the Issue of Capital and Disclosure Requirements (ICDR) Regulations while submitting the updated offer document.

ICDR regulations define the framework for companies issuing securities in India.

With the markets mired in volatility and self-off, valuations have dipped to 52-week low in several cases, directly affecting IPO plans.

When markets are unstable, companies struggle to attract investors at favourable valuations, forcing many to delay their public issues until conditions improve. This will also hinder good IPO pricing.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

'Sugar supply stable, but Centre should ensure timely payments'

Express News Service
New Delhi, April 7

INDIA'S SUGAR supply situation is "stable" for now, but the government must take steps to ensure the industry's financial health and its ability to make timely payments to cane growers.

"The country's sugar production in the 2025-26 season (October-September) is likely to be around 281 lakh tonnes (lt) after factoring in an estimated 28 lt diversion towards ethanol manufacturing," said Harshvardhan Patil, president of the National Federation of Co-operative Sugar Factories Ltd.

With opening stocks of 50 lt, the total sugar availability of 331 lt can comfortably cover the domestic consumption requirement of 280 lt and another 10 lt of exports for this season. The projected closing stocks for 2025-26, at 41 lt, will be the lowest since the 39 lt in

of 2016-17, but that is still reasonably balanced, as per Patil. He also discounted the effect of a possible El Niño on the sugarcane crop to be crushed in the ensuing 2026-27 season.

"The bulk of plantings for the next season were already completed last year, which had good rains. A below-normal monsoon due to an El Niño this year (as predicted by the private weather forecaster SkyMet) would basically hit the 2027-28 cane crop," Patil pointed out.

"The problem today is that the all-India average ex-mill price of sugar is about Rs 3,850 per quintal, while our cost of production is Rs 4,100 or so. We are incurring losses of Rs 250 for every quintal of sugar, affecting our liquidity and resulting in mounting cane dues to farmers," he added.

BRIEFLY

Adani seeks dismissal of SEC fraud case
New York: Billionaire Gautam Adani and his nephew Sagor Adani have asked a US court to dismiss a securities fraud lawsuit brought by the US Securities and Exchange Commission. In a pre-motion letter filed ahead of a planned April 30 motion seeking dismissal of the lawsuit, Adanis through their lawyers said the SEC's claims over a 2021 bond sale

by the group's renewable energy arm, Adani Green Energy Ltd are legally flawed on multiple grounds. The SEC had sued the Adanis in November 2024, alleging they misled investors by failing to disclose an alleged bribery scheme tied to Indian state officials, framing the case under US securities laws. They argued that the court lacks personal jurisdiction, saying neither had sufficient contacts with the US or direct involvement in the bond offering. PTI

MARKETS

Sensex	74,616.58	NIFTY	23,123.65	Gold	₹53,200	US Dollar	₹92.98
Silver	509.73	Oil	₹155.40	Silver	₹2,40,000	Oil	\$130.93
0.69%	0.68%						

NOTE: GOLD, SILVER RATES AS PER 1KG. INDIA SAFRAA ASSOCIATION DATA. GOLD PER 10G. SILVER PER 1KG. CRUDE OIL (INDIAN BASKET) AS OF APRIL 8, 2026

RAJASTHAN RAJYA VIDYUT UTPADAN NIGAM LTD.
KOTA SURVEILLANCE TOWER, SURVEILLANCE
E-TENDER NOTICE: **TN-5546 (RVU2627WSOB00043)**
E-Tenders are invited for Assistance in operation in Turbine, Seal Oil, CA area, poking and hammering of coil burners, HT/LT Switchgear, electrical activity & other misc. work anywhere in plant of stage-I to V at KSTPS, Kota. Tender details are available on <http://eproc.rajjasthan.gov.in> (for e-tender).
www.energy.rajjasthan.gov.in/rvn/ & www.sppp.rajjasthan.gov.in
Raj.Samaddi/C26/358 RVN/16-4274 Chief Engineer (KSTPS)

Chandigarh Power Distribution Limited, Chandigarh
SICD 33-35, 4th Floor, Sector 34-A, Chandigarh - 160022, India
CIN: U12209PB1992PLC014506
NOTICE INVITING TENDER (NIT) Date: 08.04.2026
Chandigarh Power Distribution Limited invites tenders from the eligible bidders for the following:
NIT No. Tender Description EMD (in Lakhs) Full Submission Date
CPDL/P25-27 Rate Contract for Outsourcing of the CPDL 2.0 09.04.2026
CPDL/CE008 24 X 7 Call Centre Operations for CPDL 2.0 up to 18:00 Hrs
Tender fee of individual Tender Document Rs 1180/- (incl. GST)
For detailed NIT, please visit our website www.chandigarhpower.com -> Tenders: Also, all future competitors & apply. In the above tenders will be published on the same website only. DGM (CRM)

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF RAJASTHAN
CURAJ/Purchase/Tender/2025-26/4259 Date: 25.03.2026
TENDER NOTICE
Bids are invited from the Manufacturers, Authorized Channel Partners/Dealers/Firms for the Installation of the Access Control System in the Central Instrumentation Laboratory (CIL) at Central University of Rajasthan.
For more details, visit: www.curaj.ac.in and CPP Portal: <https://eprocure.gov.in> Registrar

BEFORE THE HON'BLE NATIONAL COMPANY LAW TRIBUNAL DIVISION BENCH, COURT-1, AHMEDABAD COMPANY APPLICATION NO. CA(CAA/11/AHM)/2026
IN THE MATTER OF SCHEME OF ARRANGEMENT (DEMERGER) BETWEEN:
Nabros Pharma Private Limited, a company incorporated under the Companies Act, 1956, bearing CIN: U24230G1983PT000628, having its registered office at 3rd Floor, Oriental House II, Behind British Library, Opp. Art Gallery, Law Garden, Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad - 380 006.
... Demerged Company / Applicant Company No. 1 AND
Nabros Securities Private Limited, a company incorporated under the Companies Act, 2013, bearing CIN: U64990G2025PT0171253, having its registered office at 4th Floor, Oriental House II, Law Garden, Court-1, Ahmedabad - 380 006, Gujarat.
... Resulting Company / Applicant Company No. 2
ADVERTISEMENT OF NOTICE OF THE MEETING OF EQUITY SHAREHOLDERS AND UNSECURED CREDITORS OF NABROS PHARMA PRIVATE LIMITED
NOTICE is hereby given that on or after 27.03.2026, the Hon'ble National Company Law Tribunal, Division Bench, Court-1, Ahmedabad ("Hon'ble Tribunal") has directed a meeting of the equity shareholders and Unsecured Creditors of Nabros Pharma Private Limited ("Demerged Company") and meeting of the equity shareholders of Nabros Securities Private Limited ("Resulting Company") to be held for the purpose of considering, and if thought fit, approving with or without modification(s), the Scheme of Arrangement ("Scheme") between Nabros Pharma Private Limited and Nabros Securities Private Limited ("Resulting Company") and their respective Shareholders and Creditors under Sections 230 to 232 of the Companies Act, 2013.
In pursuance of the said Order and as directed therein, further notice is hereby given that separate meeting of equity shareholders and unsecured creditors of Nabros Pharma Private Limited ("Demerged Company") will be held at Registered Office of the Demerged Company OR through Video Conferencing (VC) / Other Audio Visual Means (OAVM), as per the schedule mentioned below, at which day and time the said equity shareholders and unsecured creditors of Nabros Pharma Private Limited ("Demerged Company") are requested to attend.
Sr. No. Meeting of Day & Date Time
1 Equity Shareholders Saturday, 09th May, 2026 10.00 AM
2 Unsecured creditors Saturday, 09th May, 2026 10.30 AM
Notice with all requisite details and documents has been sent to the available addresses / email ids of the respective Equity Shareholder & Unsecured Creditors of the Demerged Company. Cut-off date reckoned for the meetings is 31.12.2025. Persons entitled to attend and vote at the meeting may in person or proxy, provided that all proxies in the prescribed form are deposited at the Registered Office of the Demerged Company. Copies of the Scheme and of the Statement of Sections 230 & 232 of the Companies Act, 2013 read with Rule 6(b) of the Companies (Compromises, Arrangements and Amalgamations) Rules, 2016 ("Rules"), can be obtained free of charge at the Registered Office of the Demerged Company or at the Office of its Advocates, M/s. Parth Sanja and Heet B. Javeri, at 24, Sarvabh Station, B/h. Banupada No. 1, Vijay Restaurant - Manasa Mandir Road, Navrangpura, Ahmedabad - 380 009.
The Hon'ble Tribunal has appointed Mr. **Dinesh Chaitrath, Advocate** as Chairperson of the said meeting and Mr. **Mahendra Kumar Parmar, Advocate** as Scrutinizer of the said meeting. The Scheme of Arrangement (Demerger), if approved by the meeting, will be subject to the subsequent approval of the Hon'ble Tribunal.
The Scheme shall be deemed to have been agreed to upon receiving the requisite consent of a majority in number representing three-fourths (3/4ths) in value of the Equity Shareholders for Equity Shareholders meeting or value of Unsecured Creditors for Unsecured creditors of the Demerged Company, meeting and voting either in person or by proxy, at the said meeting, in terms of Section 230(b) of the Companies Act, 2013.
If the required quorum is not present at the meeting, the meeting shall be adjourned by half an hour, and thereafter the persons present and voting shall be deemed to constitute the quorum. For the purpose of computing the quorum, valid proxies shall also be considered.
All queries/grievances with regards to attending meetings and voting, you can contact the company at nabros-pharma@nabros.in or call on: 079-2640 5299.
Dated this 07th day of April 2026 Chairperson appointed for the Meeting Place: Ahmedabad Mr. Dinesh Chaitrath, Advocate

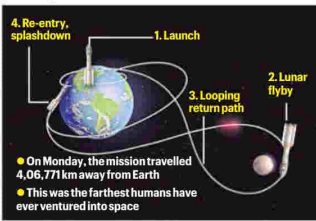
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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

• SPACE

Why Artemis II crew went farther from Earth than anyone before



On Monday, the mission travelled 4,06,771 km away from Earth
This was the farthest humans have ever ventured into space

Arav Shah
New Delhi, April 7

THE FOUR astronauts of NASA's Artemis II mission on Monday travelled 4,06,771 km away from Earth. The Orion spacecraft, in setting the new record, swung around the far side of the Moon. The record before this was the 4,00,171 km travelled by Apollo-13 in 1970, though in that case, the mission had to deviate farther than its intended path due to a malfunction. For Artemis II, setting this record is not the mission's main objective. The distance is simply a function of its path.

What was the Artemis II flight path?

The first crewed lunar mission since December 1972, Artemis II is not a landing mission. It is a flyby designed to test the limits of the Orion spacecraft. While earlier missions like Apollo 8 followed a circular lunar orbit — dictating that the crew fire their engines to maintain a fixed distance from the lunar surface — the Orion spacecraft is flying an elliptical "free-return trajectory". This path relies on the Moon's gravity to naturally slingshot the spacecraft back toward Earth.

How does the 'free-return trajectory' work?

Prioritising crew safety and fuel efficiency, this free-return trajectory is executed in two phases:

High-Earth orbit: Rather than aiming directly for the Moon, Orion pushed into an elliptical path around Earth, stretching outward to roughly 74,000 km. This afforded the crew a 42-hour window to conduct critical checks on the environmental control and life support systems. Should any system have failed here, the spacecraft remained within Earth's gravitational pull, allowing an abort and splashdown within hours.

Lunar slingshot: Once cleared for deep space, Orion was pushed toward the Moon by the European Service Module, aiming for a point roughly 10,300 km beyond the lunar far side. This allowed the Moon's gravity to act as a tether, catching the spacecraft and whipping it around the far side, back toward Earth's atmosphere.

What makes this flight plan attractive?

This looping, figure-eight route acts as a safety mechanism. It ensures that in the event of an engine failure, the crew does not find itself stranded in deep space.

Additionally, this route is exceptionally fuel-efficient. Entering a circular lunar orbit requires a massive, fuel-heavy deceleration burn to get caught in the Moon's gravity, followed days later by an equally massive acceleration burn to break free. Orion's utilisation of gravity to change direction conserves critical propellant.

This lighter fuel requirement reduced the overall mass the Space Launch System rocket had to lift off the pad, while ensuring the spacecraft retained a reserve of propellant for potential emergencies.

What next for the Artemis programme?

The primary agenda of Artemis II is to prove that the Orion spacecraft — and its European Service Module — can sustain human life in deep space. The 10-day mission's goal was to verify that the vehicle had the capacity to reach the same distances as the uncrewed Artemis-I while preserving the life of the crew members.

A safe return of Orion will provide NASA with a wealth of telemetry and life-support data for future journeys. Promising a long-awaited return to the Moon, the missions are part of NASA's vision to develop its 'Moon Base'.

• ENERGY

Kalpakkam: 'Critical' step in 3-stage nuclear programme



ANIL SASI

INDIA is among the few countries with considerable experience in developing nuclear technologies. This includes mastery over pressurised heavy water reactor (PHWR) technology — reactors that use natural uranium as fuel and heavy water (deuterium oxide) as a coolant and moderator.

These reactors now comprise the bulk of India's installed nuclear power capacity of 8,180 megawatt electric (MWe), alongside some imported light water reactor units.

Two other technologies are a work-in-progress: fast breeder reactors (FBRs) and a longstanding project aiming to fabricate thorium-based nuclear reactors.

These three technologies — PHWRs, FBRs and thorium reactors — progressing in a series, make up India's ambitious three-stage nuclear power programme.

This programme envisages a pathway to utilising India's abundant thorium reserves to generate electricity.

On Monday, India took a major step towards completing the vital second stage — its first indigenous FBR, at Kalpakkam in Tamil Nadu, attained criticality.

Going critical means the initiation of a self-sustaining nuclear fission reaction that will eventually lead to full power generation. It is a key milestone indicating that the reactor core is functioning as designed and that each fission event in the core now releases a sufficient number of neutrons to sustain an ongoing series of reactions.

This major step came after the 500-MWe FBR's "core loading" — or the process of placing nuclear fuel assemblies inside the core — was completed in March 2024. The Kalpakkam reactor will initially use uranium-plutonium mixed oxide (MOX) fuel, with a "blanket" of a uranium isotope (U-238) around the fuel core that will undergo nuclear transmutation to produce more fuel — hence the name "breeder".

Nuclear transmutation involves the conversion of a chemical element or isotope into another chemical element, with the nucleus of protons or neutrons in the nucleus of the atom undergoing a change.

The three stages

The first stage in India's nuclear pro-



gramme entails the setting up of PHWRs and associated fuel cycle facilities, which is currently in progress. The India-US civil nuclear deal opened the doors for India to buy uranium for its domestic reactors, increasing the pace of its PHWR programme.

The second stage involves deploying FBRs at scale. FBRs are designed to produce more fuel than they consume. The "higher breeding" is desired so that the rate at which power capacity can grow would be higher.

FBRs enable the potential to harness the energy of natural uranium by over 60 times through multiple recycles. These breeder reactors are also crucial for enlarging the inventory of plutonium — produced after the first stage PHWRs — so that a much larger irradiation capacity to produce an isotope of uranium (U-235) at scale for use in the three-stage programme can be built up.

For this, at an appropriate stage, the FBRs would need to be loaded with thorium (Th-232) as the blanket material that would be converted to U-233. With sufficient inventory and production capacity for U-233 having built up, the move onto the third stage can then happen.

Thus, FBRs are a key link between the first and third stages of the programme.

Second-stage plans

India's FBR programme began in 1985 with the operationalisation of a 13.5MWe

A file photo of the Kalpakkam Nuclear Complex.

IMAGE/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Setting the stage

Once the Kalpakkam project is commissioned, India will be the second country after Russia to have a commercial operating FBR.

China has a small FBR programme. Programmes in countries such as Japan, France, and US were shut down amid safety concerns.

Fast Breeder Test Reactor.

The 500-MWe prototype Kalpakkam FBR, ingeniously designed and built, is now in an advanced stage of commissioning. Besides the Kalpakkam FBR, India plans to construct six more FBRs with a capacity of 600MWe each. Two of these six reactors are planned to be constructed at the site adjacent to the prototype FBR, and another site will be identified to build four more reactors, according to an expert committee report of the Vivekananda International Foundation.

Successive governments have nurtured the FBR project as a step towards India developing comprehensive capabilities that span the entire nuclear fuel cycle, by which electricity is produced from uranium in nuclear power reactors. In 2003, when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was prime minister, the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) and BHAVINI was incorporated to build and operate what was then India's most advanced nuclear reactor, the prototype FBR. The project was expected to be completed by September 2010, but was delayed due to technological challenges. The last set of approvals had revised the completion target to October 2022.

Once commissioned, India will be the second country after Russia to have a commercial operating FBR. China has a small programme on fast breeders; programmes

The Kalpakkam fast breeder reactor has attained criticality, a big part of the second stage of the programme. The next step is thorium reactors

in countries such as Japan, France, and the US were shut down amid safety concerns.

The Department of Atomic Energy aims to increase nuclear power capacity to 22,400 MWe by 2032. It has approved the construction of 10 new PHWRs in "fleet mode", in which a plant is expected to be built in five years from the first pouring of concrete.

Key for third stage

The second stage leads to the third phase where thorium can be used as the main fuel. The three stages, in this process, involve the conversion of "fertile material" (which is not fissionable by thermal neutrons) into fissile material.

For example, U-238, the dominant isotope of uranium, is a fertile material that cannot by itself make the reactor achieve criticality, and has to be converted to fissile plutonium (Pu-239) in a reactor.

The spent fuel from thermal reactors contains Pu-239, which is most efficiently burnt in a fast reactor or FBR. Thorium-bearing monazite too, is a fertile material that has to be converted to the fissile U-233. India has adopted a "closed fuel cycle" approach, which involves the reprocessing of spent fuel to separate the useful Pu-239 and U-235 isotopes from U-238 and Th-232. To multiply the fissile inventory and to gradually work towards establishing a higher power base, it is key to ultimately use thorium in the third stage of the programme.

The FBR is clearly being seen as an important milestone for getting to the third stage, clearing the way for the full utilisation of the country's thorium. Transitioning to thorium-based nuclear power generation in India is vital for securing energy independence, which requires building sufficient inventory of fissile U-233 or fast neutron irradiation of thorium in thermal or fast nuclear reactors of relevant capacity, according to nuclear scientist Anil Kakodkar.

Now that India is able to build a large FBR capacity with imported uranium (as fuel), the country has the possibility of using this reactor capacity for conversion of thorium to fissile uranium through irradiation of thorium along with HALEU (a fuel variant called high assay, low enriched uranium) in the country's indigenous PHWRs at scale, he told *The Indian Express*.

This enables the launch of the thorium phase of India's three-stage nuclear programme earlier than envisaged, without having to wait for build up of required FBR capacity that comprises the second stage.

• WAR IN WEST ASIA

How the Iran war has left Gulf nations divided in their response

Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, April 7

IN THE US-Israeli war on Iran, now into its second month, the Gulf Arab countries have found themselves directly on the firing line.

Iran initially responded by targeting US military bases, facilities and personnel in these countries. In the weeks since, both sides in the conflict have widened their targets to energy facilities, desalination plants, and population centres.

Even American universities and multinational companies in the Gulf have become potential targets. Iran, for instance, has targeted Amazon's data centres.

As the war broke out, Bahrain took the unprecedented step of leading a diplomatic charge against Iran at the UN Security Council. But the countries worst affected by Iran's horizontal escalation have been the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar.

Even then, a clear difference in approach to the war has emerged among these four countries.

Saudi Arabia and UAE

The war has brought together the two regional heavyweights, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, weeks after their tensions over Yemen boiled over.

The drone and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia have struck a major refinery, US embassy, and the Prince Sultan Air base, among other targets. This has resulted in civilian and military casualties, besides loss and damage to aircraft.

The impact on the UAE has been greater. The country has faced over 2,500 attacks. Some 10 civilians have been killed and more than 200 people have been injured.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have had long-standing tensions owing to their decades-long tussle for leadership in the Islamic world. There have been numerous attempts at brokering peace in the past, the most famous one being the 2023 rapprochement facilitated by Oman and China.

Ties between Iran and the UAE have been more complex. The two have had territorial disputes over islands in the Persian Gulf. The UAE has also faced attacks from

Capital flight

The war poses a threat to the facade of safety and security in the Gulf region

This could lead to a flight of capital and business to destinations such as London and Singapore

Iran-backed Houthis in 2019. Over the years, Iranian businesses spread their footprint in the UAE, especially Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

The Iranian regime, however, took great exception to the Abraham Accords between the UAE and Israel, accusing the Emirates of betraying the Palestinian cause.

The current war has widened the split. Iran's effective closure of Strait of Hormuz, and the resultant disruption in energy supply from the Gulf nations, have pitted them against Tehran. This has also affected the UAE's carefully cultivated image of a prosperous economic destination.

This situation, if prolonged, can pose a threat to the facade of safety and security in the region. This could lead to a flight of capital and business to other destinations. A UN survey report suggests the crisis can lead to a loss of \$200 billion. In this context, the Saudis and the Emiratis have been pressing the Americans to not exit and finish the task.

Oman and Qatar

This view, however, is not shared by Oman and Qatar, who have more empathy

towards the Iranian position.

Oman, often referred to as the "Switzerland of the East" for its traditional "constructive neutrality" position, was also mediating between the US and Iran. It had been at the table when Iran came under attack from the US-Israeli forces.

Qatar, meanwhile, has carefully positioned itself. It shares the world's largest gas field with Iran, which is the source of 80% of Qatar's government revenues.

So, both have sought diplomatic solutions to the current conflict.

Oman's Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi has called for a return to negotiations. In a sharply-worded piece in *The Economist*, he called the attack by Israel and US an "unlawful military strike", and termed Iran's retaliation against the Gulf states "completely unacceptable" yet "inevitable".

At this point, the Gulf states are vulnerable and divided, and would be looking at credible interlocutors. With Pakistan, Turkey, and China already having put their foot in the door, India too could see this as an opportunity to step up its role.

• GLOBAL

'Generational change in Nepali politics... they are eager to work with India'



EXPERT EXPLAINS
RANJIT RAE

FORMER INDIAN AMBASSADOR TO NEPAL

Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak.

Ranjit Rae, who served as India's envoy to Nepal between 2013 and 2017, spoke to Anagha Jayakumar about the developments in Nepali politics and their implications for India's relationship with Nepal.

What are your initial impressions of the new government?

I believe the new government has truly hit the ground running; they have announced an extensive 100-day programme focused on three pillars: justice, constitutional reform, and good governance. They have taken several strong and serious steps regarding the Gen Z protests, seeking to bring those responsible for the September 8 killings to justice, and investigating the arson that followed on September 9. These were tabled in the Gaun Bahadur Karki-led Investigation Commission report.

On the constitutional front, they have established a committee to discuss reforms to the Constitution for better efficiency, though the leadership of this framework remains a sensitive issue in Nepal.



Nepal PM Balendra 'Balen' Shah. FILE PHOTO

The government is also tackling systemic corruption by committing to investigating all cases since 1991. This has led to high-profile arrests of political leaders and "fixers", which has struck a chord with a supportive public. To improve delivery, they plan to digitise the citizen-govern-

ment interface, allowing documents such as passports to be delivered directly to homes to eliminate bribes and queues.

How do you view the Nepal Supreme Court's show cause notice against the arrests?

The show-cause notice is not an exceptional or political move; whenever the government takes such action, the Supreme Court naturally asks for the reasons behind it. The courts have also extended the remand of both the former Prime Minister and Mr Lekhak. There are substantive grounds for the arrests, which include not just politicians but middlemen and fixers as well. Balen Shah ran on the plank of anti-corruption, and everyone in Nepal is aware how a few leaders had cornered political and economic power to promote their own interests and feather their own nests.

Interestingly, while the political figures remain in jail, a senior bureaucrat indicted by the commission was released — a signal that the new leadership recognises it must work with the permanent bureaucracy to

deliver governance. The distinction in how the bureaucracy is being treated, compared to the previous political leadership, shows a certain caution by the current leaders.

How do you interpret the decline of communism in Nepal today and the emergence of a political alternative?

In Nepal, I believe communism fell quite some time ago. While political parties continued to call themselves Maoists or Marxist-Leninists, they were essentially reformed communists who believed in economic development, the capitalist way, and free enterprise. They integrated into the multi-party democratic system but over the years developed a monopoly on power, allowing corruption to seep in and eventually overtake it. This is precisely why we are seeing a reaction in the form of completely new forces emerging in Nepal. I believe the new government's ideology is one of pragmatism: supporting Nepal's development and doing everything possible to improve people's lives.

Are there specific signals for India to

read into these recent developments?

The most important signal for India is the profound generational change in Nepali politics. We are now dealing with a group of educated, dynamic, and young leaders; the oldest member of the cabinet is the Finance Minister at 51 — an economist of international repute — while the Prime Minister is only 36 years old. Recently, many of these leaders, including the PM, have studied in India, while others have been educated in Western countries. This is a leadership that is not ideologically tied in the traditional sense; they are technocratic, focused on rapid development, and eager to work with India to achieve that goal.

For India, our 'neighbourhood first' policy needs to focus on youth connectivity. While we talk a lot about physical connectivity — roadways, railways, transmission lines, and digital links — we must add a youth dimension, especially since 50% of Nepal's population is below 26. Beyond infra and hydro-power projects, we need to find new ways of bringing the young people of our two countries closer together.

The Big Picture

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 2026

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THE INSCRUTABLE MR VIJAYAN

Why this is Pinarayi Vijayan's election — to win or to lose

If his first term was about steering Kerala through a string of crises, from floods to the pandemic, his second has seen him consolidate his position. Now, as Pinarayi Vijayan faces another election, SHAJU PHILIP & LIZ MATHEW on the 81-year-old comrade whose rise to the CM chair is a textbook case of political consolidation in a cadre party



ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

ENTHORU MATTAM (What an incredible change!) It's what a visiting expatriate, dazzled by Kerala's road network, reportedly remarked to Pinarayi Vijayan. The Chief Minister often falls back on the phrase, turning it both into a personal endorsement of his decade-long term and a punchline that anchors the ruling Left Democratic Front's (LDF) campaign for the upcoming Kerala Assembly elections.

Ahead of the 2021 elections, Vijayan was projected as the captain of a state caught in a stormy sea of crises — floods, Nipah, cyclone Ockhi, the Covid pandemic. Now, after another term in office, he is being pitched as the man who transformed Kerala. On reefs and roadside banners, the CPI(M)'s poll slogan is, "If not LDF, then who?" Given Vijayan's complete hold over his party and government, the question might as well be, "If not Vijayan, then who?"

Despite this apparent confidence, as Vijayan aims for a third term, he can't afford to leave anything to chance. The alleged theft and misappropriation of gold in Sabarimala, combined with the setback in the local polls, have left the CPM with a job on its hands.

In the last leg of the campaign, the 81-year-old Vijayan has been crisscrossing the state, addressing four rallies a day ahead of the April 9 election.

On March 30, as his SUV rolled into a convention ground at Kottarakkara in the southern district of Kollam, party candidate K N Balagopal paused his speech and extended a brief welcome.

As he stepped out of the vehicle, party workers raised their clenched fists and shouted, "Comrade Vijayan, lead us", "Salute to Pinarayi Vijayan".

Without stopping to talk to any of the leaders waiting for him, Vijayan walked straight up to the stage. After a one-line welcome from a local leader, Vijayan laid out his government's achievements in a calm, flat tone. Urging the crowd to back Balagopal, he wrapped up his speech and walked off as the others on the dais stood up and watched with a mix of awe and reverence. No selfies, no handshakes, no embraces.

Vijayan's campaign style reflects his persona — minimalist, disciplined, and focused.

The climb to the top

Vijayan's rise from Pinarayi village, the site of the first official meeting of the undivided Communist Party of India in 1939, in north Kerala's Kannur district, to the highest office in the state is a textbook case of political consolidation and power centralisation in a cadre party.

At key moments in his six-decade political journey, faced with rebellious leaders and factions, Vijayan stuck steadfastly to the party line. It didn't matter who was on the other side — friend, foe or mentor — Vijayan rarely let emotions come in the way, earning him the hardliner tag.

In 1986, when CPI(M) rebel M V Raghavan posed a challenge to the party in its citadel Kannur, as then district secretary, Vijayan's organisational prowess helped prevent the flow of party workers to the outfit of his former mentor. With the support of CPI(M) workers, he ensured that Raghavan, a redoubtable leader, did not take control of party offices in the district. Now, in a twist of fortunes, Raghavan's son M V Nishesh Kumar is in charge of the party's social media campaign for the elections.

Another landmark in his political journey was in 1996, when he became the electricity minister in the CPI(M) government led by E K Nayanar. Two years later, he stepped down from the Cabinet to become the party state secretary following the death of incumbent Chadayan Govindan. It was V S Achuthanandan, then a power hub in the party, who handpicked Vijayan for the key slot as a counter to the CITU lobby within the party. Within a few years, both leaders, hailing from the same Ezhava Hindu community, pulled apart.

For the next 15 years, Kerala's politics was dominated by the rift between Achuthanandan and Vijayan. While Achuthanandan turned into a mass leader, Vijayan refused to play to the gallery, instead placing the party and its discipline above anything else. Several leaders who owed their allegiance to VS were removed from the party. At the same time, Vijayan had no qualms falling back on VS's popularity during the election campaigns of 2006 and 2011.

By 2015, when Vijayan demitted office after being the longest serving party secretary, he had silenced even the last feeble voice of opposition within the CPI(M).

A tightening grip

By 2016, when he was voted to power, the CPI(M) had coalesced around Vijayan. With no effective challenger and the party weakened elsewhere in the state, the Kerala unit of the CPI(M) that he controlled became stronger than ever before. Now, after a decade as CM, it's hard to distinguish the man from the party in Kerala, the only state where the CPI(M) is in power.

Under him, administrative efficiency became a habit rather than a slogan. With the organisation already in his grip, Vijayan realigned the allegiance of the party, its trade union outfit CITU and the student wing SFI to carry out a slew of reforms in the industrial and education sectors. *Nooku cooli* (workers demanding wages without working) was banned and loss of working days due to labour unrest came down. In the state-run road transport corporation, no-

torious for strikes and trade union dominance, the government hired bus crew on daily wages. Norms were eased, procedural bottlenecks were cleared for ease of doing business, industrial parks were expanded and startups were encouraged.

The CPI(M) also shed its obstructionist approach to Central infrastructure projects that were delayed for several years due to party-led protests — from the GAIL pipeline to land acquisition for National Highways. Road projects, including National Highways and the state's Hill Highway (a north-south road corridor to connect remote hilly areas), were put on track.

At the CPI(M) state conference held in 2025, Vijayan's clout helped him get his developmental agenda cleared by the party. But the most radical and controversial of Vijayan's fiscal policies was re-inventing the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund (KIIFB) from an infrastructure agency to a channel for off-budget borrowing to fund projects that were in the limbo for want of financial allocation. KIIFB issued masala bonds on the London Stock Exchange, raising Rs 2,150 crore and signalling a shift to a market-intensive development approach for a party that has shied away from the global capital market.

The government unwrapped a bouquet of social welfare schemes and improved on the existing ones to reach out to the marginalised sections. At least 30 per cent of the population (around one crore of 2.69 crore voters) is covered by direct social security assistance of some kind, with 81 per cent of the beneficiaries in rural areas.

Those close to him say that in a state where leaders face constant political scrutiny, Vijayan wasn't scared to be disruptive. CPI(M) parliamentary party leader John Brittas says, "Kerala politics has always been captive to the image politics of its leaders. Be it A K Antony or Oommen Chandy, they were more concerned about their image than delivery of governance. Kerala lagged in infrastructure development because of this. However, Pinarayi Vijayan just bulldozed through it. It brought him ridicule and criticism from his opponents, but he withstood them."

Yet, critics cite this very ability to push through his agenda as evidence of authori-

• Vijayan's Scorecard

EMPLOYMENT

• 3.13 lakh hired via public service commission, 2.60 lakh through KDISC, says government

• Unemployment is above the national average of 3.2%, with female unemployment (11.6%) far higher than male (4.4%) in 2023-24

INFRASTRUCTURE

• Vizhinjam seaport was commissioned. The port is now a major transportation hub

• The project is yet to further economic and job opportunities in the region for want of road and rail connectivity

INDUSTRIAL SECTOR

• Over 3.82 lakh enterprises started in the state, attracting Rs 25,227.53 crore in investments and providing employment to over 8.16 lakh people.

• Most of these ventures are in the service sector; manufacturing is yet to register a significant growth

HEALTH INDICATORS

• Kerala has among the lowest infant mortality rates (IMR) at 5 per 1,000 live births (national avg. 25)

• The state has a high burden of lifestyle diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, far above national figures

itarianism. They also point to his reluctance to nurture a strong second-rung leadership despite helming the party for nearly three decades, and his alleged sidelining of leaders such as P Jayarajan, who had a wide influence in Kannur district. But the most stark example is of K K

Shailaja, Vijayan's health minister in his first term who won praise for her ministry's handling of the Covid pandemic and the Nipah crisis. When the LDF returned to power in 2021, the entire Cabinet was dropped, but it was Shailaja's absence that was the most glaring. In the upcoming elections, too, while the party leadership decided that most MLAs would be fielded from their sitting seats, Shailaja was shifted from her Mattannur seat to Peravoor, even as a tough fight for the Left.

"Leaders like Shailaja teacher, C S Sujatha (former MP), J Mercykuttyamma or M Swardi could have been used more in the government and party," says a party leader.

Vijayan's critics say that in a party that distinguishes itself with its principled stand on most issues, his decision to promote his son-in-law PA Mohamed Riyas, who is now the Minister for Public Works & Tourism, may have been his worst call.

That Pinarayi could have his way, irrespective of party ideology and the accompanying pulls and pressures, was evident early in his first term. In 2016, he appointed India-American economist Gita Gopinath as economic advisor, signalling that he did not bother about ideological slants.

Sources say Vijayan continued taking advice from Gopinath even after she took on other assignments, including in the IMF. "When it comes to getting things done, Pinarayi adopts Deng Xiaoping's approach — it does not matter if a cat is black or white; as long as it catches mice, it's a good cat," says a party colleague.

His critics also accuse Vijayan of compromising on the Left's ideals. Vijayan's political career has been built on an uncompromising resistance to the Sangh Parivar, a stance that helped the CPI(M) draw million communities closer. But as he marks 10 years as CM, that image is under strain. The Opposition has been accusing Vijayan of surrendering to the RSS and BJP, referring to a string of incidents to make their point — his U-turn on the Centre's PM SHRI project for schools, which he had earlier dismissed as RSS-driven agenda; his failure to act against ADGP Ajith Kumar over the senior IPS officer's alleged meetings with senior RSS leaders; and his kid-glove approach towards prominent Hindu leader Vellappally

Natesan's controversial and often communally charged remarks.

While many talk about Vijayan and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the same breath, especially over the alleged centralisation of power, CPI(M) leaders dismiss the comparison. They argue that Vijayan, unlike Modi, frequently addresses the media, gives interviews and never dodges any questions.

His critics, however, refute that by referencing his famous outburst, "*kadaku purathu* (get out)", directed at reporters who tried to gatecrash a meeting between the CPI(M) and the BJP in Thiruvananthapuram in 2017.

A man for all seasons

What his critics and supporters both agree on is that Vijayan is the man to turn to in a crisis.

When Vijayan was invited to be the chief guest at the death anniversary function of Oommen Chandy, his predecessor and bitter political rival, Chandy's family came under criticism from the Congress, but they stood their ground. His son Chandy Oommen later spoke about the support Vijayan had extended to the late leader during his last days.

A businessman's recollection of his visits to the CM Office, both Vijayan's and that of Oommen Chandy, offers one of the best insights into the man.

When he walked into Chandy's office, the businessman says, he could barely spot the "people's CM" from among the crowd of Congress hangers-on. "They were everywhere — standing, sitting, even on the handle of the CM's chair. I had to look hard to spot the CM and finally I spotted him near the bathroom, on his phone."

In Pinarayi's office, he says, it's just the CM. "He gives you an appointment and expects you to be there at that precise time. And when you meet him, he listens to you. If he thinks there's merit to what you are saying, he calls his secretary and asks for the work to be done. If he doesn't agree, he will tell you bluntly," says the businessman.

The 14th child of Mundayil Koran, a toddy tapper, and Kalyani, a homemaker, Vijayan did his primary schooling at Amala Basic, a missionary school in Pinarayi. Those were the days when most children in Pinarayi dropped out of school after Class 5 and rolled *bendis* for a living. But after Vijayan completed his Class 5, school authorities prevailed on his parents to let him continue his education, "at least until he failed". Vijayan not only finished school but enrolled at Brennen College, Thalassery.

Retired school teacher K Nanu, a close friend of Vijayan from his childhood days, was among those from Pinarayi who made it to college.

Recalling an incident from his days at Brennen College, Nanu says, "Students from Pinarayi village depended on a canoe service to go to college. The service was supposed to be free, but one day, the operator demanded payment and threatened to sink the boat if we didn't pay up. All of us jumped off in fear, except for Vijayan. Later, word spread from the beedi workers of Pinarayi, the free service was restored. Vijayan soon came to be recognised as a bold student leader in the Kerala Students Federation (the CPI's student wing, which later became SFI)."

Talking of Vijayan's wedding to Kamala, Nanu says, "In those days, it was difficult to find a bride for a politician. But Kamala's father was an active Communist worker and was happy to get his daughter married to Vijayan." Vijayan and Kamala, a former school teacher, are parents to Veena, an entrepreneur who is married to minister Riyas, and Vivek, a banking professional.

Dr Sekhar Lukose Kuriaokse, member-secretary of the Kerala Disaster Management Authority, says Vijayan's leadership is "a textbook in crisis management". "I witnessed his leadership under extreme pressure during Ockhi, the floods of 2018 and 2019, landslides in Idukki and Wayanad. Such disasters demand a decision maker who possesses both a clinical understanding of systemic risks and a keen awareness of consequences," says Dr Sekhar.

Former Chief Secretary Dr V P Joy describes Vijayan as a "professional chief minister, who gets things done in a professional manner". Joy, who served for two and-a-half years in the Vijayan government, says, "Decisions are taken after deliberations. But once he makes a decision, there is no change. He uses meetings primarily as an opportunity to listen to others. In the end, he presents his opinion or decision. In my experience, all meetings have been conducted at the scheduled time, and usually last about an hour at most."

A person who has worked closely with him says Vijayan's inscrutability is often deliberate. "He invokes fear rather than affection. But he likes it that way. He feels the detachment helps him get things done. He feels all the infrastructure development he managed during his term was possible because of this approach," he says.

This election season, it's this image of Vijayan, as a "development man", that screams out of every banner and hoarding. On a 500-metre stretch of the highway leading from the Nedumbassery airport, The Indian Express counted at least three huge flex banners of the Chief Minister.

A Congress leader says, "We want those to stay. The more people see his face, the more they are reminded of his arrogance, and the better our chances." This then, is Vijayan's election — to win or to lose.



"Once he makes a decision, there is no change. He uses meetings primarily as an opportunity to listen to others," says former Chief Secretary V P Joy

"The CM invokes fear rather than affection. He likes it that way. He feels the detachment helps him get things done," says a person who has worked with Vijayan

OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



Kalpakkam: Get set for nuclear-fuel recycling

India's indigenous fast breeder reactor at this site has reached criticality. It marks a major milestone in our nuclear-power plan, signalling progress towards energy independence

India's prototype fast breeder reactor at Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu, has gone 'critical,' heralding the second stage of a three-stage nuclear power generation programme envisaged by Homi J. Bhabha. When a reactor goes critical, it means that a single atomic fission event within it releases enough neutrons to produce exactly one other fission, on average. This is enough to sustain the process of breaking uranium into lighter elements, destroying some mass and creating energy at a rate defined by Einstein's famous equation, $E=mc^2$. If the fission is sub-critical, every fission of a uranium atom would not lead to another fission and the chain reaction would fizzle out. If the reactor goes super-critical, each fission would lead to multiple new fissions, sending the reactor into uncontrollable overdrive. The purpose of our fast breeder reactor is to use plutonium recovered from the spent fuel of first-stage fission reactors to 'breed' yet more plutonium. Once sufficient quantities of this stuff are produced, it can be used to interact with locally available thorium in the plant's third stage to produce uranium. Consider the science of it. Thorium, uranium and plutonium all belong to a class of elements called 'actinides.' Bombarded under intense heat by neutrons in a nuclear reactor, uranium turns into plutonium. This plutonium exists in the spent fuel of a regular reactor; if it is not recovered, it renders this waste material highly radioactive and toxic, making disposal a challenge. However, once it is recovered, an oxidized version of it can be mixed with a uranium oxide to produce 'Mox' fuel for a fast breeder reactor. Fissile plutonium interacts with uranium and this mixture works like enriched uranium. In addition to energy, a fast

breeder reactor produces a lot more of plutonium, which can be used to produce fresh batches of Mox and yet more plutonium. Once enough of it has been created, a uranium blanket over the reactor's core can be replaced with one of thorium; this can be turned into fissile uranium, which in turn would serve as fuel India's standard pressurized heavy water reactors (PHWRs). Think of it as fuel recycling. Work on our fast breeder reactor began in the early 2000s, before the India-US nuclear deal of 2008 released us from the shackles of a tech-denial regime. So this fast breeder reactor's design and construction are indigenous. It has taken time, but India has gained notable expertise in this field to match its PHWR proficiency. Yet, a lobbying effort is underway that cites slow progress on our three-stage project to push for a technology under development in the US which would use a mix of high-assay low enriched uranium and thorium as fuel for PHWRs. Now that our prototype fast breeder reactor has attained criticality, we should ignore any attempt to kill this plan. Let's persist with the fast-breeder path we chose till its final stage. It will help minimize our need for uranium imports. In an uncertain world where vital supplies could be subject to geopolitical constraints and past understandings have been falling apart, it is crucial that we push for self-sufficiency to the extent possible. Recent reforms aimed at obtaining clean energy from nuclear plants have laid the ground for small modular reactors to be set up. These projects will be import-intensive but are welcome too. And if viable fusion reactors being developed in the US (and China) arrive in the meantime, that may be the only reason to abandon our homegrown nuclear energy programme.

Philanthropic sapling planting can't fill in for carbon reduction

Industrial emissions must be slashed. This is not only an environmental but a business imperative



SOUMYA SANKAR
is an independent expert based in New Delhi, Kolkata and Odisha. Twitter: @scurve Instagram: @soumya.scurve

Every year, some of India's largest industrial companies publish sustainability reports that are full of details on the number of trees planted, villages electrified and water bodies restored. And every year, the factories that made those reports possible continue to burn coal, run furnaces and emit carbon at rates that have barely changed in a decade. Both things are true. Neither cancels the other out. That is the uncomfortable part. India's corporate sector has spent the decade since the enactment of the Companies Act of 2013 perfecting a particular kind of environmental sincerity. The law required large companies to spend 2% of their profits on initiatives for social good. The intention was sound. But for heavy industry like steel, cement, coal and chemicals, it created an unintended side-effect. It opened up a way to be seen as environmentally responsible without any change in how the business actually ran. Plant trees, fund solar panels in a village, restore a watershed, file the report and then move on. The factory that was a source of emissions stayed exactly as it was. This was a compliance exit from the harder question of what to do about carbon coming out of the chimney. Only a small fraction of large listed companies have set any targets to reduce emissions from their core operations, while environmental corporate social responsibility (CSR) budgets have grown steadily. More troublingly, studies of corporate disclosure over the past decade suggest that heavier spending on environmental philanthropy has not translated to greater investment in an actual clean-up of industrial processes. In some analyses, the relationship ironically runs the other way. Therefore, philanthropy is not a complement to change. It is simply a pressure valve. This pattern persists because the incentives made it rational. Afforestation is cheap, visible and easy to put in an annual report. Replacing a blast furnace process or retrofitting a cement kiln costs millions, carries technology risk and seizes profits in the short term. As long as the rules reward the first and say nothing about the second, most companies will choose the first. This is not a moral failing. It is a predictable business response. Charity is not a first step. It's a detour. Three things are now changing that calculation faster than most companies realize. The European Union's carbon tax, known as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), has come into force this year. A few major goods exported to Europe are being charged for the carbon produced in making them. Indian steel and aluminium exporters, who have long competed partly by not paying for their emissions, are facing a direct price penalty. As much as 20% of India's steel exports could be materially affected. It is a straightforward commercial problem, with no reputational cushion. At home, India's carbon credit trading scheme is setting up a carbon market. Once carbon carries a price in rupees, the financial case for investing in cleaner processes will improve on its own, without any need for persuasion based on principle. Moreover, the Securities and Exchange Commission's Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting requirement asks

India's top 1,000 listed companies to disclose actual operational emissions alongside their CSR spending in the same document. For the first time, analysts and investors can put both numbers on the same page. Estimates of unpriced carbon risk sitting on the balance sheets of India's largest industrial emitters run into trillions. The tardy efforts of Indian industry to decarbonize require no new rules, but three fixes. One, redirect about a quarter of all environmental CSR budgets towards cutting emissions within a company's own supply chain—cleaner suppliers, less carbon-heavy logistics and energy efficiency in ancillary units. The money has already been set aside. It just needs to go elsewhere. Two, apply an internal carbon price to every investment decision. Firms that apply a shadow carbon price of, say, \$40-80 per tonne to investment decisions choose cleaner technologies more often when given the choice. A number in a spreadsheet changes the conversation in ways that a sustainability strategy document rarely does. Three, tie executive pay to emission reduction targets. Companies that linked a meaningful share of senior pay to emission-reduction targets are found to have cut their operational carbon intensity much faster than those that did not. Incentives work—in finance, sales or decarbonization. India's industrial base is large enough for the handling of this transition to matter beyond the country's borders. The companies that move early will find cheaper capital, open export markets and hold a stronger competitive position. Those that keep filling sustainability reports full of proclamations on saplings while leaving their furnaces untouched will eventually face a reckoning with irate regulators, investors or trade partners. These businesses should choose to act while they still can. That window will not stay open indefinitely.



THEIR VIEW

No work, all play: Musk's prophecy may not come true

ATANU BISWAS



is professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata.

Elon Musk has predicted that in 10 to 20 years, work will become optional. He has done this unmetten times—in response to a *New York Times* article about Amazon, at a US-Saudi investment forum, in a conversation with Zerodha's Nikhil Kamath, at Viva Technology 2024 in Paris and the 2023 AI Safety Summit in Blechley Park. "It'll be like playing sports or a video game or something like that," Musk said. He also likened having a job to the more time-consuming task of farming a vegetable garden instead of going grocery shopping. Musk believes that robots and artificial intelligence (AI) will deliver any goods and services you desire. In his view, humanoid robots like Tesla's Optimus may grow to be the biggest industry. According to Musk, AI and robotics could usher in an era in which all people are "far wealthier than the richest person on Earth." Additionally, Musk has stated, "We probably won't have money, and probably we will just have energy [and] power generation as *de facto* currency."

Musk, however, admitted that we must ensure that AI has a strong concern for truth and beauty. The English economist John Maynard Keynes made some daring and fascinating predictions in his 1930 article, 'Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren'. Keynes foresaw a huge increase in earnings over the course of the following century as well as an unparalleled period of leisure brought about by improved standards of living during which people would "do more things for ourselves... only too glad to have small duties and tasks and routines." "Three hours a day is quite enough to satisfy the old Adam in most of us," Keynes remarked. But Musk now predicts a workless old Adam! A future without jobs would be more dystopian than utopian; as one might imagine, civilization would strive to survive. From the invention of wheels to the introduction of machines in Nottingham's textile industry, and from steam engines to electricity, the history of human civilization shows that technological revolutions not only increase productivity but also transfer some human labour to machines that humans have created, thereby reducing human workloads. Isn't AI just another

technology that will reduce the need for human labour in some ways? Also, in 2019, Chinese billionaire Jack Ma predicted that people may work as little as three days a week and four hours a day in the next 10-20 years, thanks to technological advancements and changes in educational systems. There has undoubtedly been a significant shift in work hours since the Industrial Revolution, when workers put in 10-16 hours a day. A century ago, in 1926, Henry Ford converted the typical six-day workweek to a five-day one. Will AI's magic wand finally cause the seismic transformation in workplace culture that Keynes foresaw in his famous essay? Or would it fundamentally change to the degree that Musk has been forecasting? Scottish author Iain M. Banks' 'Culture' series of sci-fi novels, published between 1987 and 2012, serve as inspiration for Musk's automated, job-voluntary future, with money not being an issue. The self-described socialist author imagined a post-

scarcity society where human labour is voluntary. AI ensures abundance and humanoid aliens as well as superintelligent AI bots are dispersed throughout the Milky Way galaxy. Elon Musk may well have been inspired by Banks' concept since he was a student. In essence, Musk may believe that AI will lead to a Banksian 'space socialism.' "In those books, money doesn't exist," Musk once observed. "It's kind of interesting." Well, Culture's universe is appealing and emotionally plausible, even though the anticipated AI advancements might take centuries or millennia to materialize rather than decades. According to Musk, since everyone will have access to this magic genie, AI will act as a kind of leveller. But didn't he tell Twitter employees in November 2022 to be ready for 80-hour workweeks amid a tumultuous start to his leadership at the company? More recently, Tesla announced Musk's \$1 trillion pay package (though payable only if

some targets are met). And how challenging will it be to develop an AI that's "maximally truth-seeking?" Robots so far have proven expensive, making them difficult to scale, even as the cost of AI is declining, according to a new working paper by the University of Pennsylvania's Konrad Kording and Ioana Marinescu, who presented a novel framework for assessing AI and the future of work. "AI transformation will be significant yet bounded, not infinite," they contend. There are many experts who do not agree with Musk's prediction that AI will transform the workplace beyond recognition. After Musk's remarks in Blechley Park, Mustafa Suleyman, a British AI researcher and co-founder of DeepMind, said in 2023, "I think that certainly over a 50-year period, we should be concerned." While Musk's vision of full-scale automation may partly be the future, AI adoption in the workplace is still not happening as quickly as anticipated, despite recent rounds of tech-related layoffs. Thus, rather than confirming the Muskian prognosis, an AI-driven global labour market may lend credence to a Keynesian scenario. The future that Keynes had in mind was around 2030, right?

Keynes' forecast of far greater income, living standards and leisure time looks a lot more realistic



MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

MINT CURATOR

Why a crude oil crisis could play out differently this time around

India's economy, like the world's, is structurally less vulnerable than in the 70s but policymakers must still pay close attention



NIRANJANA RAJADHYAKSHA
is executive director at Artha India Research Advisors.

The ongoing war in West Asia has cast a pall of uncertainty over the global economy. The disruptions in energy supplies have begun to ripple through supply chains across the world. In its latest monthly review of the Indian economy, the finance ministry has noted: "Recent shocks are being transmitted through higher input costs, supply constraints and pressures across sectors, with early indications of some moderation in economic activity."

For economic policymakers, managing a disruption in supply is far more complicated than responding to a sudden shift in demand. The reason is simple. In the case of a demand shock, both output and prices move in the same direction. For example, a sudden drop in demand in an economy will lead to slower growth as well as lower inflation. The textbook solution of stimulating the economy through lower interest rates as well as higher government spending usually works well.

Supply shocks are very different. Output and prices move in different directions. For example, a shortage of supplies means that economic activity slows down while inflation moves up. The textbook solutions lose their bite in these extraordinary situations, creating tricky choices between either supporting growth or taming price increases.

A lot will depend on how long the war will last. The best strategy right now would be for the government to absorb some of the initial price increases through either tax cuts or higher subsidies, while the Reserve Bank of India waits along the sidelines. It will be less neat in case the supply shock lasts through the year.

Policymakers, companies, investors and economists will obviously be keeping a close eye on how economic growth and inflation behave in the months ahead. The general expectation is that economic activity will lose some momentum while price pressures will increase. The final effect on both fronts will be tough to assess since war disruptions are still playing out and the impact could be non-linear in case there are physical shortages of key inputs, both for industry as well as agriculture.

Does economic history offer any clues? The first major oil shock that hit the global economy was in October 1973. Oil prices quadrupled in a short span of time after West Asian petroleum exporters imposed a severe embargo on shipments after the Yom Kippur war of some Arab states with Israel.

The Indian economy went through a harrowing time. Consumer price inflation averaged 23% a year over the next two years. Economic growth was a modest 4.6% in 1973-74. It then went into negative territory the next year. Growth in nominal gross domestic product (GDP) was 22.6% that year and 17.7% in 1974-75. What this means is that the



sharp rise in nominal GDP was because of higher prices rather than an increase in output. Stagflation, in other words.

The next oil shock came in 1979 after the Islamic revolution in Iran and start of the Iran-Iraq war. Nominal GDP expanded by a modest 9.1% in 1979-80 and then a sharp 19.5% the next year. India had double-digit inflation in both these years. The economy contracted by 5.2% in real terms in 1979-80. It bounced back the following year, with a real growth rate of 7.2%.

However, harsh lessons from those two oil shocks have to be tempered with one other fact. India was unlucky to face energy shortages even as droughts hit agricultural production in these two periods. So high inflation as well as muted economic growth was the result of a twin battering that the governments of the day had no direct control over. Agriculture is now a much smaller part of the Indian economy compared to 1973 and 1979, and food stocks are far more comfortable. This is important given early warnings of an El Niño year, which signals dry conditions. However, on the other side, India uses far more fossil fuel energy than it did back then.

The other lesson comes a year closer to our times. Soaring international crude oil prices were

one reason why India's nominal growth was 18.7% in 2010-11. Consumer price inflation averaged 12.2% that year. Unlike 1973 or 1979, global oil prices were pushed up by red-hot economic growth in countries such as China and India as well speculative buying fuelled by a wave of cheap money unleashed by central banks in the aftermath of the North Atlantic Financial Crisis in 2008. The main lesson here is that inflation was not the result of restrictions on energy supplies but also of loose macroeconomic policies.

A look at the data since 1970 shows that there is a negligible relationship between global oil prices on one hand and nominal economic growth on the other. Data points scatter, with no clear pattern. The line of best fit has a slope so gentle that it is barely meaningful. India has grown rapidly with oil at \$15 a barrel and equally rapidly with oil at \$110.

However, this overall benign story hides what happened during severe energy shocks—in 1973-74, 1980-81, 1990-91 and 2021-22. A lot will depend on the details. Is the world facing a supply shock or a demand shock? Are there any other exogenous blows, such as a hit to food production? How dependent are economies on oil? And how will economic policy respond to these disclosures?

Trump is making China look like a better bet for the world

Pax Americana has been unreliable but Chinese wares have helped



MIHIR SHARMA
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist.



Relying upon Beijing may not turn out to be any safer eventually. ISTOCKPHOTO

For at least a decade, developing countries across Asia and Africa have worried about growing dependence on the People's Republic of China. They're concerned about debt traps, coercive policies and hidden costs that might push their economies toward crisis.

Crisis has come, and that logic has been turned on its head. After six weeks of the US and Israel's war on Iran and its ensuing counter-attacks, it is the countries that bet on Chinese supply chains that are faring better than the ones that had trusted Pax Americana.

Consider Pakistan. By now it should have been in the middle of yet another economic and social implosion. It has always been vulnerable to energy price shocks, given that it imports almost all of its energy, much of it through the Strait of Hormuz. The country has \$130 billion in external debt and a persistent current account deficit and so the slightest nudge should have tipped it over into a familiar spiral: emergency requests to the International Monetary Fund, 18-hour power blackouts, unrest on the streets.

None of that is visible. There are signs of stress, certainly. Islamabad has hiked fuel prices and is reportedly planning to shut off electricity for two to three hours each day. A sustained shortage of liquid natural gas will make it hard to keep power plants running. But, compared to the situation just a few years ago—when, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the economy had a full-scale meltdown—it's showing remarkable resilience.

What's the difference? Chinese-made solar panels. Pakistanis have gleefully transitioned to solar power, importing about 17 gigawatts a year of photovoltaics since 2021. A quarter of households have installed solar panels for their own use.

Islamabad didn't even have to spend too much money subsidizing the renewables rollout. It just had to ride Chinese overcapacity and make it work for Pakistani citizens by keeping tariffs low. The price of imported solar panels dropped by almost 60% in 2024-25; Beijing's subsidies kept Chinese factories humming, but also financed the electrification of millions of households across Pakistan.

Many other countries made the opposite choice in order to insulate domestic production or minimize political risk. Those that tried to keep cheap Chinese photovoltaic cells out have seen much slower rates of uptake—and are, in consequence, far more exposed to chaos in the Gulf.

Nor are solar panels the only way in

which cheap Chinese goods are turning out to be sources of resilience rather than disruption. Nepal has a higher proportion of electric vehicles (EVs) than any other country in the world, barring Norway. Its huge imported fleet of cheap EVs mean that it is far less worried about petrol prices than most of its Asian neighbours. And they run on clean electricity, emerging from a hydropower infrastructure that is financed in part by Beijing.

It's not hard to imagine policymakers from across the developing world looking at examples like these and concluding that betting on Beijing isn't actually the riskier option. Some may already have taken that chance: imports of Chinese solar panels have shot up in the past couple of years across sub-Saharan Africa in particular. If the only options are dependence on predictably mercantilist Beijing and on an erratic, self-centred and disruptive US, the choice is obvious.

That may turn out to be the wrong call. It is not wise to imagine that relying upon Beijing's goodwill is any safer. In just the past year, China has shown its willingness to weaponize control over supply chains, such as the production of magnets and rare earths.

But right now, the contrast is glaring. Countries that believed that the world's open trading order, underpinned by American hegemony, would protect them from shocks are struggling; those who chose to run the risk of dependence upon Chinese imports and infrastructure are showing unexpected resilience.

This will only get worse if the US withdraws from the Gulf without making an effort to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Then the lesson the world learns is even harsher: America will make decisions about your energy supply, take no responsibility for the consequences, and then leave. China will sell you the technology that allows you to stop caring about what the US does.

This is a far greater geopolitical setback to the US than a loss of face in the Iran war might be. The US president may have thought that he would be remembered as the one who restored American greatness by solving long-running problems—Venezuela, Iran, perhaps Cuba. Instead, it looks like he'll be remembered as the president who lost Asia to China. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Rethink the changes proposed for India's internet rules

RAHUL MATTHAN



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

On 30 March, the ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY) published draft amendments to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules, 2021, which, if passed, will have far-reaching consequences for internet users in India. While each of the three primary amendment proposals does something different, together they will transform the internet from a rules-based regime into one governed by discretion. Though they may seem benign, their bite could be worse than their bark.

The new Rule 14(2) would expand the powers of the Inter-Departmental Committee (IDC) from hearing just "complaints and grievances" to "any matter" referred directly by the ministry. Rule 8 takes things further by not just expanding adjudicatory power, but who is subject to it—from 'publishers' to anyone who posts about news online. But both these play in relation to Rule 3(4), which reshapes the source of legal authority. Let's go through each provision to better

understand how they will all affect us.

Let us start with Rule 14. Through a set of innocuous adjustments, sub-rule (2) will significantly expand the powers of the IDC. From being an apex appellate body in a three-tier complaint-resolution mechanism for violations of the Code of Ethics, it could become a super-regulator with the power to hear just about "any matter" that the ministry refers to it.

There are two problems with this. First, since the IDC would have the power to rule on anything the ministry sends it, the recommendations it issues could well exceed the statutory authority under which it was created. But what's far worse is that by accepting references directly from the ministry, parties could be denied the two levels of appeal they are currently entitled to, thus collapsing the current three-tier mechanism into a single executive-controlled process. With this one amendment alone, the government could end up violating principles of both administrative law and natural justice.

It is worth noting that in August 2021, the Bombay High Court stayed the Code of Ethics framework as *prima facie* violative of Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India—a prohibition subsequently extended by the Madras High Court. In this backdrop, for the inter-

departmental panel to operate within this now tenuous structure would expand its powers even as the constitutionality of the framework itself remains under litigation and is questionable.

This brings us to Rule 8(4). As originally drafted, this provision applied only to "publishers of news and current affairs content" and "publishers of online curated content." In other words, regular news outlets, as well as their online equivalents. The proposed amendment will extend the applicability of certain provisions to ordinary users who share news or current affairs content. Since sharing posts about news is something we all do, this means that a provision earlier designed for news organisations will now apply to you and me. In effect, the Code of Ethics, a standard of accuracy, fairness and impartiality with which news organisations must comply, could get extended to ordinary internet users who have neither the resources nor the inclination to vet everything they post at this

level of rigour.

But it is the proposed addition of a new sub-Rule (4) to Rule 3 that in many ways is the most disappointing. This new provision seeks to legally elevate clarifications, advisories, orders, directions, standard operating procedures, codes of practice and guidelines to the level of rules and regulations (the only forms of subordinate legislation that the executive branch is constitutionally permitted to enact). If brought into force, it will allow the executive to make a new law without creating a law, and, in doing so, arrogate upon itself the power and authority that ought to vest with the legislature. Or at the very least be subject to Parliamentary supervision.

The power of the executive branch to make rules and regulations is always subject to an obligation to place them before Parliament as soon after they have been made as possible. By elevating various informal executive instruments of this kind to the level of enforceable law—one of which need to be laid before the legislative

branch—the government seems to be trying to evade a necessary constitutional check on its power.

What makes these regressive proposals particularly disappointing is that they were released for public consultation just three days after the Jan Vishwas Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha. The latter, as many have noted, is the single largest horizontal decriminalisation effort anywhere in the world, significantly improving the ease of doing business across sectors. Central to this deregulation effort is the principle of regulatory certainty it embodies—that the state should not impose compliance obligations on citizens through instruments that do not carry the weight of the law. For the government to just a few days later introduce amendments that do just that shows how little the left hand appears to know of what the right is doing.

I am the first to admit how hard it is to govern modern online spaces and these proposed amendments are an attempt to walk a well-known tightrope between allowing free expression online and preventing the harms that can result. But if we cannot find a more effective way to strike that balance, we will replace a system governed by rules with one ruled by executive discretion.

They will give the executive discretionary power and make life harder for regular users of online platforms

Economy

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 2026

IN THE NEWS

GOVT MAY SEEK REVISED BIDS FOR IDBI BANK

THE CENTRE MAY ask for revised financial bids from two potential buyers of IDBI Bank as their original bid amounts were lower than the reserve price fixed for the strategic sale of the lender, sources said.

JSW, OTHERS TAKE PART IN PRE-BID FOR RARE EARTHS

AT LEAST 25 companies, including JSW Group and NLC India, participated in a pre-bid conference for the ₹7,280-crore scheme to promote the manufacturing of sintered rare earth permanent magnet called by the heavy industries ministry on Tuesday, sources said.

SC says borrowers not entitled to personal hearing

THE SUPREME COURT on Tuesday said that borrowers are not entitled to a mandatory personal hearing before their accounts are classified as fraud by banks under the rules laid down by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

CIDCO presents ₹16,250-crore budget for FY27

THE CITY AND Industrial Development Corporation (CIDCO) on Tuesday presented a ₹16,250-crore budget for the financial year 2026-27, prioritising infrastructure, regional connectivity, and affordable housing in Navi Mumbai. It outlines a projected receipt of ₹16,250 crore.

Dermathon to raise awareness for skin health

THE FIRST DERMATHON 2026 saw over 500+ participants, including dermatologists, doctors, and marathon enthusiasts. The event successfully blended fitness with skin health awareness, reinforcing the message of holistic well-being.

FE BUREAU & AGENCIES

ANNUAL PROCESSING & PRESERVATION CAPACITIES HAVE DOUBLED

PLI for food processing sector attracts ₹9,200-cr investment

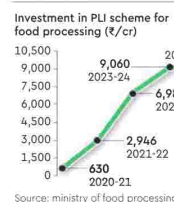
SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, April 7

MORE THAN ₹9,200 CRORE investments have been made by 165 firms under the production-linked incentive scheme in the food processing sector between FY22 to FY25, a senior official said on Tuesday. The scheme has attracted investment by corporates, including Nestle India, Hindustan Unilever, Parle Agro, Britannia, ITC, Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation or Amul, Tata Consumer and Haldimad, D Praveen, joint secretary, ministry of food processing said.

Additionally, the country's annual processing and preservation capacities have been doubled to 7.3 million tonne (MT) with the addition of 3.4 MT created through the PLI scheme. Investment under the scheme has exceeded initial commitments, with cumulative investments reaching ₹9,207 crore against a committed ₹7,722 crore across 22 states, Praveen said.

He said that the scheme has

SCHEME OUTLAY



Source: ministry of food processing



Investments under the scheme have exceeded initial commitments. Focus on marine products, processed fruits and vegetables, ready-to-cook food and Mozzarella cheese

also helped increase production capacity, boost exports, support Indian brands, generate employment, and strengthen the overall food processing ecosystem in the country.

It focuses on four key segments - marine products, processed fruits and vegetables, ready to cook food and Mozzarella cheese. In the four years between 2021-22 to 2024-25, financial incentives of ₹2,740 crore have been disbursed to several private sector entities under the PLI scheme.

The states which have attracted major investment under PLI scheme include - Gujarat (₹1,600 crore), Maharashtra (₹1,368 crore), Andhra Pradesh (₹1,313 crore), Uttar Pradesh (₹1,242 crore) and Bihar (₹660 crore).

The scheme is currently being implemented for the period of six years from FY22 to FY27 with a total financial outlay of ₹10,900 crore. However, the implementation of the scheme would continue till the end of FY28.

"The incentives under the scheme are admissible where the entire chain of manufacturing processes, including primary processing of the food products applied for coverage under the scheme takes place in India," the ministry had said in a statement.

Praveen stated that sales of PLI-subsidised products have grown at a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10.58%, while exports have registered a CAGR of 7.41% despite global challenges.

Panel to explore ways to boost ethanol use

SANDIP DAS
New Delhi, April 7

THE GOVERNMENT HAS set up an inter-ministerial panel comprising petroleum, heavy industries and food ministries to consider ways to utilise the surplus ethanol manufacturing capacity, including an increase in the blending of ethanol with petrol from the current level of 20%, Food Secretary Sanjeev Chopra said on Tuesday.

"There is a demand from industry to increase the blending of ethanol into petrol from the current 20%. We have a surplus capacity of ethanol manufacturing at 20 billion litres," Chopra said on the sidelines of the conference ISMA Sugar NXT 2026.

At present, oil marketing companies procure 11 to 12 billion litres of ethanol made from sugarcane, rice and maize annually for 20% blending with petrol.

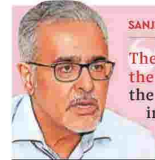
In response to West Asia war which has disrupted oil supplies, Chopra said the committee would look into how to utilise this additional ethanol manufacturing capacities and there are several options, including increase in ethanol blending and promotion of flex fuel vehicles is being discussed.

"We may get some news before the next ethanol supply year (which starts in November)," he said while adding that

SURPLUS CAPACITY

■ OMCs procure 11-12 bn litres of ethanol annually for 20% blending with petrol

■ The panel would look into how to utilise additional ethanol making capacities



SANJEEV CHOPRA, FOOD SECRETARY
There is a demand from the industry to increase the blending of ethanol into petrol from the current 20%...

since the launch of ethanol blending programme, there has been savings of ₹1.65 lakh crore in terms of foreign exchange so far. Currently, out of the total 40 ethanol manufacturers, around 250 units are grain based (rice and maize) while the rest operate on sugar-based feed stock.

In the 2025-26 ethanol supply year (November-October) only 2.89 billion litres of ethanol, just 28% of the total requirement, have been allocated from sugar-based feedstocks, compared to 72% or 7.61 billion litres from grain-based sources - 4.78 billion litres from maize (45%) and 2.83 billion litres from rice (22%).

The ministry of petroleum and natural gas recently stated that it is formulating a mechanism to address the issue of excess ethanol capacity with

the sugar and food grain processing industry, in consultation with the ministry of food. The options include easing export of ethanol and laying a road map for increasing the share of biofuel blended with petrol.

The Grain Ethanol Manufacturers Association, in communication to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has suggested adoption of ethanol-based cook-stoves as a complementary option alongside LPG for both domestic households and commercial establishments such as restaurants, street vendors, and institutional kitchens. The government is conducting a study to assess the feasibility of 'sweet sorghum' as an alternate feedstock for production of ethanol to diversify the raw material base for the biofuel.

Morgan Stanley reduces FY27 India growth forecast to 6.2%

MORGAN STANLEY HAS cut India's growth forecast to 6.2% from 6.5% for FY27 and increased the inflation forecast to 5.1% from 4%, citing that the ongoing war in West Asia might lead to elevated energy prices and supply-side constraints. It had previously tracked upside risks, forecasting real GDP growth at 7.4% for

Q4 FY26 and approximately 7% for FY27. The brokerage said in its latest note that the country's current account deficit is likely to widen to 2.5% of GDP from the 1% projected earlier. These projections are based on crude prices at \$95 per barrel in FY27. However, if oil prices spike to \$150 a barrel for a quarter, the brokerage projects

GDP growth at 5.7%, retail inflation breaching 6% and the current account deficit widening to 3% of GDP. Earlier, Moody's Ratings had trimmed India's growth outlook for the current fiscal year to 6% from the 6.8% estimated earlier, flagging rising risks from the ongoing conflict in West Asia. Goldman Sachs lowered its 2026 growth forecast for India to 5.9%

from 7% before the conflict. In contrast, S&P Global Ratings took a more optimistic view, raising its projections by 40 basis points (bps) to 7.1% for FY27. The divergence reflects the high degree of uncertainty surrounding the crisis's duration and intensity.

—SAIKAT NEOGI



* It had previously tracked upside risks, forecasting 7% GDP growth for FY27



Source: Morgan Stanley

Govt returns to buying Venezuelan crude oil

THE GOVERNMENT IS set to import the most oil from Venezuela in almost six years, helping the world's third-largest crude importer replace West Asian grades disrupted by the Iran war.

More than 12 million barrels are headed to the country this month from Venezuela, the most since February 2020, according to data from Kpler. The April-arriving cargoes were likely secured before the recent disruptions in supplies from West Asia, underscoring a longer-term strategic shift rather than a purely reactive move, said Sumit Bhatia, a lead research analyst at the data intelligence firm.

India, which imports about 90% of its crude, has been seeking alternatives after the Iran war disrupted flows through the Strait of Hormuz, which typically transits almost 40% of the country's oil supplies. —BLOOMBERG



Workers load LPG cylinders on a carrier truck amid the supply crunch, in Chikkamagaluru (Karnataka) on Tuesday

Fuel demand spikes



WAR BYTES

annually and sequentially, driven by panic buying amid fears of supply disruptions linked to the West Asia conflict.

Petrol consumption rose 7.6% year-on-year to 3.78 MT in March 2026 from 3.51 MT in March 2025, while diesel increased 8.1% to 8.73 MT from 8.08 MT. On a month-to-month basis, petrol jumped 12.2% from 3.37 MT in February, and diesel surged 13.9% from 7.66 MT, indicating precautionary stocking and heightened demand, the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC) showed. —FE BUREAU

Solar can meet bulk of power demand

SAURAV ANAND
New Delhi, April 7

SOLAR POWER BACKED by battery storage can now meet up to 90% of India's electricity demand at a cost of ₹5.06 per unit, lower than the average power procurement cost across most states, marking a structural shift in the country's energy economics amid rising demand and volatile fossil fuel prices.

The findings underline low rapid declines in storage costs are enabling round-the-clock renewable power, with solar-plus-battery systems already cheaper than coal-based generation in several states, according to global energy think tank Ember. "Solar and batteries could supply 90% of India's electricity demand at a competitive LCOE of around ₹5.06/kWh," the report said, highlighting the growing cost advantage of renewables over conventional sources.

The development comes as India's electricity demand continues to expand, crossing 2,000 terawatt-hours (TWh) in 2024, increasing pressure on conventional generation and fuel imports.

A key driver behind this shift is the sharp fall in battery costs. Global turnkey battery prices declined by around 40% in 2024 and a further 31% in 2025, significantly improving the viability of storing solar energy for use beyond daylight hours. "Battery economics have improved sharply in the last two years," the report noted, adding that storage is no longer a barrier to delivering firm, dispatchable renewable power. According to the analysis, meeting 90% of India's electricity demand would require about 930 GW of solar capacity and 2,560 GWh of battery storage, translating to roughly 4.9 GW of solar and 13.5 GWh of storage per 1 GW of average demand load.

Reforms to improve insolvency outcomes for MSMEs proposed

MANU KAUSHIK
New Delhi, April 7

TO STRENGTHEN THE insolvency framework for medium, small and micro enterprises (MSMEs), a recent Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India (IBBI) study suggests that the government permit clubbing of claims by operational creditors (OCs) up to a limit of 10 claims. This proposal aims to improve the recovery of marginal suppliers/vendors during the insolvency process.

"Individually, many MSMEs do not hold claims large enough to justify the cost of initiating proceedings, even when non-payment is persistent and economically damaging. Aggregation would allow similarly placed OCs to collectively initiate proceedings, thereby improving access to the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) without lowering thresholds across the board," the study said.

At present, the statutory threshold for OCs to submit claims and initiate bankruptcy proceedings requires a mini-

IBC AT A GLANCE



mum default of ₹1 crore. The study, conducted by Management Development Institute (MDI) Gurgaon, asked for a waiver of procedural and filing charges for smaller OCs post admission to the insolvency proceedings.

A key job of the study was to identify structural gaps in the current resolution auction design. To address this, it has

proposed an auction model where the bidder offering the highest overall recovery is awarded. This must be coupled with implementing a quasi-Absolute Priority Rule (quasi-APR) for the distribution of proceeds. Under the quasi-APR, financial creditors' priority will be fully recognised up to the firm's liquidation value, and any value retained beyond

liquidation will then be distributed proportionately across other creditor classes. "The quasi-APR with MSME orientation provides large OCs and MSMEs with recovery rates proportional to their claims," the study noted. Additionally, the study suggests that the National e-Governance Services (NeS) should be mandated to record all accepted OC invoices of at least ₹1 crore. NeS is a central repository for financial information that enables OCs to submit and store data regarding debts, which acts as an evidence of default under the IBC. "A systematic recording of claims would reduce informational frictions, speed up dispute resolution, and lower transaction costs at the pre-admission stage, particularly for MSMEs," the study said.

Tailored specifically for MSMEs, the package includes insolvency resolution process (PIRP) has been sparsely used with just 14 cases filed under it so far. The study calls for interventions by eliminating the clause requiring that OCs suffer "no impairment" of their claims

Govt doubles 5-kg LPG supply; daily sales cross 100,000

THE GOVERNMENT HAS doubled the daily supply of 5-kg free trade LPG (FTL) cylinders to states for distribution to migrant labourers, with sales already crossing 100,000 units per day. Since March 23, around 7.80,000 5-kg LPG cylinders have been sold, while on April 6 alone, over 1,06,000 units were sold, significantly higher than the February average of 77,000 cylinders per day, according to data from the petroleum ministry. "It is conveyed that the daily quantity of 5kg FTL cylinder in each state available for distribution to migrant labourers is being doubled, beyond limit of 20%," the ministry said, adding that the cylinders will be distributed through state governments with support from OMCs. —FE BUREAU

Sugar consumption declines due to West Asia war

INDIA'S SUGAR CONSUMPTION IS projected to come down by almost 0.4 million tonne (MT) in the 2025-26 season (October-September) to 27.7 MT, as the LPG crisis due to the war in West Asia and a cooler-than-usual March cut down demand, an official of Indian Sugar and Bio-energy Manufacturers Association (ISMA) said on Tuesday. "Till October 2025 to February 2026, sugar dispatches were higher by around 60,000 tonne compared to the same period last year, but the situation shifted as the West Asia conflict escalated in March," Deepak Ballani, DG, ISMA said on the sidelines of the 'ISMA Sugar NXT 2026' conference. —FE BUREAU

Opinion

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 2026

Utterly Amul

From village co-ops to global shelves, India's leading food brand scales new heights

AMUL'S POPULAR MILK and dairy products—marketed by the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF)—is the first Indian food brand to hit a turnover of ₹1 lakh crore (\$10.75 billion) in 2025-26. It is a dominant player not only domestically but also globally as the GCMMF is the largest farmer-owned dairy cooperative. The produce of 3.6 million farmers directly reaches the consumer, cutting out the middleman, and exemplifies how cooperatives dramatically transform their livelihoods. Unlike the majority of their counterparts in crop cultivation whose incomes are under severe stress, these dairy farmers are paid every day of the year for their daily supply of 35 million litres of milk. The cooperative also provides subsidised cattle feed and veterinary services. Amul's success naturally led to its replication beyond Gujarat with 16 million farmers across the country supplying milk to 185,903 dairy cooperative societies, which is processed in 222 district cooperative milk unions and marketed by 28 state marketing federations, all of which make India the world's largest milk producer. Amul hit the historic milestone with double-digit growth of 11% over 2024-25 through an aggressive push both domestically and globally. The popular brand makes around 4% of its sales from exports to 50 countries and has raised its level of ambition to establish a presence abroad. This entailed penetrating small towns with a population above 5,000 as also introducing its fresh milk in the US and Europe.

In March 2024, the GCMMF partnered with Michigan Milk Producers Association to bring Amul's fresh milk products to the US. The choice of Michigan was to honour the memory of Verghese Kurien—who kicked-started the Amul revolution and was the founder-chairman of the GCMMF—and his ties as an alumnus of Michigan State University. In Spain, the GCMMF has partnered the Cooperativa Ganadera del Valle de los Pedrechos. "We are not just expanding globally; we are also expanding the very definition of what a farmer-owned institution can achieve in the modern world, ensuring that the fruits of technology and global trade reach the hands of producers," stated Jayen Mehta, managing director, GCMMF, in a press release.

Amul's dominance domestically and global ambitions, however, does not quite square with India being firm on its red lines to open up agriculture and dairy in free trade negotiations. The dairy ecosystem has high barriers to foreign competition, which will stay that way so long as the government insists that India does not take dairy from outside. Any trade negotiation entails a process of give and take for greater access to each other's markets. Freer trade in farm and dairy produce is no exception, more so as economists like Ashok Gulati believe that Indian agriculture is not as vulnerable as popularly believed—80% is reasonably competitive. So, too, is dairy. The ₹1-lakh crore question is whether a more self-confident Amul can lead the charge in this regard as it has been described by an European trade negotiator as an "Indian state in itself", representing farmers whose numbers exceed the population of Uruguay. According to him, the government wants to keep them on its side, so dairy is completely off trade talks as Amul is a huge constituency, an article in *Financial Times* says. Amul's stance on these issues bears watching as it expects to expand in double digits due to its commanding position.

INDIA'S REGULATORS HAVE a recurring instinct when confronted by new financial products—rather than defining them on their own terms, they reach for the nearest statutory category and stretch it to fit. The recent order of the Karnataka High Court in Nishchay Babu Arakalug, V. State of Karnataka is the latest and most instructive instance of this tendency.

At the centre of the controversy is Jar, a platform built on a deceptively simple proposition—letting users buy physical gold in denominations as low as ₹10, with the underlying metal held by independent custodians such as Brinks India Private Limited. The model is less financial engineering than behavioural nudge. It converts spare change into incremental gold ownership, drawing on a deep-rooted cultural preference for the asset.

That model has now been drawn into the ambit of the Banning of Unregulated Deposit Schemes Act, 2019 (BUDS Act), a statute designed to dismantle Ponzi schemes and curb illicit deposit-taking. Acting on inputs from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and a public caution issued by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) in November 2025, which noted that digital gold falls outside its regulatory perimeter, the police registered an FIR against the company and its directors under Sections 21(1) and 21(2) of the BUDS Act.

The legal contest that followed is instructive. Jar's position was straightforward—these were completed sale transactions, evidenced by invoices, with title passing to the buyer immediately. There was no "deposit", no promise to return money, and no pooling of funds. The platform facilitated a purchase and arranged for custody, nothing more. The state countered with a purposive argument—the definition of "deposit" under the BUDS Act is intentionally broad and must be read to advance its protective objective. Given the scale of the business

● SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Vice-President CP Radhakrishnan

One of the biggest challenges facing our youth is the menace of substance abuse. Drugs destroy not only individuals but also families and entire communities

● DIGITAL GOLD DILEMMA

IF LAW BEGINS TO TREAT PURCHASES AS DEPOSITS, IT RISKS BLURRING DISTINCTIONS THAT MATTER BEYOND E-GOLD

Regulating by analogy

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing Partner, Finsec Law Advisors



and the potential for consumer harm, investigation was warranted.

The court declined to quash the FIR, emphasising that "deposit" must be interpreted purposively, and left the core question—whether these transactions can legally constitute deposits—to be resolved through investigation.

That restraint is procedurally defensible, but it leaves out a more fundamental difficulty. The threshold for declining to quash a criminal proceeding is not the same as the threshold for invoking a penal statute. In conflating the two, the court has deferred a question that deserves direct engagement.

The BUDS Act defines a "deposit" as an amount received with a promise of return, with or without benefit. That formulation is incidental—it is the axis around which the statute turns. The mischief the law targets is schemes that solicit money from the public on assurances of repayment or profit. Where that element is absent, the Act's application is very difficult to sustain.

Digital gold is structurally different. Money is exchanged for a commodity; ownership passes immediately; the asset is then held by an independent custodian on the buyer's behalf. There is no obligation to "return" anything because the consideration has already been discharged. The user is a buyer, not a depositor. To

characterise such a transaction as a deposit is not purposive interpretation, it is a category substitution, driven by outcome rather than structure. When that substitution occurs in a penal statute, the risk of overreach is real. Statutory definitions cannot be made elastic to the point of meaninglessness.

The risk of this approach extends well beyond Jar. If "deposit" can cover a sale in which title passes immediately, the implications ripple outward—e-commerce platforms, prepaid models, and a range of hybrid financial products could be exposed to similar interpretive expansion. A targeted enforcement action risks becoming a precedent that unsettles a much wider range of legitimate commerce.

None of this is to suggest that digital gold should remain unregulated. It should not. Questions of asset backing, custody standards, pricing transparency, and consumer recourse remain unresolved. Sebi's own caution is a candid acknowledgement that these products operate without the safeguards associated with regulated financial instruments.

However, the answer to that gap cannot be found by pressing an ill-fitting statute into service. The BUDS Act was not designed to govern commodity transactions on digital platforms. Using it as a

proxy regulator may address immediate enforcement pressure, but it does nothing to create a durable legal framework and may complicate the path to one.

India has been here before. Payments, peer-to-peer lending, and other emerging sectors each passed through periods of regulatory uncertainty before being brought within tailored frameworks. The pattern has generally held up—recognising the product's distinct character, identifying its specific risks, and crafting rules that address those risks without distorting the underlying structure. The beginning point, while that happens, would be for the digital gold industry to form a self-regulatory organisation or SRO to set standards of holding, valuation, and customer safety.

Digital gold is at that juncture now. The question it raises is not whether "deposits" can be stretched to include it, but what regulatory category best reflects what it actually is—a commodity product with financial characteristics, a financial product with commodity underpinnings, or a hybrid that warrants its own framework. That classification must be made deliberately, not by default.

The Karnataka High Court has allowed the process to continue. But the question it has raised will not be answered through a criminal investigation. It is, at its core, a question of regulatory design, one that belongs to the legislature and the regulators, not the police. If the law begins to treat purchases as deposits, it risks blurring distinctions that matter not just for digital gold but for the broader architecture of commercial regulation. Gold has always represented security in India. The irony is that its digital form now finds itself in legal uncertainty not because of what it is, but because of how the law has chosen to see it.

Co-authored with Nameta Shankar, associate, Finsec Law Advisors

Megacities can Chinamaxx their way out of oil shock

FOR THE EMERGING megacities of Asia, the oil crisis spreading from the Strait of Hormuz is like the acute phase of a chronic condition.

The largest migration in human history is filling their streets and alleys ways to bursting point. Urbanisation and births will add a billion more people between now and 2050. Jakarta and Dhaka, with 42 million and 37 million people respectively, have overtaken Tokyo at 33 million as the world's biggest metropolises. Delhi, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Manila, Kolkata, Seoul, Karachi, and Bangkok aren't far behind.

Keeping that many people on the move is a challenge at the best of times. When the price of road fuel doubles, it becomes a nightmare.

The good news is that one country in Asia has been through this cycle already: China. It offers a guide for how to cut oil import bills and transport costs for citizens, reduce pollution from noise and exhaust smoke, and make the urban experience a more pleasant one for the average resident. Asia's megacities can follow the Chinamaxx trend that's taken over local media lately: On quality-of-life issues, there's plenty to learn from the country that's home to one in five of the world's urbanites.

From the perspective of a rich country, it's easy to think that the electrification of transport is all about passenger cars. In emerging Asia, however, the real gains are to be made in scooters, motorbikes, trucks, and buses.

Two-wheelers are most ripe for EV disruption. As we've written, parts of Asia are already moving towards hard restrictions on gasoline-powered bikes and scooters. Most Chinese cities have been operating with such restrictions for a decade or more, making them motorbike-free zones. Nearly 60% of sales are already fully electric. Falling battery costs are changing the game across the region. In India, a base model Ola Electric Mobility S1 electric scooter costs about ₹90,000, compared to ₹78,000 for the entry-level gasoline-powered Honda Activa. That's close enough to make the electric bike a serious proposition, especially when you consider savings on maintenance and fuel. While a small battery that can typically be swapped and charged up at home, such bikes don't require costly infrastructure, either. They also offer a quick route to making the urban environment more pleasant. Conventional motorbikes and scooters contribute a disproportionate amount of particulate pollution. Just one can make as much noise as 30e-bikes.

Unfortunately, the sector here has been held back by baffling policy reversals. Indonesia, the third-largest two-wheeler market, announced the cancellation of its EV subsidies last year, leaving manufacturers and buyers uncertain. India, the biggest, recently cut sales taxes on conventional bikes from 28% to 18%. That's still higher than the 5% levied on EV bikes, but the narrowing of the discount made electric models less competitive.

Trucks will be a harder fix, but there are opportunities there, too. Asian megacities, including those in China, already curb deliveries to nighttime to prevent vehicles cramping up the road—but that creates its own problems, because noisy diesel engines ruin everybody's sleep. Smaller trucks are already cost-competitive once you factor in fuel expenses, but operators still lack the incentive to switch. Cities should complement their night-delivery rules with charges for non-electric deliveries, similar to those employed in Europe's low-emission zones. The revenue can be used to offer low-cost loans for drivers to switch to new, cleaner vehicles. Buses form the last part of the picture. In China, two-thirds of the fleet and 97% of city bus sales are now electric. Typically, these services are state-run, so governments are well placed to act. Though they are a small share of traffic and fuel consumption, using fleet renewals to stimulate local supply chains will help build capability in manufacturing other heavy-duty vehicles, such as trucks.

We can't ignore the EV car fleet, but that's going to be the toughest nut to crack for emerging megacities. It will require comprehensive charging networks and costlier subsidies, given the sheer scale of the potential market. It will also funnel money to affluent citizens least in need of it. Metro systems, being built across Asia at a furious pace, are likewise a relatively big-ticket way to tackle the fuel, pollution, and traffic problems faced by 21st-century metropolises.

Governments should certainly remove any subsidies that still incentivise gasoline and diesel usage. But making the transition to EV cars and commuter rail is a challenge that will take billions of dollars, and years, to solve. For governments struggling with the fiscal headaches spawned by the Iran war, Chinamaxxing the two-wheeler, truck, and bus fleets will be far quicker, and cheaper.

DAVID FICKLING
Bloomberg

SASMIT PATRA
RAMESH KAILASAM
Respectively Rajya Sabha MP and member, Supreme Court Bar Association, & CEO of Indiatel.org

OVER THE PAST decade, India's digital public infrastructure (DPI) has fundamentally reshaped the architecture of finance. At the centre of this transformation lies the National Payments Corporation of India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI), regulated by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). What began in 2016 as a seamless, real-time payments rail has today evolved into the backbone of India's digital retail economy.

The next phase in this evolution is the integration of credit. In 2023, the RBI permitted the introduction of Credit Line on UPI (CLOU), enabling banks to extend pre-sanctioned credit through UPI applications. This marked an important step, effectively allowing users to access short-term credit through the same interface they use for routine payments. Yet, there is huge promise and scope to expand this. While banks are permitted to offer credit lines on UPI, non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), despite being deepened in India's credit ecosystem, remain excluded from direct participation.

Over the past decade, NBFCs have emerged as critical drivers of retail lending, micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) financing, and last-mile credit delivery. Many have built specialised underwriting models, leveraged alternative data and digital tools to assess thin-file borrowers, and expanded credit access to segments historically underserved by traditional banking channels. In several segments,

The next wave in UPI

SASMIT PATRA
RAMESH KAILASAM
Respectively Rajya Sabha MP and member, Supreme Court Bar Association, & CEO of Indiatel.org

Exclusion of NBFCs from UPI-linked credit means that there is huge & untapped potential that can transform the economy through ease of access to credit

particularly unsecured retail lending and MSME credit, NBFCs have grown faster than banks. Their capital adequacy ratios remain comfortably above regulatory thresholds, and the RBI's scale-based regulatory framework has introduced enhanced supervision, governance standards, and prudential alignment with the broader financial system. In this context, the exclusion of NBFCs from UPI-linked credit means that there is huge and untapped potential that can transform the economy through ease of access to credit.

The practical potential of UPI-linked credit becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of everyday financial behaviour. Consider a user who receives a pre-sanctioned credit limit—say ₹50,000—from a lender—and has that limit linked directly to their UPI ID. When making routine payments—buying inventory for a small shop, paying utility bills, covering travel costs, or managing household expenses—the user could choose to draw from this credit line instead of their bank balance. Over the course of a billing cycle, multiple small transactions would accumulate against the sanctioned limit, with repayment occurring at the end of the month or through flexible installments.

For millions of individuals and small businesses accustomed to transacting through UPI, such a model integrates short-term liquidity seamlessly into everyday financial activity. Small merchants, gig-economy workers, and first-time borrowers often interact daily with UPI as a payments interface while relying on NBFCs for access to short-term credit. Currently, the only argument against inclusion of NBFCs is prudential risk and one may argue that NBFCs do not enjoy the same liquidity backstops as banks. At the same time, the structural evolution of NBFC funding suggests a sector that is gradually becoming less dependent on bank intermediation than it once was.

Banki also indicates that a bank's exposure to a share of NBFC borrowings has moderated, while market-based funding through instruments such as non-convertible debentures and commercial paper has grown steadily. Conceptualising UPI-linked credit as a broader digital credit interface—rather than merely an extension of conventional banking lending—opens the possibility of developing innovative products embedded directly within the UPI ecosystem.

The policy conversation around this issue is also beginning to attract acade-

m attention. The National Law School of India University, Bangalore, has recently undertaken a research study titled "Digital Lending Ecosystem: A Case for Inclusion of NBFCs in Credit Line on UPI", examining the evolution of UPI as a form of DPI and exploring the policy considerations surrounding the current exclusion of NBFCs from the CLOU framework.

India stands at an important moment in the evolution of its digital financial architecture. The country's DPI has succeeded largely because it has remained interoperable, scalable, and responsive to the changing needs of users and institutions alike. As credit becomes more deeply integrated into this infrastructure, the way participation is structured will play a significant role in shaping the next phase of India's digital financial story.

The Union Budget 2026 has already acknowledged the importance of this evolving landscape. The announcement of a high-level committee on Banking for Viksit Bharat reflects a broader recognition that India's financial architecture is entering a new phase, one in which non-bank financial institutions, digital infrastructure, and innovative credit models will play an increasingly central role. By integrating NBFCs into the CLOU framework, India can transform a payments success story into a credit inclusion success as well. We have perfected the flow of money, now let's perfect the flow of opportunity.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

R&D gaps

Appropos of "The R&D missing" (FE, April 7), India's muted investment in research and innovation reveals a deeper malaise: a preference for safe, incremental growth over disruptive risk. While universities publish and labs produce bright minds, the ecosystem struggles to carry ideas from chalkboard to marketplace. Private industry remains cautious, funding proven models rather than uncertain

breakthroughs, leaving the burden on public institutions that are stretched thin. Innovation is treated as expenditure, not as sovereign capacity, and the link between discovery and economic strength is undervalued. The result is a culture where imitation outpaces invention, and where competitiveness hinges on imported technology rather than indigenous leadership. Without shifting this mindset India risks remaining a consumer of the future. —N Sachaiva Reddy, Bangalore

India Inc must step up

Private and corporate capital in India remains reluctant, wary of funding innovation. The need of the hour is to invest more in R&D as its spending is abysmally low at just 0.6-0.7% of GDP, with the government contributing nearly two-thirds, unlike advanced economies where private investment dominates. Corporate reluctance, driven by risk aversion and uncertain returns, continues to hold back innovat-

ion. The lack of domestic risk capital further weakens the ecosystem. The proposed ₹1-lakh crore research corpus is a welcome step to crowd in private investment through public funding support. Yet, R&D must be seen not as a discretionary expense but as a strategic necessity. Corporate investment in R&D in the larger national interest. —PV Prakash, Mumbai

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

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WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026

Nuclear milestone

Prototype fast breeder reactor, a technological trigger

The 500 MW Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) at the Kalpakkam nuclear energy complex near Chennai has gone critical — meaning, a sustained nuclear chain reaction has begun inside the reactor, a prelude to electricity generation. It is a heartening milestone, even if the PFBR suffered a 15-year delay and cost ₹8,181 crore, against the originally estimated ₹3,492 crore. The time and cost overruns seem unconscionably high, but they deserve condonation because building fast breeder reactors is technically very challenging.

Only Russia operates them commercially; France and Japan abandoned their efforts after finding the technical challenge unnecessary, while the US stepped back largely on economic considerations. China's CFR-600 is in its early stage of operation. Thus, India is on the cusp of becoming only the third country in the world to have a commercial fast breeder reactor. It will be 12-18 months before the PFBR starts supplying electricity to the grid, after tests and turbine synchronisation. It is important for the various arms of the Department of Atomic Energy to ensure that all projects — those under implementation and planned — are fast-tracked. BHAVINI, the government company set up to build and operate breeder reactors, should lose no time in implementing the plan to build two more breeder reactors at the same site, and four more elsewhere.

The PFBR is fuelled by a mixture of oxides of plutonium-239 and uranium-238, both of which come from the conventional pressurised heavy water reactors that India runs. The PFBR is a 'breeder' — it produces more Pu-239 than it consumes, by converting U-238 into more Pu-239. Hopefully, the next two breeder reactors will use metallic fuel — a mixture of pure Pu-239 and U-238 rather than their oxides — to increase the breeding ratio so that more Pu-239 is produced. Metallic fuels are the holy grail of fast breeder reactors; India should make the shift to metallic fuels, however tough, a high priority. Once sufficient inventory of Pu-239 is built, India can move to the thorium cycle.

Fast breeder reactors can also convert thorium — which India has in plenty — into another fissile material, uranium-233. However, producing U-233 from thorium comes at the cost of Pu-239 production. While India should prioritise Pu-239, it should explore other ways of converting thorium into U-233. There are several options. This includes an 'accelerator-driven subcritical system' (ADSS) — a method of irradiating thorium to produce U-233. The ADSS project has been on the anvil at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre since 2001 and should be fast-tracked. Further, the DAE should take up construction of the 300 MW Advanced Heavy Water Reactor thorium reactor, for which the design is ready. Alongside, the government should address the delays that continue to dog several other projects under the Department of Atomic Energy — such as the ₹9,859-crore fast reactor fuel cycle facility.

POCKET

RAVIKANITH



"We had to cancel it. The principal was worried kids may imitate certain social media posts of big leaders!"



PRITAM BANERJEE

MC14 was framed as the "reform" ministerial, but the core debate was whose interests those reforms would serve. At its heart, this debate reflects global economic competition, primarily the struggle between Western powers and a rising China.

Western proposals for WTO reform advocated for the selective denial of Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status and a shift away from consensus-based decision-making. From a developing country point of view, these structural anchors are vital. MFN prevents discrimination against less powerful nations, while consensus stops dominant powers from steamrolling the minority. Abandoning them risks regressing the global trading system into a power-based hierarchy.

Additionally, the US proposal sought to deny Special and Differential Treatment to large developing nations like India. By stripping away these flexibilities, the industrialized West was effectively pre-empting the industrial policies that developing countries need to grow, seeking to deny the policy advantages the industrialized West itself enjoyed for decades during their growth phase. While China is the overt target, the deeper goal is longer-term gatekeeping, thereby ensuring no other nation can replicate China's rise or challenge Western dominance.

Ironically, China may welcome this transition. In a power-driven system stripped of rules-based safeguards, China is uniquely positioned to weaponise its supply chains and extract concessions, replacing a multilateral order with one dictated by raw economic leverage.

INDIA'S PRINCIPLED DEFENCE
The US and EU proposals caused serious concern among developing countries in the run-up to the MC14. As was expected, there was significant pushback against these proposals. India played a key role in ensuring that the WTO reform pathway that emerges out of Yaoundé was open-ended and non-prescriptive, allowing for much greater debate on how WTO must reform itself.

While India was not alone in pushing back against the wider set of issues designed to undermine the level playing field for developing countries, there was one area where it found itself fighting a lone battle: on the issue of incorporation of the plurilateral agreement on investment facilitation for development or IFD.

While some developing countries did



India's strategic defiance at the WTO meet

PLURILATERAL THREAT. India's recognised that the innocuous sounding investment facilitation for development was a threat to consensus-based rule making

highlight the need to ensure that plurilateral agreements did not end up creating a fragmented system of global rules and argued in favour of some guardrails, no one was willing to oppose the incorporation of the plurilateral Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) agreement into the WTO system.

The proponents of IFD had strategically pushed it forward as an instrument of greater good and of interest to developing countries. Numerous studies and opinion pieces were marshalled to provide 'evidence' that the IFD would lead to significant increases in investment into developing countries. Any opposition to the IFD was therefore painted as 'anti-development'.

Indian policymakers viewed the IFD through a broader geopolitical lens. While agreeing that plurilaterals can advance niche rulemaking, India recognised they often serve as instruments of power play. By design, **Closed plurilaterals bypass MFN principles and circumvent the consensus-based rulemaking central to the WTO, allowing a subset of members to set global norms without the "grand bargains" required by multilateralism**

closed plurilaterals bypass Most Favoured Nation (MFN) principles and circumvent the consensus-based rulemaking central to the WTO, allowing a subset of members to set global norms without the "grand bargains" required by multilateralism.

Initiatives like the Global Forum for Excess Steel Capacity (GFSEC) illustrate the danger. Led by the EU, US, and Japan, GFSEC proposes common tariff and non-tariff measures in the steel sector that can distort trade and inhibit technology transfer to developing nations. While initiatives like GFSEC exist outside the WTO today, lack of adequate guardrails will allow a multitude of such plurilaterals to become part of WTO discussions. This would paralyse the multilateral system by shifting focus away from genuine developmental interests and allow dominant powers to impose costs on those who resist lopsided norms. The US intent to pursue plurilateral rulemaking whether within or outside the WTO further underlines the systemic challenge confronting the global trading system.

Western powers may use plurilaterals to legitimise their industrial policies under environmental or security guises, while marginalising industrial policy programmes of developing nations. China could similarly exploit this power-oriented system to advance its own norm-setting ambitions.

INDIA'S COURAGE UNDER FIRE
Indian policymakers recognised a "toothless" and innocuous agreement

like the IFD was being used as a strategic ploy to normalise the incorporation of plurilateral agreements into the WTO, precisely because it appears non-threatening and can be presented as a 'global good'.

To prevent this erosion of transparent multilateral rulemaking, India resisted the IFD's adoption at Yaoundé, insisting instead that the integration of such agreements be tied to comprehensive WTO reforms. Central to India's position is the establishment of rigorous guardrails. Such potential guardrails include procedural due diligence to verify that a multilateral consensus is unattainable before authorising plurilateral tracks, alongside a requirement for a representative critical mass of participants from across the WTO's diverse membership.

By standing firm despite tremendous diplomatic pressure and isolation, India shielded the multilateral system from fragmentation and unchecked power plays. This principled stance, while publicly solitary, earned private praise from several delegations who recognised the systemic risks at stake.

By linking the issue of incorporation of plurilateral agreements to procedural reforms ensuring adequate guardrails, India has ensured that future rulemaking remains transparent and inclusive, a position likely to be vindicated as the global trade architecture evolves.

The writer is Head, Centre for WTO Studies, Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT). Views expressed are personal

Sensex has fallen on account of global forces

The Iran war has hastened the exit of FPIs from Indian markets, amidst a rising dollar, putting huge pressure on the rupee

Govind Bhattacharjee

Ever since the war began, on closing price basis, the Indian market has been among the worst performers in Asia, with the Sensex losing around 10 per cent, compared with 7.9 per cent in Korea (South Korea), 6.8 per cent in Nikkei 225 (Japan), and 3.5 per cent in Hang Seng (Hong Kong) cushioned by mainland inflows, while only the Shanghai Composite Index showed some resilience, declining only by around 1-2 per cent. The Sensex's fall is not a random correction but a global repricing of risk, driven by non-stop FPI outflows, rising US Bond yields and strengthening of the US Dollar Index (DXY).

The FPIs hold roughly 18-20 per cent of India's free-float market capitalisation which was at around \$800 billion in February 26, and have been net sellers in the stock markets for quite some time now. FPIs have withdrawn about \$1.5 lakh crore, or around 1.5-2 per cent of their total equity holdings since this war began, and during the 15-day stretch from March 4-19, have withdrawn almost ₹90,000 crore, the largest continuous outflow in two decades, making Nifty shed 10 per cent

of its value. The largest outflows are seen in financials, IT, and large-cap consumption stocks which dominate the Sensex. It also points out an inherent weakness of our financial markets in which the FPI determine the marginal price-setting in equities, while domestic investors only buy the shares that the FPIs are selling, but cannot push the market upwards.

Another determinant of the market behaviour is the yield of 10-Year US Treasury Bonds. Once it crosses the 4.3-4.8 per cent crucial threshold, it outcompetes the risk-adjusted returns on the emerging market equities. The average expected returns from the stock markets in India range between 10-12 per cent, with risk free returns (bank FDs, yield of government bonds) remaining round 5-6 per cent, giving investors an extra return of 4-7 per cent over risk-free assets.

ATTRACTIVE \$ ASSETS
But once markets start falling and the US treasury yields start rising, this equity risk premium of investors collapses, and investing in risk-free dollar bonds becomes attractive. This reallocation in turn strengthens the DXY, as global capital flows into dollar



RUPEE. Under pressure. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

assets, exerting pressure on emerging market currencies. Every percentage rise in DXY is associated with sharp decline of emerging market equities and currencies. Between February 27 and March 23, the Sensex plunged to 72,596, falling by 9X per cent. During the same period, the DXY rose by just 1 per cent, while the Rupee weakened from 91 to almost 94, nearly 3 per cent.

Sustained capital outflows and a stronger dollar will put further pressure on the rupee, which has since beaten 95 to a dollar. With oil prices spiking above \$115 per barrel due to fears of supply disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, pressure on the rupee is likely to

intensify further. It is widely believed the Indian stock market is highly overvalued, with Price/Earning (PE) Ratio of over 20, about 40-60 per cent higher than their emerging market peers, and a correction was long-overdue. Besides, the Sensex is heavily skewed towards energy, financials and IT. These three sectors are under immense pressure due to geopolitical reasons, margin pressure due to rising cost of funds and the disruptive impact of AI.

While SIPs provide substantial support, they cannot offset large FPI exits. The exits from Indian stocks find entry into US treasury bonds giving over 4 per cent returns, and US stock markets, with the Fed's three sectors are moving towards gold, energy assets, and dollar money markets. Sensex is falling not because the economy is underperforming, but because the global opportunity cost of capital is rising. But the US is also facing rising fiscal deficit and debt ratios, imposing limits on prolonged dollar strength. The Fed may be forced to cut rates. Falling US bond yields will drive capital flows back into emerging markets, weakening the dollar — and strengthening the rupee.

The writer is a former Director General of CAG of India

✉ **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, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Freebies' fiscal impact

With reference to the Editorial, "Freebies unplugged" (April 7), the debate on freebies should move beyond moral arguments and focus on fiscal quality and outcome efficiency. Does the government spending deliver? When a rising share of state budgets is locked into politically driven transfers, it reduces flexibility to respond to shocks and crowds out capex. Every major welfare promise must be accompanied by a medium-term fiscal impact statement. Independent state-level fiscal councils could audit such commitments annually. Welfare schemes should be linked to verifiable outcomes like school

attendance, skill certification, maternal health, or energy efficiency so that public money builds human capital instead of just consumption. Crucially, election-time announcements should be regulated through stricter disclosure norms by the Election Commission, making parties accountable for financing plans.

Amarjeet Kumar

HazariBagh (Jharkhand)

In defence of freebies

More often than not, freebies are the state's direct interface with its citizens. In an economy where consumption is the engine, transfers in kind: free food, power, transport, spur demand far more effectively

than random tax incentives. Freebies double up as instruments of social stability in a deeply unequal society. A subsidized bus ride or a free ration is a hedge against discontent. They do sharpen accountability, as voters can see, feel, and judge delivery in real time. Long-term gains — nutrition, mobility, and access which often translate into better schooling and productivity. Not every freebie is fiscally reckless. Freebies are imperfect, but pragmatic, nevertheless.

R Narayanan

Navi Mumbai

With reference to 'Freebies unplugged' (April 7), the income

inequalities and the uniform indirect tax structure necessitated States to offer such compassionate to the needy. Of course the list of freebies has enlarged over a period of time and has become a powerful election tool now, unmindful of its ramifications on the economy and the taxpayer. As aptly suggested, instead of extending UCTs, the poll manifestos should aim towards enhanced investments in health, education, nutrition and capex for long-term benefits. As a deterrent unrealistic promises, the election code can be reformed with provisions to recover part of the additional expenditure on account of freebies involved, from the party funds, salaries and other benefits

payable to the elected representatives.

Sitaram Popuri

Bengaluru

Futures exit polls

This refers to the exit polls from 7 a.m. of April 9 till 6.30 p.m. of April 29: EC (April 7). Well done, EC. This move is a big relief for all as exit polls have become farcical. In fact, such polls have led to needless media hype apart from wastage of time and money. It's a different matter that the Opposition political parties may still see 'Red' over it. But, let us not get carried away by that.

SK Gupta

New Delhi

Packaging woes

Iran war hits packaging, downstream sectors

Nida Rahman
Abhishek Singh
Krishan Sharma

The packaging industry occupies a critical role in the ecosystem of manufacturing. However, it is silently bearing the brunt of global conflicts in the Middle East. From biscuits on supermarket shelves to life-saving pharmaceutical products, corrugated boxes and protective materials form the backbone of modern supply chains.



TOUGH TIMES. LPG vital for manufacture of corrugated boxes

Corrugated box manufacturing relies heavily on heat. In a typical mid-sized unit in Faridabad (Haryana), corrugation machines require sustained high temperatures to shape and bond paper layers into sturdy packaging material. Many such units depend on liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) cylinders as a primary heat source. However, the production process is such that the heating stage occurs every alternate day.

A manufacturer we interviewed, in Faridabad, supplying to large clients such as Britannia Industries and several pharmaceutical firms, reports consuming 4-5 LPG cylinders daily. This dependence makes production highly sensitive to fluctuations in fuel prices. On the ground, the erratic supply and allocation cuts have created space for price distortions, with businesses reporting inconsistent deliveries and, in some cases, inflated prices as high as ₹4,000 for one cylinder, charged by intermediaries and distributors. Currently, there is no supply of LPG cylinders to packaging units in Faridabad.

GOING A LAYER DEEP
Beyond corrugated boxes, packaging often incorporates thermocol (expanded polystyrene), widely used for cushioning fragile goods. The raw material for thermocol, polypropylene (PP), is largely imported into India, with a significant share coming from China. Industry inputs suggest that prices have nearly doubled since the escalation of tensions involving Iran, the US and Israel. For Indian manufacturers, this has created a dual cost shock: rising energy expenses and surging input costs.

While India has made strides in domestic manufacturing, segments like petrochemical derivatives still remain exposed to international market volatility. The effects of rising packaging costs are not confined to

manufacturers alone. FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) companies and pharmaceutical firms are heavily dependent on reliable packaging and face increased procurement costs. For FMCG giants like Britannia Industries, packaging is a significant component of total cost. Companies are thus confronted with difficult choices: absorb the cost increase, pass it on to consumers, or redesign packaging to economise. In the pharmaceutical sector, the stakes are even higher. Packaging is not merely functional but regulatory, ensuring product safety, stability, and compliance.

India's packaging industry is dominated by small and medium enterprises. These firms often lack the bargaining power and financial resilience of larger corporations. As input costs rise, SMEs face a "cost-price squeeze" where production becomes more expensive, but competitive pressures prevent them from raising prices proportionately. The result is a gradual erosion of margins, delayed investments in technology, and in some cases, reduced operational capacity.

Yet, within this disruption lies an unexpected opportunity. Faced with rising LPG costs, some manufacturers are beginning to explore alternative energy solutions, notably solar power. One such unit estimates that installing a basic solar setup would require an investment of approximately ₹30,000-40,000. While modest, this upfront cost represents a strategic shift in how energy is sourced and consumed. The transition is not without challenges. Corrugation processes require consistent and high heat, which solar panels alone may not reliably provide without storage or hybrid solutions. However, even partial substitution, such as using solar energy for auxiliary operations or pre-heating can significantly reduce LPG dependence over time.

Nida and Abhishek are with IILM, New Delhi; Krishan is with Bennett University, Greater Noida

China's perennial industrial policy

TESTING TIMES. China's 15th Five-Year Plan reveals ambition of a different scale. Whether this is achievable hinges on execution



ADITYA SINHA

In the second book of Kautilya's Arthashastra (a text that predates Adam Smith by roughly two millennia) there is a chapter devoted to the Superintendent of Metals. Kautilya argued that the state should not merely regulate mining. It should own the smelting works, control quality of output, fix the wages of artisans, and determine which products could flow through private trade and which must pass through royal workshops. The idea that a government could rationally direct an industrial economy is, in that sense, rather old.

China's 15th Five-Year Plan is a restatement of that old idea. The plan covers 2026 to 2030. GDP is to grow within a "reasonable range," calibrated annually, more honest than a fixed target. R&D expenditure is to grow at over 7 per cent per annum in real terms, pushing China towards the 3 per cent of GDP threshold that separates innovation-led economies from catch-up ones (the 14th Plan period recorded 2.8 per cent). High-value invention patents per ten thousand people are to rise from 16 to over 22. The share of core digital economy industries in GDP is to climb from 10.5 per cent to 12.5 per cent, implying roughly 2.5 trillion yuan of additional value-added. The plan carefully distinguishes binding

indicators from expectational ones.

The industrial architecture has three tiers. Traditional sectors (steel, petrochemicals, shipbuilding) are to be upgraded through digital and green technologies, with the "orderly withdrawal of outdated and inefficient production capacity." Strategic emerging industries, covering next-generation information technology, intelligent connected vehicles, robotics, biomedicine, and aerospace, are to be scaled. Future industries (quantum technology, bio-manufacturing, hydrogen energy, nuclear fusion, brain-computer interfaces) are to be seeded, with the plan candidly admitting uncertainty: "exploring diverse technological routes" and building "mechanisms for sharing risks."

The plan's most technically specific section covers industrial base reconstruction breakthroughs in fundamental processes and materials; landmark machinery including high-end CNC machine tools, large LNG carriers, and the CR450 high-speed train. Particularly notable is the procurement

policy requiring state buyers to adopt domestically produced advanced equipment even when imports are available. No market for high-end domestic capital goods develops without guaranteed initial demand. This is precisely what a World Bank policy research report published last month, by Ana Margarida Fernandes and Tristan Reed, calls "public procurement to incentivize quality improvement and innovation by local suppliers", one of the sharper instruments in their taxonomy of 15 industrial policy tools.

SCORES EXCEPTIONALLY HIGH

"That report is worth pausing on. Reviewing the growth strategies of 183 economies, Fernandes and Reed find that all of them target at least one industry. Industrial policy is universal. What differs is sophistication, and the three national characteristics that determine what a government can plausibly deploy: the size of its domestic market, its administrative capacity, and its fiscal space.

On all three, China scores exceptionally high, making it one of the very few economies that can legitimately reach for the full toolkit. Most developing-country governments resort to the bludgeon of sweeping tariffs and subsidies when they should use the scalpel of industrial parks, skills programmes, and procurement policy. China's 15th Plan is broadly reaching for the scalpel.

Its ambitions are ordered on a rather different scale. Which raises the question of execution. Between 2016

and 2020, China eliminated roughly 150 million tonnes of crude steel capacity and shut down all illegal ground-strip steel producers, thousands of them, by administrative direction, within months in 2017. Coal capacity fell by over 800 million tonnes in the same period. The mechanism, when central objectives are aligned and local employment pressures manageable, demonstrably functions. The current overcapacity in electric vehicles and solar panels (sectors the 15th Plan itself identifies as suffering from evolutionary competition) shows precisely where it breaks down: when provincial governments protect payrolls that Beijing wants to rationalise.

Fernandes and Reed make one further point worth noting. Industrial policy should be temporary, buying time while fundamentals are built, ideally within a decade. China's planning tradition recognises no such sunset. Each five-year plan begets the next. Whether permanent planning can sustain the discipline that temporary interventions sometimes achieve is a question the 15th Plan does not answer.

The plan targets per capita GDP at levels of moderately developed countries by 2035. The compound arithmetic is not difficult. Getting the industrial policy right, sector by sector, is a different order of problem entirely. Kautilya's Superintendent of Metals was accountable to the king. Modern planners are accountable to markets. Whether the targets remain accountable to reality is always the harder question.

Sinha writes on macroeconomics and geopolitics

Industrial policy should be temporary, buying time while fundamentals are built, ideally within a decade. China's planning tradition recognises no such sunset

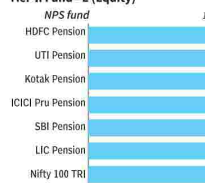
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Compiled Dhruval Gusekar | Graphic: Viswesvaran V

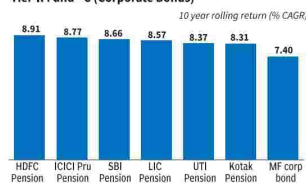
NPS funds consistency check: what 10-year rolling returns reveal

The National Pension System's (NPS) All Citizens model marks 17 years of growth, with AUM reaching ₹3.74 lakh crore as of March 2026. Across Tier I and Tier II, fund options have delivered strong returns since inception. A 10-year rolling return analysis shows equity funds generated average annualised returns of 13.5% (Tier I) and 13.4% (Tier II), slightly trailing the Nifty 100 TRI's 13.8%. In debt categories, Fund C (corporate bonds) delivered 8.6%, outperforming comparable mutual fund corporate bond fund categories. Fund G (government securities) returned 8.8%, ahead of gilt fund category averages of 7.5%.

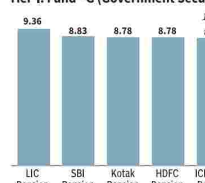
Tier-I: Fund - E (Equity)



Tier-I: Fund - C (Corporate Bonds)



Tier-I: Fund - G (Government Securities)



Tier-II: Fund - E (Equity)



Rolling return data is calculated using NAV values from July 2, 2013 onward. Alternative Assets (Fund A) are excluded due to an insufficient track record for inclusion in the analysis. Category averages for mutual fund corporate bond funds and gilt funds categories are used. Values are as of March 31, 2026. Source: Respective NPS websites.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

April 8, 2006

Export target set at \$120 b

Unwilling a slew of measures to put Indian exports on a higher growth trajectory and create greater employment opportunities, the Commerce and Industry Minister, Mr Kamal Nath, set a 20 per cent merchandise export growth target (about \$120 billion) for 2006-07.

Rlys withdraws telescopic fares

Even though the AC I and AC II class train fares for passengers were reduced from April 1, there is another segment of passengers who now would have to pay much higher rates — those whose journey between origin and destination involves travel in two different trains. This is because Railways used to charge telescopic charges for the entire distance in such cases, which it has now withdrawn, explained an official.

Clause 49: SEBI warns erring cos

The SEBI will ensure that tough action is taken against companies that fail to comply with Clause 49 provision of the listing agreement, according to the SEBI Chairman, Mr M. Damodaran. Among other things, Clause 49 stipulates boards of listed companies should have 50 per cent independent directors.

On businessline.in

Is EU's CBAM discriminatory?

Its compatibility with WTO law remains widely disputed. Many countries have challenged the legality of CBAM, characterising it as a protectionist measure disguised as climate action, says Shashank Patel

<https://tinyurl.com/y3z4Tz26>

Freebies will hit Tamil Nadu's fiscal health

Given the serious impact on States' fisc, a judicial or legislative clampdown on such schemes has become a necessity, argues V Kumaraswamy

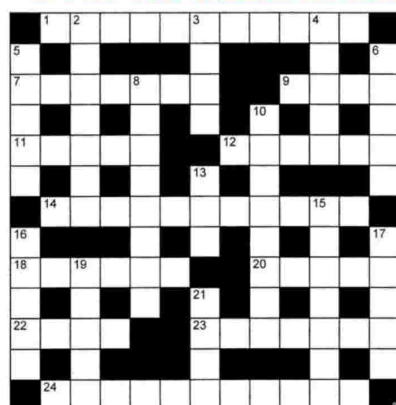
<https://tinyurl.com/y3et2u44>

Close the backdoor in tobacco FDI policy

India prohibiting FDI in tobacco is correct and well-judged. But loopholes allow indirect participation, compromising the integrity of the policy, says Ranganath Tannir

<https://tinyurl.com/5mewz8kt>

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2653



EASY

ACROSS

- Union official (4,7)
- Began again (7)
- Old (4)
- Once more (5)
- Soft sort of colour (6)
- What makes one the being one is (11)
- Sounded like clockwork (6)
- Beethoven's 'Choral' symphony (5)
- Work for money (4)
- Amount paid to mail (7)
- Flipping game (11)

DOWN

- One taken for ransom (7)
- Movement of water (4)
- Correct (5)
- Fracture (5)
- Curiously (5)
- Man of the church (8)
- Metal boundary (8)
- Unit number (3)
- Short, broad-headed nail (7)
- Mount - fiery! (5)
- Impudence (5)
- Dog (5)
- Agile, nimble (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Not, however, a small store manager in the union (4,7)
- Start of enormous amount, when in the red, taken up again (7)
- How old Annie gets ever-diminishing starts (4)
- A profit -- and not for the first time! (5)
- Sort of colour adhesive applied to end of wall (6)
- Relays point to change, this being what one projects of self (11)
- Was correctly marked and went like clockwork (6)
- An ordinal taken from Beethoven in this symphony (5)
- Get, through one's endeavour, near adjustment (4)
- Maid: how long it takes, and what one must pay for it (7)
- Somewhat tipsy, lets eyelid drop: what a flipping game! (11)

DOWN

- Kidnappers' victim recognised by label in stockings (7)
- Being affected by the moon, it turns up in some ditches (4)
- Correct, or make it so (5)
- Between lessons, cure the habit (5)
- Curiously uneven, lumpy first and last (5)
- One in government to give attentive service to (8)
- They may surround one with iron (8)
- An individual person that's singular (3)
- Nail can move zigzag (7)
- A amount that can be steered without hesitation (5)
- It's pretty impudent, let's face it (5)
- American private hasn't quite the heart first to be a dog (5)
- Nimble snooper's first to ask embarrassing questions (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2652

ACROSS 1. Munificence 8. See to 9. Natural 10. Enforce 11. Avert 12. Sallow 14. Belies 18. Gilt 19. Tipster 21. Verdant 23. Lined 24. Matchmakers
DOWN 1. Musters 2. Needful 3. Flour 4. Canter 5. Nitrate 6. Err 7. Pilot 13. Outcast 15. Intense 16. Strands 17. Stitch 18. Gives 20. Polka 22. Rum

Reducing import dependence

Renewable energy can play a significant role

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday rightly termed the conflict in West Asia as a "systemic tremor" threatening the vital arteries of global energy. In a way, this also underlines India's vulnerability. India imports over 85 per cent of its consumption of crude oil, with the bulk sourced from West Asia, a region highly prone to geopolitical uncertainties. Such disruption quickly feeds into higher import costs, inflationary pressures, and uncertainties for industry. As the ongoing crisis shows, it's not only prices but also availability that can be significantly affected. A spike in energy prices and a sharp increase in the import bill increase risks to macroeconomic stability, as has been witnessed on several occasions in the past. Therefore, in a world with persistent geopolitical disruption, to secure its long-term economic interests, India will need to reduce its dependence on energy imports.

It will have to work simultaneously on different fronts to achieve this. It has been argued that India must push up the domestic production of fossil fuels, including oil and gas, along with diversifying sources of imports. However, what India also needs is a significant push towards renewable energy. It has been reported that several businesses have partially or fully stopped production because of gas not being available. It would be worth finding out if some of them can switch their energy requirements to power. Such shifts, possibly with the help of the state, can create a stable source of demand. Reliable industrial offtake can improve utilisation in renewable capacity, attract private investment, and accelerate the development of supporting infrastructure such as storage. The recent data from the International Renewable Energy Agency highlights that India is now the world's third-largest renewable-energy market. However, the contribution of renewables in the energy mix is still low and needs to increase substantially.

There is also a significant employment-generation dimension. A recent study by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations showed that clean-energy jobs could rise from about 0.31 million in 2021-22 to about 0.9 million by 2029-30, while jobs related to energy efficiency may grow from 1.26 million to 4.28 million, implying a near threefold increase if India meets its 2030 targets of 500 Gw of non-fossil fuel capacity and 150 million tonnes of energy savings. These gains could substantially increase if India considerably increased its ambition in the space for renewables. Solar is likely to drive much of this growth, alongside rising demand for skilled maintenance roles. However, these gains are not automatic. Jobs remain concentrated in a few regions and skewed towards lower-skill roles, pointing to the need for stronger skilling systems and better policy coordination.

Besides, it must be noted that the shift to renewable power will require reform and investment at various levels. Accommodating a much higher level of renewable power would require large investment in grid modernisation. It would also require reform in distribution. Power-distribution companies are often seen as the weakest link in the sector. The pricing policy, which subsidises a certain class of consumers by overcharging businesses, also creates friction and pushes enterprises to alternative sources of energy. India must start reforming this sector. A substantial push for renewable power can not only address environmental concerns but also reduce India's dependence on energy imports. Thus, renewable energy should be a substantial part of a multipronged strategy.

Defence outperformance

Exports grow, but a more broadbased strategy needed

The government has announced that defence exports in the recently concluded financial year of 2025-26 saw a major increase of more than 60 per cent over the previous year, largely driven by defence public-sector units (DPSUs). These went up by over 150 per cent during the year; this follows an impressive performance in 2024-25 as well. The Ministry of Defence can correctly view this as a vote of confidence in India's ability to move up the value chain. This growth comes at an important time, as Indian producers should carve a niche for themselves in a world in which defence budgets are once again increasing. There is a growing demand for affordable and accessible platforms, given that recent experiences of conflict suggest that weapons are used and supply chains strained at a faster rate than planned. Many countries now see the benefit of stockpiling as well as developing integrated supply chains with trusted partners.

A step back, however, is needed to evaluate how effectively India can take advantage of this global environment. While the performance of DPSUs has been commendable, and the ministry has stressed that India now exports defence equipment to more than 80 countries, it is nevertheless true that the performance during the year was partly driven by specific and non-replicable contracts — particularly to Armenia, which is importing \$2 billion or so of Akash surface-to-air missiles as well as rocket launchers and howitzers. This reflects the unique geopolitical status of Armenia. It is threatened by Azerbaijan, which is supported by Turkey, a major producer of reasonably-priced equipment; it also wants to diversify away from its dependence on Russia, which is dangerously expansionist. It has fewer options than many other possible buyers. This also demonstrates that defence contracts and defence exports follow geopolitical alignments.

It is also necessary to recognise that the private sector must be seen as the engine of growth in this sector. Countries that have emerged as major suppliers at competitive price points in recent years have seen close public-private partnership in defence manufacturing. The Republic of Korea, for example, which has been a standout performer in defence exports over the past decade, has a mixture of publicly controlled corporations — two major players are Korea Aerospace Industries, 26 per cent of whose equity is owned by the national export-import bank, and the Hanwha group, a family-run conglomerate. New Delhi has to recognise that it must begin to trust the private sector enough to boost its ordering of complete platforms. It must also recognise that a great deal of interest from the global industry in India comes from a belief in the dynamism and innovation being displayed by smaller startups in the sector. These need to be integrated better into the supply chains, which are currently dominated by DPSUs.

The end purpose of defence-production policy must be twofold. The first is creating a defence-industrial sector at scale within India. Recent history shows that this is a key determinant of national power, and imports cannot completely replace a domestic manufacturing base. The second is that New Delhi must understand that integration of domestic production with global markets and suppliers is a geopolitical advantage because it provides the country additional levers to use for stabilising bilateral or plurilateral ties.



The Covid lessons

The West Asian conflict will impact public finances, but it can also be used to usher in reforms

Experts and analysts are comparing the ongoing West Asian conflict with the Covid pandemic. The government has also stated in Parliament that the challenging global situation arising out of the conflict will have an enduring impact on India, underlining the need for the country to stay prepared, much like it did during the pandemic.

In this context, an obvious question arises. What will be the impact of the West Asian conflict on the Union Budget for 2026-27, presented about two months ago? The past is often a pointer to the future. Looking back, it would be instructive to see how the Covid pandemic played havoc with all the basic numbers that the Union Budget for 2020-21 had presented on February 1, 2020.

Remember that two days before the Budget, the World Health Organization had declared Covid-19 a public health emergency. From January 17 onwards, the Indian government had also initiated measures to manage the Covid impact. These included steps to initiate point-of-entry and community surveillance, establish quarantine facilities and isolation wards, and provide adequate personal protective equipment, trained manpower, and rapid response teams.

Let the written speech for the 2020-21 Budget did not refer to the impending challenges posed by the pandemic. Of course, the Covid situation worsened with every passing day after the Budget presentation. The government imposed a country-wide lockdown on March 24, 2020, which was lifted more than two months later, at the end of May. The demand for tax relief was on the rise. But the government did not go in for any major tax concessions, except for ensuring an expeditious refund of taxes to businesses and a 25 per

cent reduction in the rates of tax deduction at source and tax collected at source. The government also increased financial allocations for many schemes to help small and medium businesses with increased credit guarantee and liquidity support.

The net impact of the Covid pandemic on the pace of economic activity and, therefore, the government's tax collections was huge. The liquidity support and credit guarantee schemes for small and medium businesses inflated the government's expenditure. Thus, actual gross-tax revenues in 2020-21 were ₹20.27 trillion, or 16 per cent lower than the Budget Estimate (BE) of ₹24.23 trillion. Non-tax revenues also took a 46 per cent hit — against the BE of ₹3.85 trillion, the actuals were ₹2.08 trillion.

But revenue expenditure as per actuals in 2020-21 jumped by 17 per cent to ₹30.83 trillion. Fertiliser subsidies rose by 80 per cent and food subsidies ballooned by 370 per cent over the BE. The only silver lining was that the government managed to keep its capital expenditure growth intact — the actuals were estimated at ₹4.26 trillion, compared with ₹4.12 trillion in the BE.

Quite understandably, the fiscal deficit ballooned to 9.2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), up from 3.5 per cent in the BE for 2020-21. Revenue deficit too widened to 7.3 per cent of GDP in 2020-21, up from 2.7 per cent as projected in the BE. Most importantly, the Budget for 2020-21 had projected India's nominal economic growth to be at 10 per cent. But as the year went by and Covid impacted the economy, India's nominal GDP contracted by 1.24 per cent.

Six years later, the Budget for 2026-27 was presented to Parliament on February 1, 2026. In just about four weeks, the West Asian conflict has flared up. What



RAISINA HILL
A K BHATTACHARYA

Rewiring power for a new era

The latest crisis in West Asia has once again reminded the world that energy security remains hostage to geography. Shipping through the Strait of Hormuz has been severely disrupted amid the United States-Israeli war, with major powers openly acknowledging the risk to global energy flows. Roughly one-fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) moves through this narrow passage, and the repercussions of its closure are already reverberating across the world.

India imports more than 90 per cent of its oil needs and roughly half its gas requirements. Moreover, around 60 per cent of its liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) consumption is met through imports, and about 90 per cent of those imports come through the Strait of Hormuz. On crude oil, India has diversified meaningfully, but West Asia's share in its import basket still climbed to 59 per cent in February 2026. Even before this war began, India's oil and gas import bill hovered around \$180 billion over a year.

This dependence on fossil fuels is a systemic security problem for the economy. Imported hydrocarbons bind the economy to regions over which it exercises limited control. The longer this war lasts, the higher India's import bill will be, and the pressures on industry, agriculture, transport and households will continue to rise.

Non-fossil fuel energy, however, alters that equation in a way fossil imports cannot. Solar PV systems now commonly operate for 25 to 35 years, while wind turbines typically have a lifespan of 20 to 25 years. That does not eliminate all risk — there are still grid, storage and manufacturing dependencies to manage. But it does mean that non-fossil capacity, once installed, goes on producing through wars, shipping disruptions and maritime standoffs that would otherwise send imported fuel prices soaring.

India has come a long way in its energy transition and has over 275 Gw of non-fossil fuel capacity. Yet as the crisis suggests, the current pace, while significant, is still too cautious relative to the scale of India's expo-

sure. Building on this progress, it is time for India to re-set the terms of its energy transition.

The first step is to expand the renewable energy target from 500 Gw to 1,500 Gw by 2030. This would be ambitious, but not unachievable. A 1,500 Gw goal would send a powerful signal to markets, manufacturers, states and investors that India intends to compress the next decade of energy transformation into the next five years.

Second, India cannot seriously aim for a 1,500 Gw target while leaving transmission and balancing infrastructure to catch up later. The renewable-rich corridors of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu need accelerated grid strengthening to reduce congestion and speed up evacuation. The 11 Renewable Energy Management Centres set up to integrate variable renewables were a forward-looking move, but India now needs more of them, with much greater capacity.

Third, every renewable tender should include battery storage, going away with solar- or wind-only tenders. Pumped hydro storage should also be pushed in mission mode. Storage is what turns renewable capacity from a day-to-day supplement into round-the-clock strategic infrastructure. India is already projected to ramp up both battery and pumped hydro storage sharply over the coming decade. The goods and services tax for storage assets should be reduced to 5 per cent as it is for most renewable energy devices and parts.

Fourth, LPG in India is central to household energy consumption and import dependence remains substantial. Much like the Ujjwala scheme drove down LED bulb prices through bulk procurement, a demand aggregation programme for induction cookers could sharply reduce upfront costs. By leveraging the Ujjwala beneficiary database, this can be scaled quickly, positioning clean cooking as a part of wider shift from imported fuels to domestically produced electricity.

India will also need to go all out on electric mobility and charging infrastructure. That means announcing

could go wrong for the government's Budget numbers? Already, industry has urged the government to step in with a relief and support package to reduce the adverse impact of the war on the pace of economic activity. Among the suggestions are a time-bound conflict-linked emergency credit line guarantee scheme, like the one launched during the Covid pandemic, rationalisation of the tax and duty structure on energy inputs, and the extension of the delivery timelines for central and state public sector contracts.

The government has already slashed the special additional excise duty on petrol and diesel to provide some financial cushion to oil refining and marketing companies. On an annualised basis, the Centre's revenue loss could be around ₹1.3-1.7 trillion, according to some estimates. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has admitted the enormity of the challenges arising out of the conflict in West Asia, but has reminded the country that the government has fiscal space to maintain its capital expenditure programme, the flexibility to reduce interest rates and the resources to provide targeted support to affected sectors. This would imply that the government is gearing up for a major slippage in its deficit, since its expenditure commitment would rise significantly during the year, even as revenues could shrink compared to what was projected in the Budget in February. The year, thus, could be a replay of the Covid year of 2020-21, although the impact on public finances in 2026-27 would not be that severe.

Therefore, the government has two clear ways to manage its public policy conduct. One, it should immediately identify areas where its expenditure and revenues would be impacted. Fertiliser subsidies were projected to decline by 8 per cent to ₹1.71 trillion in 2026-27, compared to the revised estimate of 2025-26. Given the way fertiliser prices have already shot up, the government's estimate for fertiliser subsidies for the current year should be revised upwards. Similarly, excise duty collections, which largely come from petrol and diesel, are likely to take a big hit after the duty cuts for petrol and diesel. It would be a good idea for the finance ministry to assess these developments and their impact on the government's finances on a quarterly basis and make that public. This should improve the country's preparedness for such a crisis.

Two, as during the Covid year, the government could use the current year as an opportunity to introduce some long-pending legislative reforms to improve the ease of doing business and attract foreign direct investment. Land acquisition laws, agriculture reform laws and further changes in the goods and services tax (GST) are among them. The Covid year of 2020-21 saw the Modi government bring about changes in labour and agriculture laws, but these ran into problems. Labour law changes were finally notified after a long wait of more than five years. Changes in agriculture laws were rolled back in the face of farmers' agitation. GST rates saw a major rationalisation in September 2023. But more needs to be done, for instance, including petrol and diesel within the GST system. The Covid year's mistakes of inadequate consultation should not be repeated. Let there be a more open discussion with farmers' bodies and states and at the GST Council to bring about necessary changes in agricultural and GST laws. A crisis could be an opportunity for ushering in reforms.

The search for a principled nationalism



HILAL AHMED

Reading this collection of Hamid Ansari's recent articles, speeches, and lectures — now carefully revised and sequenced into chapters — I found myself asking: "What is new in this book?" This is not a pessimistic apprehension. We know Hamid Ansari as one of the most prolific, creative, and astute public figures in contemporary India. A Mr Ansari inherits the intellectual legacy of Jawahar Nehru, B R Ambedkar, Ram Manohar Lohia, S Radha Krishnan, Maulana Azad, J N Narayan, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and many others — that is, leaders who reflected on the issues,

debates and concerns of public life. After a decade of service as India's Vice-President, Mr Ansari transitioned into the role of a prolific public commentator. The chapters in this book reflect his deep engagement with the national discourse. It is, therefore, natural for Mr Ansari's readers (like me) to search for a sense of argumentative novelty in this carefully compiled volume.

A thorough reading of the book offers us three key arguments. The first argument is about the significance of constitutionalism. Mr Ansari does not want us to worship the Constitution as any kind of "holy book". Instead, he envisages the Constitution as a founding legal-philosophical document that signifies a just and legitimate contract between the state and citizens. He emphasises the fact that the Preamble of the Constitution highlights the philosophical foundations that determine the rights of the citizens, governing rules and norms of the polity, and the expectations from the government to

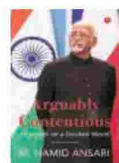
provide a level playing field for all communities and social groups. Mr Ansari systematically evokes the idea of *fraternity* to assert an inherent sense of solidarity among individuals and communities.

This conceptualisation is valuable, especially when nationalism has become the dominant narrative of Indian politics. Mr Ansari does not subscribe to the view that nationalism in the Indian context may be seen merely as an imitation of the West. He proposes a culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate conceptualisation of Indian nationalism. In this framework, the nation is envisioned through the lens of constitutional ideals: Secularism, individual freedom, the protection of minority cultural rights, social justice, and democratic federalism. It does not mean that Mr Ansari merely offers us an abstract theory of constitutional nationalism. A set of chapters tries to examine the actual functioning of public institutions to uncover the asymmetry

between ideals and practices.

This comparative mode of analysis is the second main argument of this book. Mr Ansari encourages an evaluation of political practice against constitutional ideals, aiming to uncover potential avenues for constructive intervention. This is one of the most insightful contributions of this book. Mr Ansari recognises that the political world is discursively constituted; it is a disordered and messy realm driven by self-interest and the lust for power. This messiness, he seems to suggest, ought to be evaluated to find out the problem areas. In this schema, constitutional ideals are introduced as a way of life — an intentionally undefined ideological apparatus used to find out what has gone wrong and to what extent. This contrast does not merely establish a new meaning of praxis in the Indian context; it also transforms the Constitution into a living and ever-evolving political text. This brings us to the third argument.

Mr Ansari, we should not forget, is a retired diplomat. He has written extensively on India's foreign policy as an expert, having represented the country in various international forums. Given his diplomatic background, it is fitting that he dedicates the second part of the volume to explore India's foreign policy within a rapidly evolving global landscape. Mr Ansari does not subscribe to the usual foreign policy analysis, where political moves in the realm of international relations are always interpreted and justified in relation to what is called the "national interest". He reiterates the *principles* that has always been the guiding force of India's foreign affairs. In his opinion, adherence to pluralism, commitment for secularism and support for a peaceful world order are the principles that could be evoked to design a morally just and politically favourable policy framework. Reflecting on the future directions of Indian foreign policy,



Arguably Contentious: Thoughts on a Divided World
Published by M. Hamid Ansari
Rupa
192 x xxiii pages ₹595

Mr Ansari, underlines five key areas — national security with regional boundaries and water disputes, regional cooperation, pandemics, environmental degradation, and climate change. This realistic proposal does not underestimate the conventional understanding of the national interest. Yet, it strongly asserts the significance of moral values and humane ideals in World. The goals of foreign policy and diplomacy, in other words, foreign policy is reimagined from the perspective of constitutionalism.

These three arguments — constitutional nationalism, a constructive assessment of the Indian polity, and a principled foreign policy — may be used to outline a possible theory of Indian politics. Mr Ansari wants us to move in this direction; and this reinforces the novelty of the book.

The reviewer is professor, CSDS. The views are personal.



The Free Press Journal Founder Editor: S Sadanand

No leniency for brutality

Even in a country inured to police violence, staged encounters and custodial murders, the torture and killing of a father and son in a police station in Sathankulam, Tamil Nadu by a group of policemen six years ago caused shock and outrage. The death of Jayaraj and his son Benix, who ran a small mobile phone shop, took place after a night of horrific beatings and aggravated torture during the AIADMK regime, when the COVID-19 pandemic had just set in. At the end of a closely watched trial, nine policemen have been sentenced to death for the custodial murders, and asked to pay Rs.1.4 crore as compensation to the family of their victims. The father and son, arrested for keeping their shop open a few minutes beyond the lockdown timings in 2020, were remained in custody over trivial, local magistrate, who was on his balcony at night and ignored their blood-soaked clothes. Although the trial court verdict is only the beginning of a long process of dispensation of justice involving appeals and petitions, it is a welcome, sobering moment for India's police forces whose psyche remains rooted in a system designed for colonial control over subjects, rather than empowerment of law-abiding citizens of a Republic. It should also persuade the Tamil Nadu government, basking in the limelight of strong social and economic indicators ahead of an Assembly poll, to look inward. The state is no stranger to periodic police to enforce killings of "gangsters". Moreover, although it is cyclically ruled by the AIADMK and DMK, neither party has a monopoly on custodial murders. Last year, a 29 year old security guard, Ajith Kumar, was tortured and fatally beaten by policemen in Sivaganga over a theft complaint. Given the perceived lack of impartiality of state police forces, both the Sathankulam and Sivaganga cases were handed over to the CBI.

It is a sobering moment for India's police forces whose psyche is rooted in a system designed for colonial control over subjects

Lack of effective executive and judicial oversight is all too apparent when magistrates show scant regard for Articles 21 and 22, which guarantee the right to life and due process during detention, and routinely remand people in custody at the mere request of police. While the ten policemen involved in Sathankulam (one of them died during the pandemic) are the perpetrators of the crime, they are merely the extended arm of a system that has little respect for fundamental rights. IAS and IPS officers, and executive magistrates are insulated from the consequences of unlawful actions, facing no penalties or contempt action. In the Sathankulam case, the Madras High Court had to take cognisance of a complaint from an investigating magistrate, as he was threatened by the police. Political parties pay lip service to police reform, preferring the colonial model of control to rights-based policing. Equally, citizens cannot be selective about supporting some police encounters, based on their social biases, while condemning lock-up murders.

Today, Uttarakhand is marked by confusion and guesswork in governance. Three weeks before the Yatra begins, there is no clear, consistent communication. Will it proceed seamlessly? What are the contingency plans? How will infrastructure hold up under pressure? How does the war affect me? Are there

Between reform and rollback

The Government had, over the last few months, issued a clutch of rules ranging from a cap on how many hours a pilot can fly to a 60 per cent free seat selection rule, each of which has either been reversed or put in abeyance following strong opposition from the domestic airlines. The DGGCA had put passengers first when drawing up these norms, which was seen as a win for passenger rights at a time when the regulator was widely perceived as slow in implementing reforms that benefited them. Perhaps the most controversial decision was the implementation of the Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) — a set of rules that caps the number of hours a pilot can fly and work in a given period, mandating minimum rest time between duties to prevent fatigue-related accidents, making flying safer for passengers. It is considered scientifically sound by international bodies, but IndiGo failed to implement the rule in November last year, leading to complete chaos and a 10-day-long crisis, huge loss, and appointment of a new CEO. Instead of treating this as a necessary correction to restoring restlessness, the government rushed to dilute and defer the very safety regime it had just endorsed.

The same flip-flop is on display in another reform. New refund rules and the proposal to make at least 60 per cent of seats free of selection charges were widely welcomed. Passengers, long nickel-and-dimed on everything from baggage to seat choice, received a positive response. Airlines, operating on wafer-thin margins and facing no relief on fuel, taxes or airport charges, pushed hard to reverse the decision — and, once again, New Delhi blinked. There is a legitimate tension here. Indian carriers genuinely face a hostile cost environment, and a policy that clamps down on ancillary revenues without addressing input costs will only exacerbate the sector's fragility. But that is precisely why the government's on-again, off-again approach is so damaging. By trying to lean towards consumer-protection rhetoric and then quietly rolling the measures back, it undermines safety, confuses passengers and investors, and reinforces the perception that regulation is just another negotiable variable in airlines' business plans. Hard safety norms like FDTL, once adopted, should not be hostage to one airline's planning failures. Consumer-facing rules must be paired with a coherent plan to ease structural costs. It should recognise that both the airline and the passengers are equal stakeholders, and there should be buy-in from both sides on any reforms, however difficult it may be for the regulator to secure. Persistent uncertainty around reforms can severely destabilise and erode confidence across the entire industry.



Spectrum MADAN SABNAVIS

War shocks markets, exposing India's economic vulnerabilities

From crashing equities to soaring oil, Iran war ripples through India's markets, currency, bonds, and household costs sharply.

Since the Iran war began in March, there have been several ups and downs. The markets have reacted in a variable manner depending on political statements made on all sides. Therefore, evaluating their movement becomes challenging, though admittedly everything has been turned around once too often ever since the tariff issue dominated the economic architecture. Stock markets are down, currencies are falling, and bond yields are rising. Every time it appears that a truce could be drawn, which soothes the markets, there is contrary news that spoils them again. Hence, when evaluating the impact on markets, the numbers must be read with some discretion, as the evaluation is at a point in time when things looked irreversible.

Let us look at the markets sequentially. The Sensex (free float) has lost around Rs 10 lakh crore of market capitalisation as on 23rd March, compared to February 27, which was before the war erupted. If the same is considered for the BSE 500, it would be Rs 20 lakh

crore. However, such numbers must be read with caution because these are notional losses and not actual, as the indices have been valued at market prices. The message, however, is clear. Stock markets have been losing rather than gaining, and this is the story across countries. Therefore, for investors, it is a tough call. Does one invest now that the market has tumbled, or can there be another new low from here? Interestingly, markets revived once there was subsequent news that there could be a solution to the war.

Next is the currency market. The rupee has been in a downward spiral and, while the market has been looking for guidance from the RBI in the form of intervention, it appears there may be an indifferent response. This is logical because, as all currencies are tending to decline rather than rise, there may be little merit in selling dollars to stabilise the rupee. Selling dollars may stabilise the rupee today, but the decline would recommence once these sales stop. The currency went down by almost Rs 3, touching Rs 94 to a dollar from Rs 90.95/\$ on

27th February. It crossed the 94 mark again on the 27th. This affects exporters and importers differently, with the former benefitting and the latter being disadvantaged.

The bond market has also witnessed an increase in yields, with the 10-year yield touching 6.90-6.95% from 6.68% before the war commenced. This movement has little to do with the domestic liquidity situation but is linked to movements in US Treasuries, where yields have jumped by almost 20 basis points. As the two remain linked in terms of maintaining differentials, domestic yields have increased sharply. The implications are that, from a banking perspective, treasury gains would face a downside, as higher yields are associated with declining bond prices. Additionally, government borrowing would become costlier, as these bond yields serve as reference points for fresh issuances of G-Secs by the RBI. Hence, borrowing costs for the government could increase in FY27 if these yields remain elevated. A 10 basis point increase can raise the government's interest cost by around Rs 1,700 crore.

Another major price shock is seen in gold. The rally pushed prices beyond the \$5,000/ounce level, suggesting the metal would thrive in this volatile environment. As on February 27, the price was \$5,222/ounce. However, it fell to \$4,376 on the 26th, when markets went into turmoil. Investors who bet on gold in a supportive environment faced the impact of a stronger dollar as prices declined. Will prices recover? It is uncertain, as traditionally there is an inverse relationship between the dollar and gold prices. The dollar is likely to remain strong, as the current environment may not support further rate cuts by the Federal Reserve, notwithstanding the appointment of a new Chairman.

Finally, the most important market, with far-reaching influence across sectors globally, is oil. Brent crude rose from \$71 per barrel on February 28 to \$105, and could move further depending on developments in the war. In contrast, the Indian basket climbed more sharply from \$71 per barrel to \$150 per barrel. The concern for individuals is when this doubling will be

reflected in fuel prices at the pump. Beyond crude oil, gas supplies have been disrupted due to blocked shipping routes and the shutdown of production facilities in Qatar. At the ground level, households are already facing delays in LPG deliveries due to physical constraints. The hospitality industry is affected by limited availability of cooking gas, and alternatives are not always viable. Transport costs will rise if fuel prices are increased. Industries such as fertilisers, pesticides, plastics, aviation, and ceramics are facing challenges due to higher petro-input costs and supply disruptions.

Overall, there has been widespread disruption, with markets bearing the brunt. The key question remains: when will this end, given the time lags involved in restoring stability to the oil economy? This shock is markedly different from the Ukraine-Russia war, which had a comparatively lesser economic impact.

The author is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda, and author of 'Corporate Quirks: The Other Side of the Sun'. Views are personal.



Brand Banter SANJEEV KOTNALA

Char Dham chaos exposes gaps in governance, culture of jugaad

Confusion, poor communication, and weak systems risk turning the sacred Char Dham Yatra into a stressful logistical gamble

By the time you finish reading this, chances are someone planning the Char Dham Yatra is refreshing a webpage, scanning a WhatsApp forward, or tracking a Donald Trump tweet for cues on whether their yatra this summer will even go smoothly.

That is both the story and the statement about the Uttarakhand government. People expect governments to reduce uncertainties in life. They believe they have outsourced chaos management to a responsible government that will take care of it. Poor, foolish citizens expect frameworks, clarity, predictability, and, above all, to be kept updated with information that aligns with ground reality. Not silence. Not ambiguity. And certainly not a "check the website daily" approach to something as sacred and logistically complex as the Char Dham Yatra for the common man.

Today, Uttarakhand is marked by confusion and guesswork in governance.

Three weeks before the Yatra begins, there is no clear, consistent communication. Will it proceed seamlessly? What are the contingency plans? How will infrastructure hold up under pressure? How does the war affect me? Are there

clean, Western-style restrooms along the arduous 18 km trek to Kedarnath, which begins around 3 am? Silence.

Hotels and travel operators are hedging. Pilgrims are hesitant. Helicopter bookings, when they open on the 10th (as communicated), are expected to be as chaotic as railway reservations in 1985: blink, and you miss it. And the state's advice? Keep checking.

This is not governance. Then there is digital jugaad masquerading as tourist management—the first touchpoint and digital interface. Frankly, it is pathetically designed and feels more like a compliance formality than a confidence-building tool.

This is where trust should begin. Instead, it confuses, frustrates, and alienates. In an age where apps can track your cab to the second, why can't a state guide a pilgrim through a high-risk yatra with clarity?

Why are we not even exploring wearable devices for such a yatra? A basic tracker that can monitor location, health vitals, or distress signals? It would build confidence. Instead, pilgrims are asked to submit two emergency contact names, as if paperwork is a form of preparedness.

As Osho once provocatively observed, "The greatest fear of the unknown." Governments exist pre-

cisely to reduce that unknown, not expand it.

So why is a pilgrim today dependent on critical, life-impacting information from WhatsApp forwards and YouTube videos—often driven by unmanaged influencers? Why is the government not proactively sending a simple, structured PDF update to every registered pilgrim?

A checklist of do's and don'ts. Updated weather probabilities. Mandatory medical advisories. Essentials to carry. Clear escalation protocols.

And yes, you are yatisr not required to submit a self-declaration stating that they understand the risks—natural and man-made—and are willing to undertake the journey? That is not bureaucracy; that is responsible governance.

Instead, we have silence punctuated by sporadic updates and local-level whispers. Rumours thrive in silence. Governance dies in it.

Consider the chatter: Is there a 500-car restriction in Landour? How many devotees are allowed per day for darshan? Travel agents are charging a surcharge to issue confirmed heli-yatra tickets. What happens if a pilgrim misses their darshan slot? Can they get a next-day token or must they start from scratch? These are not trivial

queries. They are core experience determinants. Yet answers are either confusing or entirely absent.

Then comes the deeper discomfort—the creeping attempt to optimise and maximise religion itself. Advisories suggest temples may skip or compress rituals or suspend daytime pujas to accommodate crowds. One wonders: since when has administrative efficiency dictated spiritual sanctity? The puja mahurat is not a traffic signal to be adjusted according to crowd surges.

Equally troubling is the approach to on-ground economics. Pitto and palik services remain unregulated, and left to the bargaining skills of visitors. Why not introduce pre-paid counters? Why must devotees come bundled with negotiation anxiety?

And let's not ignore the elephant in the Himalayas: environmental fragility. The state has witnessed enough "natural" disasters that were anything but natural. Yet where is the visible framework to curb reckless construction, regulate tourist load, or enforce ecological discipline? This is precisely the period when the government should be at its communicative best—advertising, informing, reassuring, and leading from the front. The tourism department and PR machinery should be in overdrive.

Because if done well, this is not

just about managing a yatra. It is about building Brand Uttarakhand, which has taken a beating for multiple reasons.

Right now, that brand lies buried under an avalanche of missed opportunities and camouflaged confidence.

Here's the uncomfortable truth: uncertainty is no longer accidental. It is being manufactured.

Uttarakhand does not need more announcements. It needs a playbook with clear timelines, transparent processes, standardised pricing, environmental safeguards, and, above all, consistent communication—one that maximises revenue and tourist comfort while minimising damage to nature and climate.

When it comes to something as deeply religious as the Char Dham Yatra, people should focus on their faith, not be forced to battle confusion.

The government can leverage a well-managed Char Dham Yatra to convert tourists into ambassadors and repeat visitors. However, what seems apparent is that Uttarakhand risks turning a sacred journey into a logistical gamble.

And that is a risk no government, including Uttarakhand's, should ever outsource to its citizens.

Sanjeev Kotnala is a brand and marketing consultant, writer, coach, and mentor.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Draconian aspect

With reference to "Math of the FCRA pause" (April 4), the government argues that the bill is intended to plug loopholes in the original legislation of 2010, but in reality, it will render NGOs more vulnerable and liable to arbitrary action. The government's hostility to NGOs is no secret. Since the BJP-led government came to power, more than 20,000 NGOs have had their FCRA licences cancelled. It becomes a law, would exacerbate the draconian aspect of the FCRA, which had already been criticised in 2020 for violating international and constitutional principles regarding the functioning of civil society organisations in a democracy.

SS Paul, Nadia

Easter expletives
When the world expected restraint on a day associated with hope, US President Donald Trump delivered threats instead. His Easter message, laced with aggressive expletives against Iran, reveals desperation and exposes a troubling leadership style. While the Oval Office traditionally demands sobriety

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Barbaric behaviour

The editorial, "New barbarian at the gates of hell" (April 7), accurately captures the persona of US President Donald Trump. His conduct brings disrepute to a long line of distinguished American Presidents. His recent social media posts using abusive language and making violent threats against Iran only reinforce the editorial's description of him. Sadly, his supporters continue to encourage his errant

and respect for institutions, Trump's rhetoric blurs the line between governance and spectacle. Great powers are judged by the maturity of their leadership. In crisis, the world looks to Washington for steadiness. When the voice that should calm tensions falters, American credibility suffers.

Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

Recently, over 200 psychologists in the US issued an open letter raising serious concerns about Donald Trump's fitness for leadership. Based on extensive observation, their assessment

behaviour. He has also claimed that his actions are divinely ordained, while taking credit for ending multiple conflicts, including the recent India-Pakistan war, and asserting that the present Middle East crisis will end soon.

All this, together with his trade wars, shows that he is clearly unfit to lead a great nation, let alone bring about a new world order.

V Nagarajan, Chennai

goes beyond personal critique—it is a warning with global implications. They argue that traits associated with malignant narcissism pose grave risks when in the hands of a leader of a nuclear-armed nation. A pattern of treating dissent as disloyalty, branding opponents as enemies, and fostering fear to consolidate power undermines democratic values at their core.

Tushar A Rahatgaonkar, Mumbai

Worrying silence
Prime Minister Narendra Modi's silence over the Pakistan defence minister's open threats to



Kolkata is concerning. Either the PM or the defence minister need to take cognisance of the matter and reassure us.

Arun Gupta, Kolkata

Killing all-rounders
The Impact Player rule which was introduced in IPL season 2023 may have its plus points but the sad part is that it kills the ability of all-rounders. No doubt, innovation in cricket or in any sport is necessary. But at the same time, it is important to understand and innovate, and ensure that any rule is implemented only after judging the short- and long-term benefits

Hindi as the third language. Moreover, compliance is linked to the release of funds to states. This is unconstitutional and undermines the very spirit of federalism. If it persists for long, the unity and diversity of culture and languages of our country will be jeopardised.

Martand Pawar, Kalyan

Strategy or stunt?
Apropos "Crocs and snakes as border guards" (April 7), one wonders if border management is drifting from strategy to spectacle. The idea of unleashing reptiles in riverine gaps may sound ingenious, yet it risks turning security into a dangerous circus for local communities who already live with floods and fragile ecosystems. Borders demand vigilance, technology, and humane policy, not a menagerie of hazards. A nation's safety should rest on foresight and reason, not on the teeth and venom of creatures pressed into unnatural service.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

DECCAN Chronicle

8 APRIL 2026

2 states, UT likely to face highly charged battles

The electorates in Kerala, Assam and Puducherry will vote on Thursday to elect their new Assemblies, making their choices clear amid three entirely different political matrices.

The CPM-led Left Democratic Front in Kerala is fighting anti-incumbency as well as the Congress-led United Democratic Front. It is interesting that all members of the two fronts are part of the joint Opposition platform on the national level but fight each other tooth and nail in the state.

The comrades hope that the mega infrastructure projects the government has implemented through novel funding models and the mega push it has given to welfare schemes will help them to vote.

The Puducherry elections have given an opportunity to the Congress to assert itself against DMK, its partner in neighbouring Tamil Nadu.

TN custody deaths: Justice done

The common complaint of "justice delayed is justice denied" was not raised in the infamous double murder of a father-and-son duo in June 2020 although it took about six years for the court to send to the gallows the nine police personnel involved in the crime.

When, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, information on the brutalities suffered by P. Jayaraj and his son, J. Bennix, humble traders in the sleepy panchayat town of Sathankulam in Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu, at the hands of uniformed personnel in a police station came to light, it looked as if people had lost their basic humanity.

When graphic details of the torture of the two men, leading responsible and dignified lives as law-abiding citizens, poured into the public domain, civil society plunged into despair, more so as the perpetrators were men in uniform drawing their salaries from the public exchequer for protecting the people purportedly.

Following the Madurai High Court taking cognisance of it due to this public outcry, its verdict in the case that was investigated by the CBI comes as a reassurance to the civil society.

The death sentence will likely serve as a deterrent to errant policemen all over the country riding roughshod over convicts and under-trials in the future.

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- Vijayawada: 36, Sarojini Devi Road, Secunderabad - 500 003, Ph: 040-27803904; Fax: 040-27805256
Hyderabad: No. C-3 & 4 Paramara, Industrial Estate, Auto Nagar, Vijayawada (A.P.), Ph: 0866-2555284
Vishakhapatnam: Survey No. 1/3, Beach Road, Near Kailasgiri Koppoys, post office, Vishakhapatnam - 530 017 (A.P.), Ph: 0891-2552332/25523234; Fax: 0891-2552325
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Anantapur: Thapovan colony, Bangalore By-Pass Road, Anantapur - 515004, Ph: 08554-276903; Fax: 08554-276904
Kartimangalam: H. No. 1-21-121, Cheralabhanur Road, Muzhupattur Village, Kartimangalam-50186, Ph: 9021181123
Nellore: Survey No. 527/2, Baranapur Village, Venkatchalanki (M), Chemundugunta Panchayat, Nellore, Ph: 0861-2348518/2; Telefax: 0861-2348580
Chennai: SP-3, Developed P-4, Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai - 600 032, Ph: 044-2225477/487/5051; Advt Fax: 2225476/2225476/42305325
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Subhani



Diversity works just fine in all 4 poll-going states



Shikha Mukerjee

This is election season. Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam and one Union territory (Puducherry) are in poll mode. Four political parties/coalitions are competing to retain power. That is proof that one nation and multiple ruling parties work in a democracy that is large, diverse and evolving.

Contrary to the idea that "one nation-one party" is the ideal model to speed India into "Viksit Bharat" by 2047 under the stewardship of Narendra Modi and his BJP, these states' development story signals that diversity is even better.

In Kerala, run by the CPM-led Left Democratic Front in the second term CM Pinarayi Vijayan, it's up against the Congress-led United Democratic Front in the edgiest contest in this season. In West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress are battling to retain power for the fourth time against the BJP.

In two states, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the BJP is not the principal challenger; the Congress is the lead party of the alliance against the reigning LDF and is part of the DMK alliance. In Assam, the Congress is in coalition with regional parties is the principal challenger to the ruling BJP.

In West Bengal, the Congress and CPM are struggling to reinvent themselves, while the BJP hopes to move up from the official opposition party.

The near obsessive attention that West Bengal gets has also framed how it has fared in development terms under the 15-year Mamata Banerjee government and the 34 uninterrupted years under the Left Front.

Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have all complained about the timing and intentions of ED and other agencies in carrying out raids, arrests, interrogations and investigations. On the one hand, there is a narrative that states ruled by regional, often dynastic parties, are corrupt, where money meant for the people are siphoned into bank accounts of political leaders, affecting development and wealth creation and income redistribution, and on the other, there are facts pointing to the growth and wealth in the economies of these states.

The near obsessive attention that West Bengal and its politics gets has also framed how it has fared in development terms under the 15-year Mamata Banerjee government and the 34 uninterrupted years under the Left Front, led by Jyoti Basu for the first 23 years and then Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee for 11 more years. The narrative, outlined by the Congress and elaborated by the BJP, is West Bengal's decline is due to bad policies under bad leadership. Its decline since the 1980s as one of the top industrialised and rich states has added substance to the story.

It is usually held up as an example of GST collection, wrong in a state that was once rich, but is now poor, which is a fact. The packaging, however, covers up the details of why West Bengal, despite being in decline, is still ranked sixth, in terms of contribution to the Gross National Product, which is not great compared to its glorious past, but not bad, given the steady decline in investments and industrial-

isation that it has experienced. Its per capita income is lower than the national average. Oddly, West Bengal's growth in terms of GST is above the national average and ranks eighth in GST collections.

Assam, the only state representing the magical transformation that is to be expected of a "double-engine sarkar", is not among the top ten in GST collections.

Its per capita income, despite its vertiginous Gross State Domestic Product achievements exceeding the national average in the past 10 years, is low, putting in the same bracket as West Bengal, which is 21 in the rankings.

The bottom line is that political diversity works just as well as a model of uniformity, with each state succeeding in doing its own thing. If the DMK wins in Tamil Nadu, the LDF or even the UDF comes to power in Kerala, if Mamata Banerjee wins in West Bengal and Mr Sarma wins a second term in Assam, the "Viksit Bharat" target will not be materially affected.

The much-lauded "double-engine sarkar" model has speeded things up in Assam, but that change has not as yet reached the people, as the per capita income levels reveal. West Bengal can be expected to stay on track in terms of GST collections, indicating that the economy in terms of goods and services is healthy; and people, despite lower incomes than Kerala and Tamil Nadu, have money to spend. Diversity works fine and keeping it going is democratically desirable.

Shikha Mukerjee is a senior journalist in Kolkata

LETTERS

DEATH SENTENCE

In a landmark judgment the Madurai Additional District Sessions Court awarded death penalty to the nine monstrous policemen in a case of the barbaric custodial murder of a father and son for an alleged simple Covid-19 violation (9 policemen get death for custodial double murder; April 7). Time and again some police to shield their brutality for the custodial murders.

Whether this historic verdict will deter custodial deaths and change minds of such cops in future is to be seen. Ch. V.B.R. Naidu Srikulam

The death penalty awarded to nine police personnel who were responsible for the lockdown death of father and son is a landmark judgment. The death in custody can be described as the protector becoming the predator. The verdict is a significant moment for accountability of police and a strong message against violation of human rights. No doubt it is the rarest of rare cases that has sparked nationwide outrage and needs police reforms.

B.V. Apparao Visakhapatnam

That nine policemen being awarded death sentence in a custodial death case by a trial court in TN is exemplary. The arrest and gruesome murder of two businessmen in the name of violating lockdown rules by police had shaken the nation's conscience five years ago. The Madras HC took up that case suo motu and ordered CBI inquiry that has led to proper investigation, trial and verdict now. The ghastly incident should force the country to take the path of police reforms.

Dr D.V.G. Sankara Rao Srikulam

It is first of its kind in the history of the police department in the country that nine policemen were awarded death sentence in a custodial death case in Tamil Nadu. It is very shocking to know that the police arrested the father and son duo for running their cellphone shop by violating Covid-19 lockdown norms however it was proved false later.

Pratapa Reddy Yaramuru Tiruuru

Email your letters to info@deccanmail.com, editor@deccanmail.com.



Ruchira Gupta

Trump, Epstein, Iran: An election to signal the way the US is headed

If you want to know where American politics is going, don't begin with a rally, a White House speech, or even the cable-news hysteria that follows both. Begin instead with a runoff in Georgia's 14th Congressional District, where voters this week will choose a successor to Marjorie Taylor Greene.

This is no ordinary special election. Ms Greene resigned in January after a dramatic public break with President Donald Trump over the administration's handling of the Jeffrey Epstein files. Voters are divided, leading to a runoff between a Democrat and a Republican in a district where a Republican victory would have been a foregone conclusion. Mr Trump won the seat with 68 per cent of the vote in 2024.

Now Georgia's 14th has suddenly turned into a swing district. It has become a proxy for a larger fight inside MAGA on whether loyalty to Mr Trump still overrides disappointment, embarrassment and fatigue.

That is why the race matters. Even the reddest places can begin to register shifts in political mood before the national map catches up. Greene's departure transformed what might have been a routine hold into a test of whether the movement she helped organise is still disciplined enough to close ranks when one of its own storms off the stage.

That is the first layer of the story, the fracture within Trumpism over the Epstein files. The second layer is Iran. On Sunday, Mr Trump threatened Iran with attacks on civilian infrastructure, including power plants and bridges. If it did not reopen the Strait of Hormuz by Tuesday

evening, even by his standards, it was incendiary, and it landed at a politically combustible moment, when voting in Georgia was already underway.

A runoff amid a foreign-policy crisis doesn't become an Iran referendum in any simple sense. But it does become a measure of whether the electorate can tolerate a permanent emergency as a governing style, or whether it is beginning to produce more recoil than excitement.

Elections are shaped not only by policy but by atmosphere. They are shaped by whether voters feel steered or exhausted, reassured or destabilised. Even if no pollster can neatly isolate how many votes are affected by Iran or Epstein, this race points beyond the issue.

Special elections rarely decide the whole country in one stroke. What they do decide is strip politics down to its rawest elements like motivation, anger, turnout, and enthusiasm. They show which side is actually showing up when the stakes seem small, the cameras have moved on, and the electorate is made up of less of casual spectators than of people who still care enough to vote on an off-date.

The numbers from the past year suggest something real may be stirring. Ballotpedia found that state legislative special elections held since January 2025 have shown an average 5.6-point shift towards Democrats compared with earlier, and that moderate candidates retained more of their previous-election turnout than Republicans did.

conversations, not with one miraculous upset, but with a pattern of overperformance that keeps recurring. Georgia's 14th fits that pattern awkwardly, but revealingly. In the first runoff last month, Democrat Shawn Harris, a retired Army brigadier-general, led the field with 37.3 per cent, while Republican Clay Fuller, a Trump-backed district attorney, won 34.9 per cent.

In a district this Republican. Democrats still are not favoured. But it did mean the runoff was not an afterthought. It became a test of whether Democrats can keep turning low-turnout fights into warning flares for the party in power.

Their own arithmetic can't give the race added importance for Republicans, who hold only a narrow 217-214 majority, with vacancies still hanging over the chamber. The structural facts favour Republicans. The district is still heavily conservative. Yet the fragility of that majority is itself part of the story.

When power is this tight, even supposed "safe" seats start carrying symbolic weight far beyond their borders. An easy Republican win would reassure Mr Trump the base remains loyal despite the Greene rupture and the noise around Epstein and Iran.

A Democratic overperformance, by contrast, would mean an accumulating body of evidence that something is slipping.

So, this runoff sits at the intersection of three forces now defining American politics. First, the MAGA split-screen, devotion to Mr Trump on one side and resentment over

the Epstein revelations. Second, the return of crisis politics, where a President's threat of military escalation abroad can dominate the emotional backdrop of a local election at home.

Third, the possibility that voters are beginning to use these low-turnout contests to register a broader recoil from scandal, exhaustion, inflation and chaos. Those are not side stories orbiting the election. They are its real meaning.

So, the question is not whether Iran and Epstein will literally decide Georgia, or whether Georgia will single-handedly decide America. Politics is almost never that tidy. The real question is whether small elections are becoming a place where voters can send an early signal that spectacle-as-governance, conspiracy-soaked politics, and permanent brinkmanship are no longer enough to keep the same coalition intact.

If Republicans hold easily, Mr Trump will say the system still bends to his will. But if Democrats overperform again, the meaning will be harder to explain away. It will suggest that what people have been calling a blue-wave theory is not fantasy, but the faint early outline of a correction. These elections do not redraw the map overnight. They show why the ground is beginning to tilt.

Ruchira Gupta is the author of The Freedom Seeker and I Kick and I Fly, founder of NGO Ape Aap and a professor at NYU. She has also lived and worked for UNICEF in Iran. Follow her on Instagram: RuchiraGupta, on Twitter: RuchiraGupta

quick BITES

INDICATORS	%
Sensex	74,616.58 0.69
Nifty 50	23,123.65 0.68
S&P 500*	6,550.91 -0.92
Dollar (₹)	82.92 -0.15
Pound Sterling (₹)	122.95 -0.25
Euro (₹)	107.22 -0.25
Gold (10gm)*	149,668*313 -0.21
Brent crude (\$/bbl)	110.76 -0.90
IN 10-Yr bond yield	7.042 -0.01
US 10-Yr T-Bill yield	4.347 0.012

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Cash payments at toll plazas discontinued

Cash payments at toll plazas will be discontinued for travellers on national highways from April 10, the road transport and highways ministry has said. In a notification, the ministry has said that in cases where a vehicle enters a fee plaza without a valid FASTag, users can still pay via UPI, but at a higher charge of 1.25 times the applicable toll fee. It is aimed at reducing long queues at toll gates, an official said.



Jubilant revenue rises 6.2% in Q4 to ₹1,686 cr

Domestic revenue of Jubilant Foodworks Ltd (JFL) was up 6.2 per cent to ₹1,686 crore in March quarter of FY26. For the full fiscal, revenue was up 6.87,87.8 crore, said the firm, which has franchise rights for global QSR brand as Domino's, Popeyes. Consolidated revenue, which includes revenue from international operations, came in at ₹2,505.8 crore in March quarter, up 19.1 per cent year-on-year.

Kalyan Jewellers reports 64% rise in revenue

Kalyan Jewellers India reported 64 per cent jump in consolidated revenue for the fourth quarter of FY26, buoyed by robust wedding and discretionary jewellery purchases. The jewellery retailer had a revenue of ₹6,222.35 crore in same quarter a year earlier, it said. For full fiscal year, consolidated revenue rose approximately 42 per cent from prior year, when the company recorded annual revenue of ₹25,189.66 crore.

FY26 EV sales in India grow 24.6% to 24.5 lakh units

Total electric vehicle (EV) retail sales in India grew by 24.6 per cent at 24.5 lakh units in FY26 as compared to the previous fiscal, with every category delivering strong double-digit growth, Federation of automobile dealers associations (FADA) said. While electric two-wheelers crossed 14 lakh units, electric passenger vehicle retail sales missed the 2 lakh units by a whisker but surged 83.65 per cent in FY26, FADA said.



Sensex up 509 pts ahead of RBI's review of rates

Investors pricing in meaningful developments, not reacting to noise

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, APRIL 7

Market rose for a fourth consecutive session expecting a ceasefire, hours before expiry of a US deadline for a deal with Iran, and with sides still at war. The Sensex gained 0.69 per cent or 509.73 points to close at 74,616.58. The Nifty-50 closed at 23,123.65, gaining 155.40 points or 0.68 per cent. The gains also preceded RBI's monetary policy announcements scheduled for Wednesday.

STEADY APPROACH



IT, REALTY stocks big gainers ahead of Q4 earnings season. PSU banks, consumer durables see decline.

RUPEE STAYS BELOW 93-LEVEL ON RBI ACTION

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Rupee stayed just below 93-level as banks continue to meet their positions limiting the overnight net open positions in the onshore forex market, the rupee opened at 93.07, a low of 93.07 and a high of 92.86 before closing at 93.

However, heavy selling by foreign investors continued with ₹8,692.11 crore worth of equities sold on Tuesday while domestic institutions were net buyers by ₹7,979.50 crore.

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Indian equity markets continued to exhibit notable resilience as the Middle East conflict entered its sixth week, becoming increasingly complex and unpredictable. Despite elevated volatility markets responded with maturity absorbing developments rather than reacting with panic," said Ponnudi R., CEO, Enrich Money.

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This reflects a clear behavioral shift, where investors are now pricing in meaningful developments rather than reacting to headline-driven noise. The session opened with a gap-down, but steady buying interest throughout the day helped indices recover and close marginally positive," Ponnudi said.

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Investors are also awaiting the Reserve Bank policy decision, with rates widely expected to remain status quo. In the near term, markets are still driven by geopolitical developments and selective value buying, with focus gradually shifting to the earnings season for assessing potential downgrade risks arising from higher crude prices and currency volatility," said Vinod Nair, head, research, Geojit Investments.

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Technical analysis suggests a short-term correction in the near term, but the long-term outlook remains positive. Investors should maintain a balanced portfolio, focusing on quality stocks with strong fundamentals and growth potential.

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Market sentiment remains cautiously optimistic, with investors looking for signs of a global economic recovery and a resolution to the Middle East conflict. The rupee's stability is a positive sign for the Indian economy, but investors remain vigilant for any developments that could impact the market.

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The market's resilience in the face of global uncertainties is a testament to the strength of the Indian economy and the confidence of investors. As the earnings season progresses, investors should continue to monitor market developments and adjust their portfolios accordingly.

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Air India CEO Campbell Wilson quits, to serve till new CEO is appointed

FC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 7

Air India chief executive officer and managing director, Campbell Wilson on Tuesday resigned from his post. He will remain in the role until his successor is announced and in place.

Wilson conveyed his intention to step down in 2026 to Air India chairman N. Chandrasekaran in 2024 itself.

He has overseen Air India's privatisation, acquisition and merger of four airlines.

I wish to record my deep appreciation for Campbell's leadership and contribution over past 4 yrs. — N. CHANDRASEKARAN, Chairman, Air India

IT HAS BEEN a true honour to play a small part in this latest chapter of Air India's long history, and I will continue to be an enthusiastic supporter of this wonderful organisation and its people.

— CAMPBELL WILSON, CEO & MD, Air India



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The rupee appreciated for the fourth consecutive session at 93 to a high of 93.07 compared to Monday's close of 93.06. At the inter-bank foreign exchange market, the rupee opened at 93.07, a low of 93.07 and a high of 92.86 before closing at 93.

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The RBI, to defend the ongoing weakness in the currency, barred banks from offering rupee non-deliverable forwards to resident and non-resident clients and said companies cannot re-book cancelled forwards. The move followed tighter limits on banks' forex positions in the domestic market to \$ 100 million by the end of each business day. Banks have to comply with this directive by April 11.

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Investors are also awaiting the Reserve Bank policy decision, with rates widely expected to remain status quo. In the near term, markets are still driven by geopolitical developments and selective value buying, with focus gradually shifting to the earnings season for assessing potential downgrade risks arising from higher crude prices and currency volatility," said Vinod Nair, head, research, Geojit Investments.

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Govt to aid MSMEs with credit scheme

FC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 7

India plans to roll out sovereign credit guarantees on loans worth \$26.7 billion, aimed at supporting businesses, particularly small firms, affected by the Middle East crisis, two government sources said.

Businesses such as textile and glass makers, have been hit by disruptions to supply chains from the Middle East due to the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran.

At the same time, India is the world's third-largest oil importer, also faces the risk of rising inflation and slower growth.

The government is planning sovereign guarantees for four years to banks that lend to businesses, similar to those provided during the deadly Covid-19 pandemic, both the sources said.

This would cost the government about ₹17,000 crore to ₹16,000 crore (\$1.83 billion to \$1.94 billion), they said.

India is planning to provide a guarantee of about 90 per cent on loans up to ₹100 crore (\$10.75 million) to lenders offering credit to borrowers in the Middle East default in the aftermath of West Asia crisis, both the sources said.

In 2020, India offered credit guarantees to support bank lending to businesses including travel and tourism firms hit hardest by Covid-19 pandemic, to help them resume operations and pay their debts. — Reuters

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Gold, silver fundamentals strong, slide to reverse when tensions ease

SANGEETHA G.
CHENNAI, APRIL 7

Despite technically having fallen into bear market, the fundamentals of gold and silver are still strong. While the precious metals are awaiting a ceasefire in Iran to rebound, UBS and Goldman Sachs have issued optimistic forecasts for gold.

Global capability centres (GCCs) accounted for 43 per cent of total leasing, absorbing 2.5 million sq. ft., up 53 per cent from 1.6 million sq. ft. in the same period last year. Third-party services firms leased 1.7 million sq. ft.,

drop of 20 per cent, the metals are in the bear market. But the fundamentals, including central bank buying, inflationary fears, and growing economic uncertainties are supporting gold," said Ajay Kedia, MD, Kedia Commodities.

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Gold, seen as a safe haven asset during geopolitical uncertainties, has been correcting since the beginning of the Iran war. Since the onset of the war, spot gold prices have dropped 14 per cent and silver has fallen 21 per cent from their closing levels on Feb. 27.

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Hyd absorbs 5.68 mn sqft in 3 mths

FC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, APRIL 7

Hyderabad recorded office leasing of 5.68 million sq. ft. in first quarter of 2026, marking a historic high for a single quarter, driven by strong demand from GCCs, according to Knight Frank India.

Office transactions grew 48 per cent year-on-year from 4 million sq. ft. in Q1 2025, making the city the second-largest market for office space absorption among eight major cities,

in the country. Average rents rose eight per cent to ₹77.5 per sq. ft. per month, while new completions stood at 2.3 million sq. ft., indicating steady supply.

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Investors are also awaiting the Reserve Bank policy decision, with rates widely expected to remain status quo. In the near term, markets are still driven by geopolitical developments and selective value buying, with focus gradually shifting to the earnings season for assessing potential downgrade risks arising from higher crude prices and currency volatility," said Vinod Nair, head, research, Geojit Investments.

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Market sentiment remains cautiously optimistic, with investors looking for signs of a global economic recovery and a resolution to the Middle East conflict. The rupee's stability is a positive sign for the Indian economy, but investors remain vigilant for any developments that could impact the market.

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Good governance must complement fiscal management

UNION Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman didn't make a political point when she said that India has fiscal space to support sectors impacted by the escalating West Asia crisis. It is because of the deft management of public finance over the years, which has resulted in a steady decline in fiscal and revenue deficits, despite heavy capital expenditure. External headwinds are strong and unrelenting. As she said, "The escalation of Middle East conflict has evolved from a regional security concern into a systemic tremor threatening vital arteries of global energy and hardening the lines of a new multipolar world order."

Sound public finance management, however, provides considerable resilience, giving the Finance Minister elbow room to help the

badly hit sectors. The "systemic tremor" has already started hurting India. Moody's Ratings has cut economic growth projections for 2026-27 from 6.8 per cent to six per cent. The credit ratings agency has attributed the cut to the ongoing war in West Asia and its impact on the global energy market. Other challenges India's economy faces are well-known: "subdued private consumption, softer industrial activity and a weakening in the momentum of gross fixed capital formation amid elevated prices and higher input costs."

The beneficial impact of the Iran war is also reflected in India's services sector, whose growth was at its weakest pace in 14 months in March. The government can learn two lessons from the current situation. First, reducing dependence

on petroleum imports is not optional but mandatory. To mitigate this, the government must accelerate investments in both fossil fuels and alternative energy sources like renewables, expand domestic exploration and production, and promote energy efficiency across sectors. Initiatives like electric mobility, green hydrogen, and solar energy must be scaled up not just as climate commitments but as economic imperatives. Diversifying energy sources and suppliers can also help reduce risk. The second lesson is equally important: sound fiscal management must go hand in hand with efficient governance and service delivery. Having fiscal space is valuable, but its effectiveness depends on how well it is utilised. The recent panic and disruptions caused by LPG short-

EDITERS

Game changing sentence

T cannot restrain myself from appreciating the concerned Judge of Madurai for sentencing all the nine custodial death accused policemen to double death sentences as the offence invited maximum punishment considering its gravity. This is a rare judgement on custodial death of two individuals. We seldom find perpetrators of custodial violence leading to death of an arrested or detained person, getting punished in the first place, leave alone a life or death sentence. The fine of Rs 84 lakh imposed on the main accused is apparently meant as a token compensation to the bereaved family of the two deceased. As the legal procedure is time-consuming, my suggestion is after the death sentence, the entire follow-up procedure should be fast-tracked so that the scope for 'manipulations' is minimised, and the sentence of a lower court stands legal scrutiny and isn't feared in the future. Political interference should not be tolerated, and accountability must be ensured at every level of administration and judiciary to make the system strong against the offenders. I will not be surprised to ultimately see all the nine convicts in this case escaping death sentences at the SC or HC level as our system has a history of converting death sentences to life imprisonment.

Govardhana Myneddu, Vijayawada

Don't spare barbaric cops

THE recent judgement of a trial court awarding death penalty to the nine policemen involved in the custodial torture of a father and son in Tamil Nadu's Thoothukudi district is a daring judgement that confirms that no one is above law. In fact, the charges against the father were that he had kept his mobile shop open during the Covid-19 lockdown, which is not a serious offence. Instead of serving a warning to the two, the police personnel tortured him and his son to such a brutal extent they succumbed to the injuries. The judge held that a custodial death is a social evil and an attack on human rights. As per the oath taken while undergoing training, police personnel should behave like public servants and serve the people. But what is happening? A person who comes to lodge a complaint must first pay bribes, which is the reason people dread going to police stations with their complaints. A strong solution should be initiated by the Assembly and Parliament to curb such barbaric police excesses.

TSN Rao, Hyderabad

A landmark verdict

THAT nine policemen are being awarded death sentence by a trial court in Tamil Nadu in a custodial death case is exemplary. The arrest and gruesome murder of two businessmen in the name of violating lockdown rules by the TN police had shaken national conscience five years ago. The Madras High court took up that case suo motu and ordered CBI enquiry that paved the way for a proper investigation, trial and verdict. The ghastly incident should force the country to take the path of policing reforms. There are findings and reports of a dozen commissions, including the Supreme Court's recommendations that are waiting to be implemented in this regard. Right from accountability at district and state level functionaries, many issues like fixed tenure at the helm and immunity from political pressures. This landmark verdict should be an eye-opener.

D V G Sankara Rao, GEMS Medical College, Srikalamb

Death punishment is justified

In a first in India, nine policemen, including an inspector and sub-inspector working at Sattankulam police station in Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu were awarded death punishment. It is a case of "fence eating the crop". It is very shocking to know that the police arrested a father and his son for running their cell phone shop defying the Covid-19 lockdown norms, which eventually were proved wrong. They were beaten to death inside the premises of the police station. It is regretful that the case would have been buried if the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court had not monitored. As custodial deaths are an attack on human rights, a mere life sentence would have been an insufficient punishment. The verdict should serve as a deterrent and prevent such recurrences. The death punishment and slapping the convicts an overwhelming Rs 1.84 crore fine on convicts is a welcome decision.

Pratap Reddy Yaramala, Tiruvuru (AP)

thehansreader@gmail.com

DELIMITATION will cause economic loss to South Indian States: BAMUL President D K Suresh

BENGALURU: Bangalore Milk Union Limited (BAMUL) President D K Suresh on Tuesday said that the delimitation of Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies would not only reduce the number of seats for South Indian states but also lead to serious economic hardship. Speaking to reporters at his Sadashivanagar residence, he said, "I had said earlier as well that South Indian states will face injustice. The southern states need to wake up. I had warned that this outcry would rise sooner or later, and that if it doesn't, people will start thinking about alternative paths. Whether seats are gained or lost is not the main point." He was replying to a question on Prime Minister's claim that delimitation would not result in a loss of seats for South India. "A special Lok Sabha session has been called from the 16th of this month. We need to watch how the government introduces the bill. Overall, this is a conspiracy to funnel the South's money to the northern states. Our taxes will be diverted to northern states," he warned. "The central government says it is carrying out delimitation based on the 2011 Census. This is even more dangerous. As per that census, Bengaluru's population was 60-70 lakh — it is now 1.40 crore. Karnataka's population was 5 crore — it has now grown beyond 7 crore. Along with this, numerous challenges including economic ones will arise. All parties need to think seriously about this," he said. "Our country is facing considerable problems due to the war in the Middle East. The Central government has not broken its silence on this matter."

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

Polavaram: Decades of delay, emerging progress and the road ahead



G MURALI KRISHNA

Godavari water is to be diverted to the Krishna River for sharing among Andhra Pradesh Karnataka and Maharashtra in the respective ratio of 45:21:14 TMC while Odisha and Chhattisgarh can draw five TMC and 1.5 TMC, respectively, from the foreshore.



A performance audit by CAG released last month highlighted systemic issues that contributed to the prolonged delays. Spending was heavily skewed toward construction while land acquisition and rehabilitation received inadequate attention. Failure to adhere to flood diversion schedules and the absence of a dedicated agency for flood mitigation during construction led to damage of partially built cofferdams and the diaphragm wall. Irregular contracting practices including nomination-based awards restrictive tenders and abrupt changes in contractors at critical stages disrupted work and exposed structures to risk.

Clearances arrived progressively, including site and environmental clearances in 2005 wildlife and rehabilitation and resettlement clearances in 2006 and 2007 forest clearances in 2008 and 2010 and the Revised Cost Estimate Phase I approved by the Union Cabinet in August 2024. The layout includes a 1118-metre spillway on the right bank at A Hill with 48 radial gates of 16 metres by 20 metres each operated hydraulically. The river course has been re-routed over 6.6 kilometres through an approach channel of 2100 metres, a spill channel of 2920 metres and a pilot channel of 1000 metres to handle a design flood discharge of 50 lakh cusecs. A fish ladder designed by the Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute, Kolkata, forms the first such ecological feature in India. The river course has been re-routed over 6.6 kilometres through an approach channel of 2100 metres, a spill channel of 2920 metres and a pilot channel of 1000 metres to handle a design flood discharge of 50 lakh cusecs. A fish ladder designed by the Central Inland Fisheries Research Institute, Kolkata, forms the first such ecological feature in India. The reservoir carries a gross design capacity of 194.6 TMC at full reservoir level of plus 45.72 metres. It envisages utilisation of 322.73 TMC of Godavari water to irrigate 7.2 lakh acres of new ayacut and stabilise 23.5 lakh acres. The project will generate 960 megawatts of hydropower through 12 units of 80 megawatts each. It will supply drinking water to 540 villages serving 28.5 lakh people along the canals and allocate 23.44 TMC for drinking and industrial needs in and around Visakhapatnam including the Vizag Steel Plant. Approximately, 80 TMC of

with civil works at 81 per cent and the Godavari Water Disputes Tribunal Award of 1980, the project secured National Project status in 2014. The Polavaram Project Authority was subsequently formed under the Ministry of Jal Shakti in January 2015. The reservoir carries a gross design capacity of 194.6 TMC at full reservoir level of plus 45.72 metres. It envisages utilisation of 322.73 TMC of Godavari water to irrigate 7.2 lakh acres of new ayacut and stabilise 23.5 lakh acres. The project will generate 960 megawatts of hydropower through 12 units of 80 megawatts each. It will supply drinking water to 540 villages serving 28.5 lakh people along the canals and allocate 23.44 TMC for drinking and industrial needs in and around Visakhapatnam including the Vizag Steel Plant. Approximately, 80 TMC of

executed and embankment at 12 per cent. The powerhouse includes 12 pressure tunnels of 150.3 metres length and nine metres diameter with Asia's largest vertical Kaplan turbines.

This visible momentum in head works canals and key dam components marks a welcome shift. Yet the project remained pending for decades despite early clearances and national status. A performance audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) released last month highlighted systemic issues that contributed to the prolonged delays. Spending was heavily skewed toward construction while land acquisition and rehabilitation received inadequate attention. Discrepancies in land records payments

pedited land awards, transparent compensation and full provision of amenities in colonies. Earth-cum-rock fill embankment works in Gap I and Gap II require round the clock monitoring of modern equipment and strict adherence to flood management protocols to avoid any repeat damage. Uninterrupted funding, continuous contractor support and use of project monitoring tools can prevent further cost overruns. Protective embankments for Odisha and Chhattisgarh along with full integration of the hydropower component deserve immediate attention. Regular high-level reviews involving all stakeholders and public reporting on milestones can build accountability and confidence.

After more than eight decades Polavaram has reached a decisive phase. The people of Andhra Pradesh have waited long for this lifeline that promises irrigation for new and existing ayacut, flood moderation, drinking water security, industrial support and clean energy. The government can address past shortcomings through disciplined execution while communities stand to gain from timely and equitable delivery of benefits. With Phase I targeting storage up to the Minimum Draw Down Level and several works, well advanced sustained focus on the remaining gaps can convert delay into lasting development without further slippage.

The ultimate success will be measured by how efficiently and fairly the project meets its national promise for all concerned.

(The writer is a researcher at People's Pulse Research Organisation)

Be warned: Soft drinks are silent killers

Dr M AKHILA MITRA

WITH the onset of summer, a familiar yet troubling pattern emerges across society. Alongside rising temperatures comes an equally sharp rise in the consumption of soft drinks. Fueled by relentless advertising campaigns, particularly during high-profile events like the IPL, these beverages are promoted as symbols of refreshment and enjoyment. Supermarkets and shopping malls witness a surge in bulk purchases, while refrigerators in many homes are stocked with bottles of sugary drinks, often treated as essential summer staples.

However, the perception that soft drinks provide cooling relief is largely misleading. Scientific evidence increasingly points to the contrary, indicating that these beverages contribute significantly to deteriorating health. Over time, people have unknowingly embraced habits that undermine their well-being, influenced by modern consumer culture and aggressive marketing strategies.

Research conducted by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has raised serious concerns about the contents of soft drinks, including the presence of pesticide residues. These beverages are composed of carbonated water, high quantities of sugar or corn syrup, artificial sweeteners like aspartame, caramel coloring, phosphoric and

citric acids, caffeine, and chemical preservatives such as potassium benzoate and potassium citrate. Some studies have also reported traces of harmful pesticides including lindane, DDT, and malathion, highlighting the potential risks associated with regular consumption.

Despite such alarming findings, regulatory responses have remained inadequate. Soft drink companies continue to generate enormous profits, often at the expense of public health. Compounding the issue is the role of celebrities and athletes who endorse these products for substantial financial gain, thereby normalizing and encouraging their consumption among the masses.

The health implications of soft drink consumption are profound and far-reaching. Their acidic nature, often compared to that of certain cleaning agents, can have damaging effects on the human body. Regular intake is linked to obesity, hypertension, diabetes, respiratory complications, weakened bones, joint pain, and digestive disorders. Over the long term, it increases the risk of kidney failure, liver disease, cardiovascular problems, and even cancer. Pregnant women who consume these beverages may inadvertently expose their unborn children to potential health risks.

The high sugar content in soft drinks frequently exceeds recommended daily limits,



leading to weight gain, insulin resistance, and the development of Type 2 diabetes. Their acidity erodes dental enamel, resulting in cavities and long-term dental damage, while also causing irritation to the digestive system.

One striking illustration of their corrosive nature is often cited: human teeth, which can withstand extreme conditions such as fire and prolonged burial, have been observed to deteriorate when immersed in soft drinks over a period of days. While this example is often used symbolically, it underscores growing concerns about the impact of these beverages

on the body's internal systems.

In contrast, additional natural alternatives such as buttermilk, lassi, fresh fruit juices, ragi malt, and seasonal fruits like watermelon and cucumber offer safer and more nutritious options, particularly during the summer months. Encouraging these choices requires a conscious shift in lifestyle, beginning within households and extending to social practices. Avoiding soft drinks at public gatherings, including weddings and celebrations, can serve as an important step toward promoting healthier habits.

The issue also calls for broader societal and policy-level interventions. Increased public awareness, responsible advertising practices, and stricter regulatory measures are essential to curb the unchecked spread of unhealthy consumption patterns. There is also a need to hold public figures accountable for endorsing products that may harm community health.

Soft drinks, often perceived as harmless refreshments, demand closer scrutiny. The growing body of evidence suggests that they function less as thirst quenchers and more as contributors to long-term health risks. Recognizing this reality is the first step toward safeguarding public health and fostering a culture that prioritizes well-being over convenience and commercial influence.

(The writer is a Naturopath & Public Health Consultant)

We are at a very important cusp of what I call as return of global colonialism, something which Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry fought from 1927 till 1947, and in 2026, we are at one such cusp

-Uday Kotak, Founder of Kotak Mahindra Bank

BIZ BRIEFS

TAFE sets up JFarm centre

Tractors and Farm Equipment Limited (TAFE), a tractor manufacturer, inaugurated its adaptive research centre, TAFE JFarm Rajasthan, at Bhawani Mandi, reiterating its commitment to driving farm productivity and farmer prosperity through sharing sustainable agricultural practices. Dr. Lakshmi Venu, Vice Chairman, TAFE, said, "we have always believed that the progress of Indian agriculture depends on combining strong domain knowledge, appropriate technology, and a deep respect for sustainability."

PPS Motors' new launch

PPS Motors launched the all-new Renault Duster in Nizamabad, with turbo petrol prices starting at Rs 10.49 Lakh (ex-showroom) and dispatches now underway nationwide. Renault India built the new Duster on the advanced Renault Group Modular Platform (RGMP), with a clear focus on structural robustness, efficiency and future-readiness. Its true SUV proportions, best in segment approach and departure angles and high ground clearance reinforce off-road credibility while supporting everyday usability.

New product from TaMo

Tata Motors strengthened its leadership in electric commercial mobility with the launch of the all-new Tata Intra EV Pickup. Expanding its electric small commercial vehicle portfolio, the new pickup brings together the proven strengths of the trusted Intra platform with a purpose-built electric architecture—delivering a dependable, high-earning solution for India's evolving cargo requirements.

Tata Play Fiber, IBM in pact

Tata Play Fiber, an internet service provider, announced its collaboration with IBM to build a next-generation, AI-ready enterprise data lakehouse using IBM watsonx. The new platform will unify 25 disparate data sources into a single, scalable environment to enable advanced analytics, strengthen customer retention, and unlock new cross-sell and upsell opportunities. Tata Play Fiber's new data lakehouse will optimize and scale AI workflows while consolidating structured and semi-structured data into a trusted, unified foundation for enterprise-wide analytics and informed decision-making.

New collection from Mochi

Mochi, a footwear brand, has unveiled its latest collection for the season—a bold, expressive range designed for those who live to be noticed. Built for today's consumer, the collection celebrates individuality through statement-making styles that seamlessly blend trend and comfort. Anchored in the campaign Caution: Attracts Attention, the collection traces a playful and confident energy. Designed to command attention, the collection is built for women who own their vibe. For men, the brand has launched open-toe chunky sole slip-ons.

Centre lining up ₹2.5-L-cr credit guarantee for MSMEs

THE LOAN PROGRAMME MODELLED ON PANDEMIC-ERA ECLGS

NEW DELHI

THE government is considering a Rs2.5 lakh crore credit guarantee scheme to support businesses, particularly MSMEs, hit by the ongoing West Asia crisis, sources said. The proposed scheme would provide a sovereign-backed guarantee of up to 90% on loans of as much as Rs100 crore, offering lenders protection against default.

The Centre is expected to allocate around Rs17,000-18,000 crore to operationalise the programme. The initiative is likely to follow the framework of the Emergency Credit Line Guarantee



Scheme (ECLGS), launched in May 2020 under the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan during the COVID-19 pandemic. That scheme provided 100% guarantee cover to lenders, enabling quick, collateral-free loans to businesses based on existing borrowings, with capped interest rates and no additional charges.

Officials said the earlier programme proved effective in helping firms manage cash

flows, meet liabilities and re-sumo operations during the pandemic. The fresh proposal comes amid rising economic stress triggered by geopolitical tensions in West Asia. Global crude oil prices have surged nearly 50% since late February, following military strikes by the US and Israel on Iran and subsequent retaliation.

To cushion the impact, the government has taken several steps, including cutting

WHAT DOES IT ENTAIL?

- Up to 90% guarantee on loans of up to Rs100 crore
- Guarantees to be routed via National Credit Guarantee Trustee Company
- Estimated Rs17,000-18,000 crore fiscal outlay for the scheme

excise duty on petrol and diesel, imposing export duties on fuels, and exempting customs duty on select petrochemical imports to stabilise supply. India, a major importer of crude oil, fertilisers and natural gas, faces heightened vulnerability to supply disruptions and price volatility arising from the conflict.

Rising fuel costs push Air India to increase domestic, intl surcharges

Domestic fares up ₹299-₹899; international routes see sharper hikes amid cost pressure

Key takeaways

- Fuel surcharge effective April 8 on all Air India flights
- Domestic surcharge: Rs299-₹899; international: \$24-280
- Applies to Air India Express as well

NEW DELHI

THE Air India group has announced a fuel surcharge hike for both domestic and international flights, effective April 8, citing a sharp rise in global jet fuel prices. The surcharge will range from Rs299 to Rs899 for domestic routes, while international passengers will face an additional USD 24 to USD 280, depending on distance and sector. The revised charges will also apply to flights operated by its low-cost arm, Air India Express.



However, no such relief exists for international fuel prices, necessitating sharper revisions for overseas travel. Routes to Bangladesh and Far East destinations, including Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea, are yet to see revised surcharges pending regulatory approvals. Meanwhile, rival carrier IndiGo has already increased its fuel surcharge in response to rising costs. Citing data from the International Air Transport Association (IATA), Air India noted that global jet fuel prices surged to USD 195.19 per barrel for the week ending March 27, nearly doubling from USD 99.40 at February-end.

A TE, which constitutes 40-45 per cent of airline operating costs, has been hit by rising crude oil prices and a steep increase in refinery margins, or "crack spread." Despite the hike, the airline said international surcharges still do not fully offset escalating fuel costs, adding that it continues to absorb a significant share of the burden.

Vijay is CBO of Refroid Tech

HANS BUSINESS HYDERABAD

REFROID Technologies, datacentre infrastructure company focused on enabling next-generation AI and high-performance datacentres, has appointed Vijay Sampathkumar as Chief Business Officer (CBO). In this role, Vijay will lead Refroid's global go-to-market strategy, partnerships, and business expansion, taking the company's Make-in-India datacentre infrastructure innovations to international markets.



Vijay Sampathkumar

Vijay brings extensive leadership experience in the datacentre cooling and infrastructure ecosystem and has played a key role in advancing next-generation cooling technologies across emerging and high-growth datacentre markets. At Refroid, he will focus on strengthening strategic partnerships, accelerating adoption of advanced cooling technologies, and scaling the company's presence across global AI datacentre ecosystems.

Rupee down as markets wait for RBI decision

MUMBAI

THE rupee depreciated 10 paise to close at 93.00 (provisional) against the US dollar on Tuesday, as investors remained on edge ahead of US President Donald Trump's deadline for the opening of the Strait of Hormuz and the Reserve Bank's monetary policy review.

Forex traders said the USD/INR pair is trading under pressure, dragged down by unabated withdrawal of foreign capital, a firm dollar, and higher crude oil prices amid a volatile geopolitical situation.

Moreover, market participants will remain watchful of evolving geopolitical headlines and the upcoming RBI monetary policy decision.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the rupee



opened at 93.05 against the US dollar, then lost ground to trade at 93.07, registering a fall of 17 paise from its previous close. During the day, the rupee also touched an intra-day high of 92.86 against the greenback.

At the end of Tuesday's trading session, the rupee was quoted at 93.00 (provisional), down 10 paise from its previous close. On Monday, the rupee gained 28 paise to close at 92.90 against the US dollar on Monday, following the Reserve Bank's measures to curb speculative fervour and dampen volatility in the Indian currency.

Retail sector sees high double-digit revenue growth

Several FMCG makers register strong growth due to stable demand

NEW DELHI

LEADING retail players reported strong double-digit revenue growth in the fourth quarter of FY26 on the back of a stable demand environment and resilient macro-economic conditions.

Listed retail companies as Trent, Avenue Supermarkets (D-Mart) and V-Mart, in their recent quarter updates reported around 20 per cent year-on-year growth in their latest quarterly updates, aided by aggressive store additions and steady consumption trends.

Trent, a Tata group firm reported around 20 per cent growth in standalone (domestic) revenue to Rs 4,937 crore in the March quarter



of FY26. It was at Rs 4,106 crore in the corresponding January-March period a year ago.

"Revenue from sale of merchandise (excluding other operating income) grew 21 per cent and 19 per cent during the quarter and

the year ended March 2026, respectively," said Trent, which operates popular fashion outlets under the Westside and Zudio retail format. Trent has opened 22 Westside stores and 109 stores of its value retail format of Zudio.

Jubilant stock dips 9% over weak Q4

MUMBAI: Shares of Jubilant FoodWorks Ltd, the parent company of Domino's outlets in India, plummeted sharply in early trade on Tuesday after the company reported weak like-for-like (LFL) growth in its fourth quarter (Q4) business update.

The stock fell as much as 9.23 per cent to Rs 418.50 on the NSE, underperforming the benchmark Nifty 50, which declined 0.6 per cent. Jubilant FoodWorks reported a consolidated revenue growth of 1.9 per cent year-on-year to Rs 2,506 crore in the January-March quarter.

GLOBAL MARKETS RISE AS OIL PRICE SURGE CONTINUES

TOKYO: Global shares mostly rose in cautious trading Tuesday, as oil prices continued to surge ahead of a headline that US President Donald Trump set for Iran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz to all shipping traffic or risk its power

plants and bridges being bombed.

France's CAC 40 jumped 1.3 per cent to 8,066.18 in early trading, while the German DAX added 0.8 per cent to 23,360.26. Britain's FTSE 100 added 0.2 per cent to 10,460.13.

US shares were set to drift slightly higher with Dow futures up 0.1 per cent at 46,963.00. S&P 500 futures inched up less than 0.1 per cent to 6,652.50.

Japan's benchmark Nikkei 225 gained less than 0.1 per cent to close at 53,429.56.

EV sales rise by 25% to 24.52L units in FY26

NEW DELHI

TOTAL electric vehicle retail sales in India grew by 24.6 per cent at 24.52 lakh units in FY26 as compared to the previous fiscal, with every category delivering strong double-digit growth, Federation of Automobile Dealers Associations said on Tuesday.

While electric two-wheelers crossed 14 lakh units, electric passenger vehicle retail sales missed the 2 lakh units by a whisker but surged 83.63 per cent in FY26, FADA said in a statement. "FY26 has been a watershed year for India's electric mobility story. Total EV retail across two-wheelers, three-wheelers, passenger vehicles, and commercial vehicles stood at approximately 24.52 lakh units, growing nearly 24.6 per cent YoY, with every category delivering strong double-digit growth," FADA President CS Vigneshwar said.



total sales were at 1,99,923 units in FY26 as compared to 1,08,873 units in FY25, a growth of 83.63 per cent.

Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles was the leader in the electric PV segment by volume at 78,811 units in FY26, followed by JSW MG Motor India at 53,089 units and Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd with 42,721 units in second and third spots, respectively, as per FADA data.

The electric two-wheeler category saw a growth of 21.81 per cent at 14,01,818 units in FY26, up from 11,50,790 units in FY25.

TVS Motor Company was the leader in the segment with 3,41,513 units, followed by Bajaj Auto with 2,89,349

units in second place and Ather Energy with 2,39,178 units in the third spot in FY26.

FADA said the electric three-wheeler category witnessed a growth of 18.97 per cent at 8,30,819 units in FY26 as compared to 6,98,914 units in FY25. Electric commercial vehicle sales zoomed 120.57 per cent at 19,454 units in FY26 as compared to 8820 units in FY25, FADA said.

Reflecting on the overall EV sales, Vigneshwar said, "This is not just an automobile industry achievement, it is a testament to India's ability to lead a mass-market energy transition, from the last-mile auto-rickshaw to the family car."

Mkts remain bullish on uptick in IT stocks

IT scripts anchor rally | Crude oil dip lifts sentiment | FIIs sell, DIIs provide cushion

WHAT LED TO THE RALLY

- Crude oil eased: Lower prices improved sentiment
- IT stocks surged: Defensive buying in TCS, Infosys, HCL Tech
- Global markets positive: Supportive cues from Asia, US

MUMBAI

STOCK market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended higher on Tuesday, as a drop in crude oil prices and a rally in global markets calmed investors' sentiment. Also, buying in IT stocks aided recovery in the markets after early losses. The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 509.73 points, or 0.69 per cent, to settle at 74,616.58. During the day, it hit a high of 74,686.32 and a low of 73,282.41, gyrating 1,403.91 points.



The 50-share NSE Nifty climbed 155.40 points, or 0.68 per cent, to end at 23,123.65. From the 30-Sensex firms, Tata Consultancy Services, HCL Tech, Infosys, Bharti Airtel, Sun Pharma, and Hindustan Unilever were among the major gainers. InterGlobe Aviation, Adani Ports, Mahindra & Mahindra, and Titan were among the laggards. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, dropped 0.71 per cent to USD 109 per barrel.

"Indian markets staged a sharp intra-day recovery, with Nifty reversing early losses to reclaim higher levels, driven largely by short-covering and selective sec-

torially, BSE-Focused IT jumped 2.46 per cent (IT 2.37 per cent), realty (1.70 per cent), metal (1.55 per cent), commodities (0.83 per cent), hospitals (0.83 per cent) and FMCG (0.71 per cent). PSU banks, consumer durables, services, BSE MidSmall Private Banks Quality Tilt and consumer discretionary were the laggards. A total of 2,671 stocks advanced while 1,555 declined and 155 remained unchanged on the BSE. "Indian equity markets continued to exhibit notable resilience as the Middle East conflict entered its sixth week, becoming increasingly complex and unpredictable. Despite elevated volatility, with VIX hovering near the 25 zone, markets responded with maturity-absorbing developments rather than reacting with panic."

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs8,167.17 crore on Monday, according to exchange data. Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs), however, bought stocks worth Rs 8,088.70 crore.



In social networks, the function of 'friends' is primarily to heighten narcissism by granting attention, as consumers, to the ego exhibited as a commodity

Byang-Chul Han

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

GROWTH AND RESILIENCE OF AMUL CO-OP SHOULD BE EMULATED BEYOND DAIRY

HERE is another feather in Amul's cap. India's largest dairy brand has become the largest packaged consumer goods company in India, with its turnover exceeding ₹1 lakh crore in 2025-26. For the brand's promoter, the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation, the success flowed from diversification over time—from milk to products such as butter, ghee, cheese and ice-cream, and then to chocolates, sweets, probiotics, flavoured beverages and frozen products. Above all, it represents the story of India's largest cooperative succeeding in eliminating exploitation by middlemen and maximising returns for primary producers. Along the way, Amul collected many accolades including the recognition in 2024 as the world's strongest food brand by British consultancy Brand Finance after scoring high on familiarity, consideration and recommendation metrics.

This unique combination of farmer power and effective marketing began as a small dairy farmers' union in Kaira district near Anand in 1946. The impetus came from a series of strikes by farmers who had ousted the region's milk traders. Over decades, it grew to become a three-layered movement—village and district cooperatives, and a state-level federation—engaging 36 lakh farmers. In 1970, the National Dairy Development Board adopted Amul as a pan-India model for state cooperatives. Verghese Kurien's leadership and establishment of the marketing federation in 1973 made the brand synonymous with the 'White Revolution'. Yet, farmer power may not have succeeded had it not been for clean corporate governance. Popular ad campaigns and jingles like "Utterly butterly delicious" continue to capture the imagination of customers.

There are downsides as well. Amul has become so big that it sometimes poaches into the turf of smaller dairy cooperatives like Nandini in Karnataka and Avavin in Tamil Nadu. Such power has its own cycle—after the early days of democratic teamwork and farmer-leaders, cooperatives often become calcified as traditional power centres led by regional politicians, as has happened to Maharashtra's sugar cooperatives. Size matters too. To keep cooperatives democratic and serving local interest, an optimum size should be preferred. Even if Amul has crossed that threshold, there is no denying its way of running a cooperative and scaling up must be emulated beyond dairy farming. Exploitation of primary producers by traders is a scourge that plagues the broader farm economy. Advancing the cooperative movement is one of the best ways to get the producer his due.

LET RESERVATION RESET ENHANCE EQUITY IN ODISHA

THE Mohan Charan Majhi government has quietly shaken up social dynamics in Odisha by enhancing reservation for members of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and socially and educationally backward classes (SEBCs) in medical and technical education. From 20 percent earlier—12 percent for STs and 8 percent for SCs—the total quota has now jumped to 50 percent. With 22.5 percent for STs, 16.25 percent for SCs and 11.25 percent for SEBCs, reservation in Odisha now reflects the levels in other states with similar social structures.

Coming after decades of demanding proportional representation, this is a moment of reckoning for historically disadvantaged groups in the state. In 2015, reservation for the SC and ST communities was raised to 38.75 percent in general higher education, but medical, engineering and other technical institutions were kept out of the move. The wait was even longer for SEBCs, a section that mostly overlaps with the other backward classes. Despite accounting for 54 percent of the population, reservation for the group was kept at 11.25 percent to stay within the overall ceiling of 50 percent mandated by the Supreme Court in the *Indira Sawhney* (1992) case. A 2023 survey by the Odisha State Commission for Backward Classes revealed that just about 22 percent of SEBC members had cleared matriculation and intermediate to hold technical diplomas. The structural correction should, at long last, open the doors of technical professions to many more in the community.

While OBC groups rejoice and the state government draws appreciation from across party lines, it must be noted that the action aligns closely with the BJP's social reengineering strategy. Across India, OBCs have emerged as a key constituent of the national party, and by extending reservation to them in technical education through the SEBC classification, the BJP government is consolidating its broad social coalition in Odisha just a year before rural and urban by-elections, even while addressing a longstanding demand. It goes to show how closely social justice and pre-poll policy shifts are often intertwined in India. The Odisha government must ensure that this reservation reset practically improves social mobility and equality on the ground, rather than be seen as a mere move to gain votes.

QUICK TAKE

RINGS TO PROTECT

PUTTING your body in harm's way to protect what you support has a long and powerful history. In India, women have formed defiant human shields in various eras to protect the vulnerable from both brutal rulers and murderous mobs. In the 1970s, locals in the Garhwal Himalayas formed rings around trees to prevent large-scale logging in what came to be known as the Chipko movement. Today such a movement is growing in Iran, whose power players and big brands the US has threatened to destroy. First, rat virtuosos Ali Ghamsari stunned the world by calmly sitting down to play next to the Damavand power plant. Then thousands of Iranians responded to the government's call to follow suit. Leaders must improve the war machine to stop before knowingly harming civilians.

FOR a mid-sized party that earned its place in Indian political chronicles by claiming and retaining Delhi in the 2015 and 2020 Assembly elections, though it was left battered after an ignominious defeat in 2025, the AAP never disappears from the news cycle. Its survival now depends on its Punjab government, while it nurtures a small presence in the Gujarat, Goa and J&K assemblies. The AAP's record does not portend the prospect of being a force to reckon with at the Centre in the foreseeable future. But nothing stops the party dreaming big. No sooner was AAP chieftain Arvind Kejriwal legally exonerated in the excise policy case that cost him a third victory in Delhi, than his cheerleaders proclaimed him as a prospective Prime Minister.

After drawing local big-shots from opponents like the Congress, the AAP got a taste of its own medicine once it ceded power in Delhi. It lost former ministers Raaj Kumar Anand and Kailash Gahlot to the BJP, while Alka Lamba, one of the national capital's best-known women politicians, returned to the Congress.

However, the recent exclusion of Raghav Chadha from the inwards of power drew more reactions—both negative and favourable towards the newsmaker—than the other departures, although Kejriwal has not yet suspended Chadha from the party. He seems set to quit as he lobs a provocation a day at his leader.

Last week, Chadha was stripped of his post as the AAP's Rajya Sabha deputy leader with a communiqué to the secretary not to allocate him time to speak. It was as if lifelines sustaining his political career were cut off, leaving him with a token presence in the party and Parliament.

Chadha, a 37-year-old chartered accountant, started as a Kejriwal favourite. Dapper and eloquent, he spoke the language of a quintessential upper-middle-class urbanite without the cynicism of someone tired of the existing system. The patina of earnestness he exuded persuaded even politics-weary citizens to believe that a vote for AAP would bring them 'achche din'.

Chadha was no political spring chicken. He quickly grasped and nearly perfected the AAP's operative dynamics and maintained Kejriwal's trust to become a trouble-shooter in Punjab after the party was elected to rule, and was crucial to selecting candidates, finessing the campaign and sorting out organisational glitches. Before the 2022 polls, there was a buzz that Chadha could be the Chief

Raghav Chadha lost Arvind Kejriwal's confidence by growing distant from party initiatives and championing causes for the classes rather than the masses of the state that sent him to the Rajya Sabha

WHAT A POLITICIAN'S RISE & FALL REVEALS ABOUT AMBITIOUS AAP

RADHIKA RAMASESHAN

Columnist and political commentator



MANDAR PADKOR

Minister if AAP was voted to power. Even as Bhagwant Mann made it to the top job, Chadha leveraged his clout to a degree that he was feared as an extra-constitutional authority to Mann's chagrin.

The growing antagonism towards Chadha didn't bother his mentor Kejriwal, who in 2022 had him appointed as an advisor to the Punjab government. He was elected to the Rajya Sabha from the state and was additionally rewarded with the post of the AAP's deputy leader in the Upper House, with the hope he would assist the ruling NDA coalition and flag issues close to his party's agenda.

He didn't work to fulfil Kejriwal's expectations. Apparently, the trigger for Chadha's creeping indifference towards the AAP was Kejriwal's arrest in March 2021 in the excise scam along with senior Delhi ministers Manish Sisodia and Saty-

endar Jain. Chadha's name figured in supplementary charges filed by the Enforcement Directorate, but he was not named as an accused or a suspect. AAP insiders believed that the mention was enough to put the fear of god in Chadha. He started to act in a pious manner. He did not campaign enthusiastically in the Delhi elections. When AAP leaders and workers were out on the streets protesting the arrest of Kejriwal and other colleagues, Chadha went missing. His plea was that he was in London for a vitrectomy. However, even when back in Delhi, he did not partake of the celebrations after the corruption charges against Kejriwal and others were dropped.

In Parliament, he was considered more a liability than an asset to the AAP. The grouse was that Chadha never participated in opposition walkouts, never raised

questions against the Modi government and, importantly, never took up Punjab-related matters despite representing the state. He was accused of indulging in "soft public relations", which when parsed meant speaking on issues the treasury bench would readily endorse.

So when Chadha pleaded that he was brought down for "speaking for the people", his colleagues' retort was he was more concerned with the high price of samosas selling at airport restaurants than the deletion of bona fide voters from electoral rolls. The "samosa" became a metaphor for Chadha's levity in a serious forum like the Rajya Sabha. What was unexceptionable to him was unacceptable to the AAP—adopting "neutrality" and "playing safe" in politically fraught times. A day after the first round of actions against him, he accepted posts attacking Modi from his X account. He invited ridicule from his colleagues, who reminded him that an individual who takes flight might as well be dead.

One of Chadha's recent Instagram post says, "Never outshine your master". Although described as cryptic by observers, it was crystal clear that he intended to portray himself as a 'victim' for displaying 'talent'. The undertone suggested that his 'master' Kejriwal was insecure because he, Chadha, appeared more brilliant.

Sadly, Chadha's purported brilliance and talent were rarely, if ever, on display. When he was given space in Punjab, like any politician, he tried to put his new skills at realpolitik to use and did not succeed. In Parliament, his anxiety over excessive baggage charges, flight delays and legalising paternity leave—legitimate issues by themselves—would have steered him to the classes rather than the masses who are losing sleep over LPG shortage.

For someone who supposedly had a great rapport with Kejriwal, Chadha must have known early on that he served a leader who, like anyone in his role, was essentially ruthless and subscribed to an off-with-the-head credo to reinforce his supremacy. At the peak of the AAP's popularity and strength, Kejriwal hid himself of several founding members such as Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan, indisputably wiser and more talented than Chadha. The AAP survived the vicissitudes.

By comparison, Chadha might be small change useful to the BJP and the Congress—only to the extent of disparaging Kejriwal and galling the beans on AAP like some of Rahul Gandhi's former confidants are to the BJP. (Views are personal)

EFFECTIVE PILL FOR ONLINE ILLS

OVER the last few months, several states have sent a clear message long overdue: In today's age, child safety can no longer be treated as an afterthought. Calls for stronger restrictions on minors' social media use are already being voiced citing mental health, academic performance and overall well-being.

From Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh to Goa and Punjab, state governments have begun recognising the seriousness of challenges children face online, and the fact that it is no longer a scattered concern but a national problem that demands urgent attention. The concern is not remote to my state, Odisha, either. This is not a sudden overreaction or a passing political trend, but rather the consequence of years of mounting harm and toxicity, and the ineffectiveness of platform safeguards.

Even this year's Economic Survey framed social media addiction as a health challenge in which compulsive use among young Indians is leading to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, sleep disturbances, reduced concentration and poorer academic performance.

Among the things children are exposed to on social media platforms are sexualised material, influencer-driven content, unrealistic lifestyles and manipulative trends. Added to this is the rising threat of bullying, predatory contact and generative artificial intelligence-enabled harms that overwhelm young users with misleading and often harmful material. It is for this reason that state-level conversations on social media regulation have largely framed the public health lens. While platforms are making efforts to improve a child's experience on social media through measures such as teen accounts and parental tools, such efforts are clearly not enough.

As parliamentarians, we should read this carefully. When state governments with varied political dispensations move in the same direction, it signals that a public concern has crossed a threshold and policymakers are losing patience. The question, therefore, is not merely whether banning social media for children is a sustainable approach. Banning technology is not the solution, but the *status quo* also needs to change.

The bigger question is whether the existing platform-led model of child safety online remains defensible at all. Are we starved for workable solutions? While

platforms have had years to remodel these spaces meaningfully safer for users, the harms have only exacerbated.

Now, with the mainstreaming of generative AI, the culture of platforms seems to be becoming even more exploitative and difficult to govern. In such a situation, it is hardly surprising that governments reach for bans and regulatory restrictions, which could be considered the easiest tools available when no one has offered a better alternative.



CHITRA

When state governments of different political persuasions move in the same direction, Parliament must take note. The harm online platforms are causing for young children needs a conversation beyond state bans. Focus must be trained on platform design

The next phase of this conversation must be about platform accountability in its most achievable form. For that, we first need to acknowledge that social media platforms function as systems of public consequence. It would not be an understatement to say that they actively shape what we see, how we think and what kinds of social behaviour are normalised.

Second, since the question of harm is no longer restricted to content alone and has become more about design and culture, our accountability mechanisms must keep that in mind. For that, platforms accessed by children must move away from design architectures that involve meaningful friction, including age-

appropriate time limits, safer late-night defaults, reduced virality features for younger users, stronger break prompts and greater restraint around design choices that are built to prolong use.

On top, the focus should shift towards a preventive model of moderation focused on improving the quality of the environment itself. This means stronger human moderation for high-risk youth-facing spaces, faster escalation channels, greater visibility into how harmful trends spread. Platforms should also take more responsibility on platforms to disrupt repeated cycles of manipulation, pile-ons and algorithmically-amplified mischief before they harden into culture.

Just as importantly, platforms must also learn to slow down, especially in times of AI. They can't continue to roll out the impact features, generative tools and engagement mechanisms into youth-heavy environments as though society must absorb the consequences later.

Significant product changes should go through sandboxes, testing environments and external review before large-scale deployment. Parents, young users, educators, child-rights experts and mental health professionals should be consulted in product design and rollout.

It may no longer be enough to rely on scattered rule-making and platform-specific responses to tackle what we are dealing with today. What is now needed is a more specialised digital-safety regulator capable of monitoring risks to minors, demanding meaningful disclosures and reviewing high-risk design features. Such an approach should not focus only on content take-downs, but on the broader conditions that make harm more likely.

The role of the regulator would be particularly crucial in India, where the scale of platform use is enormous and enforcement remains uneven. Moreover, at a time when different states are beginning to respond in different ways, there is a need for an institutional mechanism that can bring coherence and ensure effective enforcement of safety obligations. (Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Safeguarding students

Ref: Faculty code of conduct (Apr 7). Harassment of minority community students and their discriminatory branding is highly condemnable and unpalatable. It's high time that the students facing caste-based humiliation in institutions received a diploma of learning be protected. D Sethuraman, Chennai

War barbarity

Ref: For humanity's sake (Apr 7). After all the great ancient civilisations we read about in schools—the great civilisations, wars, discoveries and inventions—we continue to live in a barbaric world. Post war, the world will witness the birth of children with congenital deformities due to the toxic effects of exchanged ammunition, leading to both direct and indirect casualties. Sanath Kumar T, Thrissur

Dole baits

Ref: Their mandate (Apr 7). I still remember election manifestos while growing up—playgrounds and parks. It's appalling to see that now doles are thrown as bait to voters, who unfortunately fall for it too. While it's always a trade-off between development and environment, critical issues like pure drinking water remain untouched. Vishnuvardhan Ravindrakumar, Karur

Sathankulam negligence

Ref: All nine policemen sentenced to death (Apr 7). While the nation welcomes the order, a question remains pertinent: how medical authorities misreported the victims' case of death despite explicit signs of distress? What is the responsibility of the much-dependable authority? G Mani Prakash, Bengaluru

System failure

Ref: Anti-Maoist push (Apr 7). Social effects are the cause of anti-social behaviour and are influenced by externalities. What will a person do to protect his family when the entire system betrays him? When truth, justice and honesty bids adieu, not many are able to escape the ruin. Sureshbabu Kalyansundaram, email

Policy rhetoric

Ref: Work on UCC, ONOE (Apr 7). The government has shown remarkable speed in passing contentious legislations. Why does ONOE then remain a distant goal? The answer lies in political convenience. Until governance is prioritised over political mileage, ONOE will remain a rhetoric. T Kaishash Ditya, Hyderabad

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Nuclear milestone

Kalpakkam reactor's criticality raises hopes

In a big boost to India's nuclear ambitions, the indigenous Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) at Kalpakkam in Tamil Nadu has attained criticality, marking the start of a controlled, self-sustaining nuclear fission chain reaction. The reactor has thus crossed the most crucial threshold before power generation. It's a strategic milestone in the country's long-envisioned three-stage nuclear programme. Fast breeder reactors (FBRs) have a key role to play in meeting India's energy needs. The nation's nuclear roadmap — conceptualised under pioneers like Homi J Bhabha — rests on a sequential strategy: pressurised heavy water reactors (PHWRs) followed by FBRs and ultimately thorium-based systems. While PHWRs form the backbone of the current capacity, they rely on limited uranium resources. FBRs, by contrast, are designed to "breed" more fuel than they consume, converting uranium-238 into plutonium-239 and, eventually, enabling the production of uranium-233 from thorium.

This makes the second stage indispensable. Without FBRs, the transition to the third stage — full utilisation of India's vast thorium reserves — would remain aspirational. The Kalpakkam reactor promises a tangible pathway towards energy self-reliance. So far, only Russia has operationalised commercial FBRs at scale; the technology is complex, capital-intensive and fraught with safety and economic concerns in countries like France and the US.

However, the celebrations must be tempered with realism. The PFBR project has faced significant delays, undermining the engineering and regulatory challenges inherent in such advanced systems. Moreover, public apprehension about nuclear safety — heightened globally after incidents like the 2011 Fukushima disaster — continues to slow down project execution in India. Addressing these concerns through transparency and robust safety frameworks will be as critical as technological success. Ultimately, the PFBR's criticality is a defining step because it reaffirms India's long-term energy vision: leveraging its unique thorium advantage to reduce dependence on imported fossil fuels. The task ahead is clear — scale up, build public trust and ensure sustainable energy security.

Portal raj

MSP on paper, distress sales in reality

DIGITISATION was meant to simplify farm procurement. In Haryana, it is doing the opposite. It is turning access to the minimum support price (MSP) into a maze of portals, passwords and procedural traps. Recent reports in *The Tribune* from mandis across the state reveal a pattern. The now mandatory portals for selling crops — e-Kharid and Meri Fasal Mera Byara (MFMB) — have been plagued by crashes, data mismatches and verification failures. In several districts, farmers have been denied gate passes because records did not match or servers failed at critical moments.

The consequences are immediate and harsh. Produce is ready for sale, but it is denied entry into mandis. Thus, many farmers are forced to turn to private traders, who offer lower prices but instant payment. In some places, government agencies have lifted only a fraction of arrivals, exposing a gap between promise and preparedness. The most damning evidence, however, is numerical. Notably, Haryana's quiet cut in wheat procurement from 80 lakh to 72 lakh tonnes denies farmers about Rs 2,068 crore at MSP. The unprocured grain flows to private traders at Rs 400-500 below MSP. It is a silent transfer of farmers' income, undermining the very purpose of MSP.

To be sure, digitisation has a logic: transparency and efficiency. But a system that works only when the server does and only for those who can navigate it. It excludes the very people — small and poor, illiterate farmers — it claims to serve. Worse, there is no fallback. When portals fail, procurement stops. MSP is meant to be a safety net. If access to it is filtered through fragile digital systems and shrinking targets, it ceases to be a guarantee. Technology should ease the farmer's path to the mandi, not block it.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, THURSDAY, APRIL 8, 1926

The National Week

THE National Week, which India is celebrating, not, it must be confessed, with the earnestness, enthusiasm and determination that characterised the celebration in the earlier years, the years immediately following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, but still in a manner not entirely unworthy of the occasion, is perhaps the most memorable epoch in our modern history. We do not forget the 7th of August and the 16th of October, 1915, days assacred to the Indian nationalist as any other day in our history; but those days were peculiarly connected with a movement which directly affected one particular part of the country. The National Week, on the other hand, is connected in our memory with a movement which was national in the truest and widest sense of the term, even as the measure against which India reeled her protest on the 6th of April, 1919 and in connection with which hundreds of patriotic Indians — Hindus, Mahomedans and Sikhs — shed their blood at Jallianwala Bagh on the 13th, was a measure affecting the whole country. The measure against which India recorded her protest in one case was an even graver and more calculated insult to India's self-respect and national self-consciousness than in the other, and the protest which it called forth was even stronger and more intense. And need we say that neither the National Week nor the earlier epoch of which it was in a sense the culmination represents a dead past of which one can safely say that it should be buried in oblivion? Neither the partition of Bengal nor the Rowlett Act is really dead, though the actual measures have been annulled.

Iqbal's rich legacy at stake

Reducing a towering mind to a political label is an act unworthy of a university



HASEEB A DRABU
FORMER FINANCE MINISTER, J&K

JAGAN Nath Azad, a scholar of rare distinction, must be turning in his grave. It was at the University of Jammu that he wrote eleven books on Muhammad Iqbal, including the authoritative five-volume biography, *Road to Iqbal*, and a translation of his magnum opus *Jawed Nama*. Scholars described Azad, a professor at the university, as "Iqbal Academy incarnate".

It is indeed tragic that a university which once hosted this finest post-Partition exponent of Iqbaliyat — the specialised field of research on the poetry and philosophy of Iqbal — should now seek to erase Sir Muhammad Iqbal from its curriculum.

At Azad's request, the Iqbal Chair was established at the University of the Punjab in Pakistan during Gen Zia-ul-Haq's reign. In contrast, the rich legacy of his research seems no longer relevant to the university that he had made his home. It is as if the institution is choosing to forget one of its finest sons to assert a new, narrower identity.

Iqbal, arguably one of the greatest poets of the subcontinent, traced his roots to the Kashmir valley, a fact he celebrated in his poetry and letters. He retained a deep emotional and cultural tether to Kashmir despite his ancestors — Kashmiri Pandits of the Sapru clan — having migrated a century earlier. What makes this erasure even worse is that Iqbal hailed from Sialkot, a city that was widely known as Jammu's twin in the pre-Partition era. Though Sialkot was administratively part of Punjab, the two cities shared extraordinarily close cultural, economic and social ties for generations. Before Partition, a narrow-gauge

railway linked them directly, ferrying traders, students and families in a matter of minutes. As old-timers would say, Sialkot was just "Dus kos door".

This was no distant neighbourly bond — it was the intimacy of twin cities, bound by shared rhythms of daily life and a common cultural ethos that transcended administrative lines. Dogri and Punjabi influences blended seamlessly in language, folk traditions, cuisine and literary circles. Iqbal's own formative years in this milieu infused his thought with the syncretic spirit of the region.

This makes his removal from the syllabus not only an affront to Kashmir's heritage but a deliberate severance from a city that was once an inseparable extension of Jammu's own identity.

The irony deepens when one looks across the Pir Panjal. At the founding of the original University of Kashmir, the central library — established in 1948 with the founding of the original University of Jammu and Kashmir — bears the name Allama Iqbal Library. It is a living monument to the shared intellectual heritage of the region.

Iqbal is not a peripheral name there; he is a major figure of study; his poetry and philosophy integral to courses in Urdu, Persian, philosophy and political science. Students in Kashmir



LEGEND: The Allama Iqbal Library at the University of Kashmir is a living monument to shared intellectual heritage.



LEGEND: The Allama Iqbal Library at the University of Kashmir is a living monument to shared intellectual heritage.

The poet who carried Kashmir in his blood while breathing the air of Jammu deserves better.

engage with *Bano-e-Dara*, *Bale-Jibri* and *Zarb-e-Kalid* as part of their academic upbringing.

The contrast could not be starker. One campus honours the poet with a library that is the heart-beat of higher education; the other proposes to consign him to oblivion. This divergence is not accidental. It mirrors a deeper, more painful truth: the two halves of what was once a single university — and a single cultural universe — have grown worlds apart. This is something far more fundamental: an intellectual and emotional parting of ways. The practical split in 1969 has evolved into an institutional embodiment of separation, where once-overlapping academic traditions now diverge sharply.

The regions of Jammu and Kashmir have always been as different as chalk and cheese. But the distinctions have rarely been institutionalised in academia. These differences, long acknowledged, were once bridged by shared institutions and a common literary canon. Today, they are being etched deeper into the academic fabric. This institutionalisation of erasure is new and dangerous.

By looking to excise Iqbal, the University of Jammu is not merely pruning a syllabus; it is severing a thread that once connected the two regions through the unifying power of academics and progressive thought. Iqbal was never a narrow sectarian figure. His early poetry sang of Hindustan — "Sare Jahan Se Achha" — and his philosophical vision, though later focused on Islamic renaissance, remained rooted in the universalist traditions of Indian civilisation. To treat him as an untouchable because of his later association with the idea of Pakistan is to reduce a towering mind to a political label — an act unworthy of a university.

The fallout of this intellectual break goes beyond academia. In the post-Article 370 era, Jammu and Kashmir is grappling with the challenge of integrating two distinct regions while respecting their unique aspirations.

Education was meant to be the bridge — nurturing critical thinking, preserving composite heritage and fostering mutual understanding among students who will shape J&K's future. Instead, this move risks deepening the fault lines.

When one campus treats Iqbal as essential reading and the other as dispensable, when one library is named after him and the other proposes to delete his name, the message to students is unmistakable: the "other" side's icons are not your icons. The shared past is optional. The cultural distance, already vast, is being made unbridgeable, ensuring that future generations grow up with even less common ground than at present.

Such steps are regressive precisely because they are polarising in a region that desperately needs healing. Universities are not battlegrounds for ideological purity tests; they are repositories of civilisation's accumulated wisdom. Removing thinkers because their ideas do not fit a contemporary political narrative is the antithesis of academic freedom.

The University of Jammu must reconsider its move. It owes this to its own legacy, and to the thousands of students who deserve an education untainted by political expediency. Iqbal belongs to the subcontinent's shared literary and philosophical heritage. He cannot be erased from Jammu's university curriculum without erasing a part of Jammu's own intellectual history — a history that once embraced Iqbal's birthplace as its twin and Kashmir as its counterpart.

The two universities that once shared a roof and a library now stand as symbols of how far apart the regions have drifted. Let not one more act of erasure of intellectual and cultural heritage be allowed to widen that chasm. The poet who dreamed of a spiritual awakening for Asia — and who carried Kashmir in his blood while breathing the air of Jammu — deserves better. And so do the students of both Jammu as well as Kashmir.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Nations are born in the hearts of poets, they prosper and die in the hands of politicians. — Muhammad Iqbal

A honeymoon trip via Strait of Malacca

LT GEN KJ SINGH (RETD)

AMID the global attention on the Strait of Hormuz and merchant mariners, I am reminded of my voyage through the Strait of Malacca. For an Army officer, a leap from the deserts of Rajasthan to the high seas was a remote possibility. Yet, it did happen.

It was a snowy January morning in Shimla over four decades ago. Despite the inclement weather, I set out on my usual jog from the Raj Bhavan, where I was staying with the Himachal Pradesh Governor's ADC (aide-de-camp), my regimental officer. On returning, I was invited to tea by an elderly guest sitting alone in the verandah.

He asked me about my New Year resolution. I replied that I intended to get married. He persisted, "And what are your honeymoon plans?" Almost reflexively, I answered, "Gulmarg." He dismissed the idea, urging me to venture beyond the ordinary. Just then, tea arrived along with newspapers, and I came to know that he was Vice Admiral 'Rusi' Ghandhi (ret'd), former Chairman of the Shipping Corporation of India.

He suggested a honeymoon cruise aboard MV Chidambaram, sailing from Madras to Singapore via the Strait of Malacca, with halts at Penang and Port Klang. The ship, a precursor to modern luxury liners, boasted a swimming pool, bar, restaurant and even a disco. I stretched my finances and managed to secure a first-class booking.

On the very first day, we were invited to the ship captain's table for lunch. When I introduced myself as a Captain in the Army and my wife as the daughter of a naval officer, the skipper, AB Jayant, offered to upgrade us to a luxury cabin — remarking that captains on honeymoon deserved nothing less. Another highlight of the voyage was the shooting of a Tamil film on board, featuring the legendary Sivaji Ganesan.

I also befriended several young crew members, including Sandeep Becha, who later joined the Navy and retired as a Rear Admiral. Our first navigational challenge was the shallow Palk Strait en route to Trincomalee Harbour. More demanding still was the transit through the Strait of Malacca — a 930-km stretch narrowing to just 65 km at its southern end (the Strait of Hormuz is around 167-km long and about 30-km wide at its narrowest point).

In those pre-GPS days, safe passage depended entirely on the crew's navigational skills and mastery of charts. Even in open waters, ships adhere to designated shipping lanes, and navigating straits is akin to traversing narrow mountain passes — much like the Khyber. Skilled piloting is also essential when entering or exiting harbours.

An amusing incident occurred as we prepared to return to our ship after spending a day in Singapore. We asked a taxi driver to take us to "the port," only to be met with a puzzled response — the entire city, after all, is a port. As landlubbers eager to return ashore after days at sea, we had overlooked this obvious fact. Who had been the quay number — essentially the ship's parking bay. Fortunately, we managed to find our way back after learning some maritime lessons.

The writer is a former Western Army Commander

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Investment-driven mission

Refer to 'Back to the Moon, with a new tune'; after a gap of 54 years, NASA's Artemis II marks a historic return to the Earth's natural satellite. It shows a shift from the exploratory nature of the Apollo programme to a commercial, investment-driven mission. Private companies like SpaceX are eager for resource extraction and profit. However, the rush for lunar resources like water ice and rare minerals may fuel rivalry. The US, China and Russia have not ratified the 1979 Moon Agreement. They view it as "common heritage of mankind" clause as a hindrance to resource extraction. Moreover, clear global rules are needed to prevent conflict, curb domination by a few nations and protect the interests of poor countries.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

Artemis, product of different era

Refer to 'Back to the Moon, with a new tune'; the Artemis mission does not aim to plant flags on the Moon or even leave footprints on it. The early lunar missions were part of a project of one-upmanship between the US and the Soviet Union. Artemis belongs to a different era in science and geopolitics. The astronauts will test life-support systems and navigation abilities ahead of landing on the Moon, planned for 2028, two years ahead of China's target. India's emerging capabilities and cooperative commitments should emphasise peaceful use and shared benefits.

SS PAUL, NADIA (WB)

Real-time tragic drama

Aristotle's *Poetics*, a classical treatise on poetry and drama written almost 2,500 years ago, lays down certain essential features of tragic drama, according to which every story must have three components — beginning, middle and end. The terrible destruction in West Asia today is a live example of the philosopher's theoretical model of tragic drama. Our tale began when hostilities started in the region about a month ago. The middle part of the drama is currently being enacted in the form of daily attacks on cities, defence installations, etc. followed by retaliatory violence. When and how will this tragic conflict conclude? The entire world waits in terror and suspense.

RAJAN KASHYAP, BY MAIL

No maturity in leadership

Apropos of 'Trump's outburst', the US President's Easter message, laced with aggressive rhetoric against Iran, reveals his imperialistic desperation and desire to rule the world. While the Oval Office traditionally demands sobriety of language and respect for institutions, Trump's rhetoric often blurs the line between governance and spectacle. Great powers are judged not by their might but by the maturity of their leadership. In moments of crisis, the world looks to Washington for stability and responsibility. When the voice that should calm tensions amplifies them instead, credibility inevitably suffers.

GREGORY FERNADES, MUMBAI

Portal system cumbersome

Refer to 'Portal raj hinders Haryana farmers' woes'; the article has clearly highlighted the difficulties faced by farmers in visiting mandis to sell their crops. The government needs to amend the system and simultaneously run the old system of issuing the receipt to the farmer for having brought the crop to the mandi and selling it to the arihya. The sale amount be straightforwardly credited to the bank account of the farmer. Simple procedures will surely help the farmer without burdening him with new digitised techniques. It is worthwhile to add that the cumbersome procedures of identifying and confirming a person or a transaction with Face IDs, OTPs, thumb impressions, etc. may confuse city people, what to talk of rustic farmers.

NPS SOHAL, CHANDIGARH

Delay will compound Punjab's pain

With reference to 'Punjab stares at Iran war-induced price shock'; what is needed now is decisive action — rationalising taxes on fuel and essentials, ensuring timely MSP payments, easing credit for MSMEs, preventing job cuts through targeted support and curbing speculative price rise through strict monitoring. Political discourse must shift from headline-seeking to problem-solving. Delay will only compound the pain; timely, coordinated intervention can still protect livelihoods and restore confidence. Punjab stands at a decisive moment — act now or pay later.

COL-SS CHAUHAN (RETD), BY MAIL

Why India must derisk from US & China



ASHOK K KANTHA
EX-AMBASSADOR TO CHINA

THE notion that economic interdependence would bind nations into a web of mutual benefit too costly to undo has been negated by the emergence of "weaponised interdependence", where global economic networks are exploited by powerful states for coercive ends.

For India, both a significant participant in these networks and a frequent target, this reality demands a clear-eyed recalibration of its policies. The response must be a strategy of derisking to reduce exposure to external coercion.

While we have been speaking mainly of economic derisking vis-a-vis China, risk management in respect of the US is also warranted in view of its recent behaviour and the track record of imposing far-reaching sanctions on India. India needs a strategy of dual and differentiated derisking. Dual because vulnerabilities arise from both China and the US. Differentiated because the scale, intent and instruments of derisking must vary across the two fundamentally different relationships.

Derisking vs decoupling

The conflation of derisking with decoupling has created confusion. Decoupling implies the aspiration to exit economic relationships. Derisking is a more nuanced concept; it means remaining economical-

ly engaged while reducing vulnerabilities which can be exploited by external actors.

India cannot afford to disengage economically from either China or the US. Derisking is essentially the construction of safeguards while preserving and even deepening economic engagement where it helps build the country's economic and technological sineqs.

Why 'dual'

The case for directing derisking at both China and the US rests on an uncomfortable truth: both have demonstrated sustained willingness to weaponise economic relationships when their political interests demand it.

The US operates primarily by privileging access to its huge market and through its dominance of dollar-denominated financial systems, tech supply chains and the global semiconductor architecture. Its reach is vast and often extraterritorial.

It has a long history of deploying sanctions and technology denial regimes against India. This pattern began in earnest after India's 1974 nuclear test with a sweeping technology denial regime and reached a peak following the 1998 nuclear tests when comprehensive economic sanctions sought to cripple India's economy.

Even in the current era of closer partnership, Washington has continued to leverage its strengths and India's vulnerabilities. The first Trump administration imposed Section 232 tariffs on Indian steel and aluminium, withdrew India's preferential access under the Generalized System of Preferences and used the threat of secondary sanctions to compel New Delhi to halt oil imports from Iran.



STRATEGY: Need a differentiated approach for the US and China.

Trump's return to the White House has intensified these dynamics. The most consequential measures at one point were 50% tariffs on Indian exports, including a 25% penalty linked to India's purchases of Russian oil.

The tariff episode revealed several hard realities for India: market access can be weaponised, supply chain participation is conditional and technology cooperation cannot be insulated from trade volatility. These developments are not a transient aberration; they are arguably a structural feature of an increasingly transactional US approach.

China has also developed an elaborate regime of sanctions and counter-sanctions, leveraging its position as a central node in global supply chains to exert the 'chokepoint effect'—limiting or denying other actors' access to critical inputs or its markets. Instances of punitive measures abound: Australia after calling for a Covid-19 inquiry; South Korea, for deploying the THAAD system; Lithuania, after opening a Taiwan representative office. India has not been spared. In

India's objective must be to enlarge its space for independent action in a world where great powers deploy economic tools as instruments of dominance.

2024-25, China withheld or delayed export clearances for rare earth magnets, denied tunnel-boring machines, restricted specialty fertilisers and withdrew Chinese personnel from manufacturing facilities—each measure calibrated to send a political signal while inflicting economic pain.

India's vulnerability is compounded by the scale of its dependence. China accounts for nearly 17% of India's imports, with huge dependencies on imports in critical sectors like active pharmaceutical ingredients, electronics, chemicals, solar components, industrial machinery, rare earth magnets and critical minerals. These dependencies have deepened even as bilateral political relations have remained fraught—a combination that creates conditions for sustained strategic risk.

Why 'differentiated'

While both China and the US weaponise interdependence, they do so from fundamentally different positions in India's strategic calculus of risks and utility. This demands a differentiated approach.

Derisking vis-a-vis the US must be targeted, precautionary and carefully bounded. America remains India's most consequential strategic partner—in critical technologies, defence, maritime security, intelligence sharing and the broader management of the Indo-Pacific. It is the largest market for India's exports, accounting for over 21% of global exports in first three quarters of FY 2025 despite Trump tariffs (compared to mere 3.5% as China's share).

The objective of derisking here is not to dilute the partnership but to enhance resilience, ensuring that access to critical technologies, financial systems and markets cannot be unilaterally conditioned on India's compliance with American geopolitical preferences.

Developing alternative markets for exports, greater self-reliance in frontier technologies, alternative payment infrastructure, diversified

defence procurement, domestic semiconductor capacity and sovereign artificial intelligence (AI) capability are the foundations of this approach.

In the AI domain, while India has valid reasons to avoid the 'China stack', exclusive reliance on American foundational models carries the risk of 'algorithmic subordination' and digital colonialism. Derisking here does not mean rejecting American technology or equipment but ensuring that India builds its own 'sovereign stack'.

Derisking vis-a-vis China must be deeper, more structural and more urgently pursued. China is a strategic competitor with a proven and systematic doctrine of coercive economic statecraft, an unresolved boundary dispute, demonstrated military assertiveness along the Line of Actual Control, and strategic nexus with Pakistan that directly imperils Indian security.

Derisking from China will be difficult and costly, requiring a sustained, government-wide effort. The starting point must be a rigorous identification of sectors where dependence creates genuine national security vulnerabilities and an objective assessment of where domestic capacity must be built.

The roadmap for derisking from China must encompass diversification of supply chains through partnerships with the US, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and Europe; accelerated trade diversification, including to Africa and Latin America; much greater focus on creating indigenous technological capabilities; domestic capacity building in critical sectors; strengthened investment screening to prevent strategic vulnerabilities from deepening.

and commercial relations where risks are low.

Where economic engagement with China continues—and it will and should in many areas—it must be structured through clear safeguards, transparency requirements, and diversification benchmarks that prevent any single dependency from becoming a chokepoint.

This process requires more caution than some analysts propose. Arguments that India should broadly welcome Chinese capital, talent, and technology to convert dependencies into strategic assets underestimate the risks of creating new vulnerabilities. Besides, there is little evidence suggesting that China is inclined to build India's capabilities or transfer technology in key sectors.

Strategic autonomy

India's objective must be to enlarge its space for independent action in a world where great powers deploy economic tools as instruments of dominance. It needs a dual but differentiated derisking policy—targeted and precautionary vis-a-vis the US, structural and security-driven vis-a-vis China. It is India's bid to engage the world on terms that preserve its autonomy, protect its critical capabilities, and ensure that economic interdependence remains an asset rather than a vulnerability.

The goal, ultimately, is strategic autonomy buttressed by greater resilience—built through domestic technological and manufacturing capabilities, development of AI in applications and engines powering them, diversified partnerships, forging its leverage and counter-measures, and reducing chokepoints before they are used against it.

The purpose of platforms and public utilities



ARUN MAIRA
FORMER MEMBER, PLANNING COMMISSION

AJURY in Los Angeles has found major social media platforms (Meta's Facebook and YouTube) in California legally liable for harm to a young user's mental health. They were negligent in the design of their platforms and were responsible for creating addictive features (like infinite scroll, autoplay and algorithmic recommendations) that encouraged compulsive use. The court awarded \$6 million in damages to the plaintiff.

The companies intend to appeal. Their case is they are speech platforms. They say the justice system should go after the people missing the platform, not the owners. They imply that platforms, treated as public utilities,

allow people to misuse them—to abuse others, buy pornography, spread fake news, or entertain themselves, etc. It's up to the users to use the platforms responsibly.

Last month, the non-executive chairman of the board of HDFC Bank resigned. He said he did so because the values guiding the bank's management were not aligned with his own. He had misgivings about the bank misrepresenting risks in the products it sold. HDFC Bank is the second most valuable corporation in the Indian stock market, following Reliance Enterprises.

The bank's stock price fell 8.9% in a single session following his resignation, and continues to decline, erasing about \$16 billion in its stock value before stabilising. The SEBI head reacted sharply.

He said the chairman's 'vague statements' had harmed investor confidence. The implication was that the duty of the chairman and the board—even if they are 'independent' directors—is only to protect the interests of investors.

These cases highlight fundamental issues of public governance. What is the purpose of a public platform or utility?



MYOPIC: An enterprise's goal is to produce wealth for its shareholders.

What principles should govern its management? Should utilities that serve the public be measured by how much wealth they produce for stock market investors or by the public welfare they create?

Public utilities are necessary for providing services equitably for the essential needs of all citizens, ensuring their health and secure livelihoods. These include clean water, nutritious food, shelter, security, health, energy, information, education and financial services (banking, loans when required for livelihood purposes, and insurance).

These are the fundamental rights of all citizens in any

decent society. It is the State's duty to ensure that all citizens are provided these services.

An enterprise is set up for a purpose. The primary purpose of any business enterprise in the private sector, whether it is unlisted or listed on the stock exchange, is to produce financial returns for its owners and investors.

It has no obligation to provide its products and services to customers who cannot pay enough. Whereas the purpose of enterprises in the public sector is to provide services to all citizens, and especially those who cannot pay enough. Their purpose is to provide public welfare, not profits for the gov-

The business of a private enterprise may be only business. The business of a public enterprise is to increase public welfare.

All organisations must use their resources efficiently. Their managers must be ethical too, and not award themselves high salaries and perks, on the specious grounds that they believe they have earned their salaries by their out-sized contributions to society by increasing the wealth of investors. The business of a private enterprise may be only business. The business of a public enterprise is to increase public welfare.

The only equity financial investors understand—and that corporate boards endorse—is stock market equity. They are not required to uphold equity of the societal kind. Independent directors are expected to stand up for the rights of small investors against the demands of promoters and majority owners.

Their enterprise's goal is to produce wealth for its shareholders. They must not bring their personal conscience into the board room and ask the board and management tough questions about societal equity.

Public sector enterprises must be efficient, no doubt. But privatising a public enterprise to make it more efficient is throwing out the baby with the bath water. Privatisation of

economies has gone too far with the victory of US-style capitalism over socialism, and the surge of financial globalisation, since the 1990s. India has privatised its education and health sectors too much, too soon. China, Vietnam and Nordic countries have stayed on their 'socialist' courses. They rank much higher than India on the human development scale.

China has led entrepreneurial spirits loose in business sectors. It has created world-scale, and class enterprises in many sectors. Nevertheless, the state has retained tight control of its financial sector, and technology sector too, to an extent that ideologically liberal western economists find intolerable.

At the same time, western governments are struggling to find solutions to regulate US tech enterprises and their wealthy owners who are destroying the social fabric and harming youth by addicting them to their services.

India must not regress to the pre-1991 era. Nor can it remain wedded to post-1991 neo-liberal economics. Even the US is searching for a new way. India must find its own way forward, untied from Washington economists and US tech firms.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- Longing to be an actor (3-6)
- Withhold one's vote (7)
- Completely (5)
- Vegetable of onion genus (4)
- Throw doubt upon (8)
- Short of money (4,2)
- Conceal from view (6)
- Be the cause of (8)
- A lure (4)
- In the light of (5)
- Put in position (7)
- Unceremonious (4,3,4)

DOWN

- Sample bit of food (5)
- Objective (4)
- Wicked (6)
- Backpack (8)
- Narrow opening in rock (7)
- Come to nothing (4,7)
- Almost immediately (2,2,7)
- Pest (8)
- Return to normal health (7)
- Slacken (6)
- Also called (5)
- Labyrinth (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Harare, 4 Hold good, 9 Rising, 10 All-clear, 12 Cuff, 13 Solve, 14 Sled, 17 Push one's luck, 20 For the record, 23 Nook, 24 Stump, 25 Lima, 28 Material, 29 Finale, 30 Stipdash, 31 Behave.

Down: 1 Hard copy, 2 Restless, 3 Rand, 5 On level terms, 6 Duct, 7 Overly, 8 Deride, 11 Moved to tears, 15 Got on, 16 Screw, 18 Dominate, 19 Adjacent, 21 Antimus, 22 Contra, 26 Prod, 27 Fine.

SU DO KU

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

APRIL 8, 2026, WEDNESDAY

- Shukla Samvat 1948
- Chaitra Shukla 18
- Chaitra Purnashtami 26
- Hilar 1447
- Krishna Paksha Triti, up to 7:02 pm
- Vairyan Yogs up to 5:11 pm
- Mooli Nakshatra
- Moon in Sagittarius sign

FORECAST

CITY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	18-25 DEGS	WRS
Chandigarh	22	16		
New Delhi	28	17		
Amritsar	22	17		
Bathinda	22	16		
Jalandhar	22	17		
Ludhiana	25	16		
Bhawan	27	20		
Hisar	27	17		
Sirs	26	16		
Dharamsala	21	09		
Manali	17	04		
Shimla	14	07		
Srinagar	15	05		
Jammu	25	15		
Kargil	15	02		
Leh	13	-01		
Dehradun	23	11		
Mussoorie	12	07		

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



COMMENT

Editorials

Belligerents should seize off-ramp provided before world economy comes off the rails

The world would do well to resist being distracted by the fog of competing narratives emanating from the warring parties in the Iran conflict. The truly consequential reality is far starker — if this war is allowed to grind on, let alone escalate, the damage to the global economy will deepen in ways that no policy work-around can contain.

Six weeks into a war that should never have broken out, a brutal arithmetic is asserting itself. Every hour the conflict continues, the global economy sinks further into a crisis that no release of strategic petroleum reserves or monetary tightening can adequately offset. The impasse in the Strait of Hormuz is not a peripheral consequence of the conflict; it is its economic epicenter. There is only one viable way to quickly restore the normal flow of oil, liquefied natural gas, petrochemicals and essential goods on which billions of people depend: an immediate ceasefire and a comprehensive cessation of hostilities.

The strait is the circulatory system of the globalized economy. In peacetime, roughly one-fifth of the world's internationally traded oil passes through it. Today, traffic has reportedly fallen by more than 90 percent. Such a disruption is existential for an already fragile global economy still recovering from the US tariff shocks and supply chain fragmentation.

The headline figures are alarming enough. Brent Crude has surged past \$110 per barrel, marking a rise of around 40 percent since the conflict began. European gas prices have jumped by over 70 percent. In the United States, average gasoline prices have climbed above \$4 per gallon for the first time in three years. Yet these numbers capture only the surface of a deeper economic malaise. Oil is a foundational input in the production of pharmaceuticals, fertilizers, plastics, medical equipment and a vast array of everyday goods.

As a result, the crisis is metastasizing beyond energy markets. Reports are emerging of potential shortages in critical medical supplies: plastic-based catheters used in hemodialysis treatments are becoming scarce, raising fears for patients with chronic kidney failure. Supply disruptions are threatening the availability of medical gloves. Even mundane items such as trash bags are being hoarded amid fears of prolonged scarcity in some countries. This is what an energy shock looks like when it cascades into a systemic crisis — a "crisis of everything."

The uncomfortable truth — one that some poli-

cymakers in the US and Israel have yet to fully acknowledge — is that the Strait of Hormuz cannot be reopened by force. Military escalation risks entrenching the blockade. The notion that energy security can be achieved through bombardment is not merely flawed; it is dangerously illusory.

Nor is the US insulated from these dynamics. Despite repeated assertions from the White House about domestic energy self-sufficiency, oil remains a globally priced commodity. US consumers are paying more at the pump not because of domestic shortages, but because a critical artery of global supply has been constricted. As long as the strait remains choked, almost every economy will bear the cost.

Against this backdrop, diplomatic efforts taken on renewed urgency. A five-point initiative jointly advanced by China and Pakistan offers a pragmatic pathway forward. Its central premise is straightforward: an immediate ceasefire, followed by negotiations addressing the underlying drivers of the conflict. It calls for the protection of civilians, the safeguarding of nonmilitary infrastructure, and the restoration of secure shipping lanes through the Strait of Hormuz. These are the basic conditions for stabilizing the global economy.

Pakistan has positioned itself as a potential mediator, while Oman and Egypt are also engaged.

Iran has received the latest ceasefire proposal submitted by Pakistan, according to Reuters. The reports cited unnamed senior Iranian officials as saying that Iran will not accept the imposition of deadlines or pressure intended to force a decision, nor will it agree to reopen the strait in exchange for a "temporary ceasefire." In the eyes of Tehran, Washington is not yet prepared to agree to a permanent ceasefire.

Broader international support is coalescing: Russia, the European Union, Germany and Saudi Arabia have all expressed backing for a ceasefire in recent telephone talks between their top diplomats and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The issue is no longer whether a diplomatic off-ramp exists, but whether the belligerents will seize it in time.

The fighting must stop as soon as possible. Only a ceasefire and the cessation of hostilities can resolve the impasse in the Strait of Hormuz. Only then can the tankers begin to move freely again. Only then can the global economy begin to take a full breath. The alternative is not victory for either side, but a long, grinding catastrophe from which no one will emerge unscathed.

Japan embarked on dangerous militarized path

In yet another major policy shift that aligns with Japan's recent rush to rearm, the Japanese government plans to revise the implementation guidelines for the "three principles on transfer of defense equipment and technology" within the month to further relax restrictions on arms exports, Kyodo News reported on Friday. This includes allowing exports of lethal arms, a move that undoes decades of postwar constraints.

This happened just a few days after Japan for the first time deployed long-range missiles capable of striking targets deep in its neighbors' territories at two of its military bases in Japan.

Meanwhile, the Sanae Takaichi government has recently carried out a sweeping reorganization of the country's Self-Defense Forces, including what it calls the "largest-ever reorganization" of the Maritime Self-Defense Force, along with an expansion of operations in the cognitive domain and the enlargement of the Space Operations Group, which bear a clear "offensive" character.

All this, along with Japan's continuous push to hike its military budget and advance dual-use technologies, gives substantial cause for concern. The provocative actions are not only a stark departure from Japan's postwar commitment to pacifism and its "exclusive defense" doctrine, but also pose a direct challenge to the postwar international order. Peace-loving people around the world must be vigilant lest Tokyo's return to militarism once again devastates Asia and beyond.

The timing of the Takaichi government's moves is no coincidence. Japan's right-wing forces have long sought to rewrite history and revive the militaristic ambitions of the past. By hyping up security threats, they aim to justify a beefed-up military and expanded role for it. This not only violates the spirit of Japan's Constitution, which renounces war, but also disregards the lessons of history. The scars of Japanese aggression in the Asia-Pacific remain fresh, yet Tokyo seems determined to pretend they do not exist.

Japan's postwar pacifism is enshrined in its Constitution, particularly Article 9, which renounces

war and prohibits Japan from maintaining armed forces with war potential. This constitutional commitment to peace is a response to the devastation wrought by the imperialistic war of aggression it launched, as well as a reflection of a broader international consensus aimed at preventing future suffering. However, recent moves by the Takaichi government suggest a betrayal of this article, allowing for a more expansive and aggressive military role under the guise of "self-defense."

This shift is part of a broader push by right-wing forces within Japan who argue that the country must take a more assertive stance in regional affairs. The logic underpinning this is deeply flawed. It depends on the deliberate construction of "external threats." When these efforts fall short, they fall back on exploiting even the Taiwan question, which is China's internal affair. At the same time, they seek to persuade the Japanese people that the country's "security" hinges on military expansion, encouraging them to overlook the disastrous consequences of a similar course in the past.

Japan's right-wing forces have been cultivating a form of historical nihilism for decades, nurturing nostalgia for the "glories" of the Empire of Japan. The "veneration" of convicted war criminals at the Yasukuni Shrine, alongside the whitewashing of Japan's wartime responsibility and the amplification of its victimhood in history textbooks, speaks volumes of the depth of their attempts.

This militaristic discourse thrives by framing the world in stark binaries that fit the core of Japanese culture — threat and security, shame and honor, other and self — while presenting the United States as an indispensable guarantor of "security." Yet this alignment is less about genuine security than about leveraging US geopolitical interests to advance a domestic right-wing agenda. Cloaked in the language of "alliance," it risks enabling the revival of militarism that runs counter to the broader regional aspiration for peace and shared development.

The international community should heed the lessons of history that a militarized Japan is a recipe for disaster.

Jin Ding



Opinion Line

Major countries need to offer solutions, not chaos or crises

Gallup's latest global approval ratings — based on surveys across more than 130 countries and regions in 2025 — show that China has surpassed the United States by the largest margin in two decades. China's median approval rose to 36 percent, while the US' fell to 31 percent.

Why? Let's roll the tape. The US administration is pulling out of dozens of international organizations. It has exited the Paris climate treaty, applied tariffs on different economies, treated the conflicts in the Middle East and the Ukraine crisis as tools to strengthen its own "security" and make economic gains, and wielded coercive tariffs as a means to acquire unfair advantages.

The US administration has threatened to "acquire" Greenland by force. It changed the dynamics in Venezuela by forcibly seizing its leader and his wife. In Gaza, it has emboldened its ally to maximize its gains at huge humanitarian costs. The Gallup poll notes that the survey predates the Iran war in late February — meaning worse might still be to come.

No wonder, even NATO allies are giving the US the side-eye. The German people's approval of the US dropped markedly. The only place that likes the US more is Israel, because, as Gallup notes, the situa-

tion on the ground matters. Here is the cold reality that the transactional approach refuses to grasp. Unilateralism, coercion and zero-sum bargaining are not merely inadequate responses to global crises — they have become engines of those crises. Climate change does not respect tariffs. The global governance of artificial intelligence cannot be built through threats. Pandemic prevention is not served by leaving the World Health Organization.

The US administration behaves as though globalization is discretionary. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development have all documented this repeatedly: international trade accounts for more than 60 percent of the global GDP. Supply chains have been forged as they are the best way to do business. "Decoupling" is a political slogan, not an economic stimulator.

Meanwhile, China's initiatives for promoting global development, strengthening global security, enhancing civilizational understanding and exchanges, and improving global governance, recognize a reality Washington refuses to admit: that major countries must shoulder global responsibilities, that zero-sum thinking belongs to a bygone era, and that

the world's common challenges require common solutions based on actions and results. The UN-centered rules-based order, which came about at huge cost to the world, is the only lifeline we have in a world sinking into turmoil.

That's why China is committed to upholding the UN-centered system and providing global public goods to the international community, especially the Global South, to instill certainty into a volatile world.

Yet many pundits in Washington remain trapped in a post-Cold War time warp, unable to see that the new model of development demands a community with a shared future for humanity — one where inclusiveness, diversity and equity are not optional extras but survival necessities. Without them, we cannot cope with climate change, high-tech governance or the next "black swan" event.

The Gallup numbers are a wake-up call. They reflect the world's views on Washington's rejection of responsibility. If it continues to put narrow self-interest above the global good and treats international politics as a zero-sum game, it will only alienate the US further in the eyes of sensible minds around the world.

— LI YANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Targeted policies can help unlock potential of seniors

Editor's note: China has pledged to proactively respond to the country's population aging and to refine policies and mechanisms for coordinating the development of elder care programs and industries in the coming years. *Oriental Outlook* magazine spoke to Luo Xiaohui, deputy director of the Institute of Health and Aging at the China Research Center on Aging, on how to develop an aging-friendly society. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

Population aging presents both opportunities and challenges. China is implementing a national strategy to address these by integrating the concepts of healthy aging into all aspects of socioeconomic development and embedding these concepts into policymaking and legislation.

From an economic perspective, it involves optimizing the silver economy by fully unlocking the potential of both elderly human resources and the senior consumer market. Socially, the focus is on building age-friendly cities and communities, promoting a culture of respect and support for the elderly.

In terms of care, it is essential to respect the autonomy of seniors, encourage their active participation and support their capabilities for self-care to reduce reliance on external assistance. Health services should prioritize a comprehensive system that emphasizes early interventions such as health education and preventive care.

The concepts of lifelong learning and continued social participation in old age are interconnected. Many seniors are willing to learn new skills and continue contributing to society. Learning allows seniors to update

their knowledge, acquire new skills and adapt to modern society, thereby allowing them to continue to be active participants. Contributing to society is the ultimate goal of this learning. Applying new knowledge in practical settings validates their efforts, brings a sense of fulfillment and motivates further learning.

Facilitating this transition from learners to active contributors requires a collaborative approach. Educational programs for seniors should be tailored to align with both societal needs and individual interests, offering practical courses in community service, digital literacy and health management. This will ensure that acquired knowledge translates into tangible value in areas such as volunteering and local governance.

Additionally, establishing clear pathways that connect education to practical application is essential. Institutions such as universities for the elderly can partner with businesses, social organizations and local communities to place graduates in suitable roles or organize teams for community initiatives. To further boost participation, robust incentive and support systems must be implemented, including public recogni-

tion, insurance coverage, streamlined administrative processes and financial subsidies.

To effectively tap into the wealth of elderly human resources while accommodating diverse needs, a tailored approach is essential. Healthy seniors with specialized skills are well-suited for reemployment, entrepreneurship or professional volunteer work in sectors such as education, science, healthcare and agriculture. Those with more free time but generalized skills can contribute through community governance.

Maximizing the potential of these seniors relies on accurately matching supply with demand. This can be achieved by creating comprehensive human resource databases that catalog the skills, specialties and employment preferences of active seniors. Additionally, targeted training programs are needed to help seniors bridge the digital divide and acquire skills that are relevant to emerging industries and fields that have high demand.

Finally, there is a need to establish multilevel development platforms to provide essential services such as job postings, career counseling, flexible employment opportunities and specialized talent pools.

CHINA DAILY WORLDWIDE

Contact us at:

China Daily
15 Huxian Dongjie Chaoyang District,
Beijing 100029
News: +86 (0) 10 6491-8366
editor@chindaily.com.cn
Advertisement: +86 (0) 10 6491-8631
ads@chindaily.com.cn
Subscription: +86 400-699-0203
subscription.chindaily.com.cn
App: www.chindaily.com.cn/mobile/daily.html

China Daily UK
50 Cannon St, London EC4N 6HA, UK
+44 (0) 207 398 8270
editor@chindailyuk.com

China Daily Asia Pacific
Unit 1818, Hing Wai Centre, 7 Tin Wan
Praya Road, Aberdeen, Hong Kong
+852 2939 9111
editor@chindailyhk.com
editor@chindailyasia.com

China Daily USA
1500 Broadway, Suite 2800,
New York, NY 10036
+1 212 537 8888
editor@chindailyusa.com

China Daily Africa
P.O. Box 27281-00100, Nairobi, Kenya
+254 (0) 20 692 0900 (Nairobi)
editor@chindailyafrica.com
enquiries@chindailyafrica.com
subscription@chindailyafrica.com

VIEWS

Wang Shushen

Exchanges conducive to cross-Strait ties

Cheng Li-wun, chairperson of the Chinese Kuomintang party, is leading a delegation to Jiangsu province, Shanghai and Beijing from Tuesday to Sunday. Cheng said the trip was meant to show Taiwan residents and the whole world that the two sides of the Strait do not need to be pushed to the brink of conflict, and that with enough wisdom and effort, they can still find a path of peaceful development across the Strait.

It is hoped that the visit will bring a sigh of relief amid intensifying cross-Strait tensions caused by dangerous provocations from the "pro-independence" separatists in Taiwan. The visit by Cheng — the spokeswoman for the delegation during former Kuomintang chairman Lien Chan's historic trip to the Chinese mainland in 2005 — is expected to offer a silver lining by renewing the valuable cross-Strait exchanges that took place between 2008 and 2016 when Kuomintang was the ruling party on the island.

For a long time, the Democratic Progressive Party authorities have set up numerous obstacles, leading to stagnation in cross-Strait cultural

History is instructive here: playing the "Taiwan card" inevitably deepens strategic suspicion between China and the US and damages cooperation on other global issues.

and tourism exchanges, economic cooperation, and youth interactions. This has resulted in impediments to the sales of Taiwan's agricultural and fishery products, putting pressure on employment and income growth for the public.

The visit, if successful, could win support from the mainland in areas such as the import of agricultural and fishery products, thereby building bridges for communication among the people. These efforts could not only garner public support for the Kuomintang but also secure tangible benefits for the livelihoods of the Taiwan residents.

It is high time for the Taiwan residents to realize only peace and cross-

Strait cooperation best serve their interests.

In stark contrast, the Lai Ching-te authorities on the island continue to make dangerous provocations and sell the livelihood of residents. In December 2025, the US administration announced a massive arms package for Taiwan, reportedly totaling as much as \$11.1 billion — more than the combined sales approved during the four years of the previous Joe Biden administration.

For the Lai authorities, this hawkish trend is a sign that they can rely on external support from the US in their pursuit of separatism. In Taipei, arms purchases are seen as the most direct — and supposedly most effective — way to secure political backing, though at the cost of imposing a huge burden on the island's residents.

There is always the incentive of profit. The US defense industry is deeply intertwined with politics. Millions of jobs and vast corporate interests depend on defense procurement and exports, and major contractors are often key donors in US elections. A large arms package is an easy way to reward the military-industrial complex while signaling "toughness"

abroad — regardless of the consequences.

History is instructive here: playing the "Taiwan card" inevitably deepens strategic suspicion between China and the US and damages cooperation on other global issues.

The Taiwan question should not be held hostage to Washington's logic of "using Taiwan to contain China". People on both sides of the Strait can have the wisdom and the capacity to build trust and manage differences through dialogue and exchange.

Cheng's visit and her efforts for peaceful engagement remind the world that the Taiwan question is China's internal affair, and that dialogue and exchanges are in the best interest of people on both sides of the Strait. In contrast, the separatists on the island, if they continue to collude with outside forces and play with fire, pose the biggest threat not only to cross-Strait ties but also to the livelihood of Taiwan residents.

The author is the deputy head at the Institute of Taiwan Studies in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.



Kang Bing

The author is former deputy editor-in-chief of China Daily, kangbing@chinadaily.com.cn

Plateful of plenty on Chinese dinner tables

What to eat and where to eat — questions once asked by a privileged few — have now become a daily dilemma for millions of Chinese. The confusion is not because of the scarcity of food, but because of the abundance of choices.

China has about 17 million restaurants. Some are big enough to host thousands of diners at the same time while others are modest mom-and-pop establishments that can seat no more than a dozen people. Beijing, with 21 million people, alone has more than 130,000 restaurants. Within a radius of just one kilometer of my home in the city, there are at least 100 restaurants for me to choose from if I decide to eat out.

There is a wide range of culinary offerings, from spicy Sichuan hot pot to sweet Cantonese dim sum, from sauerkraut fish from the southwest to Muslim beef noodles from the northwest. The dilemma does not end with choosing where to eat. Once you are seated in a restaurant, you will be puzzled by the vast options on the menu. Even mom-and-pop food stands can offer two dozen choices of dishes.

Given this enormous range, one can enjoy different dishes every single day without repetition for a year at my neighborhood restaurants. What's more, at just 20 or 40 yuan (\$2.9 or \$5.8) for a meal, the price is very affordable.

The boom in the catering business is backed by sufficient food supply, rising incomes and the traditional interest of Chinese people in good food.

This abundance of delicious food at such low prices has spawned a generation that prefers to eat out rather than cook at home. Many of my young colleagues used to avoid the company-provided free lunch — which included six different dishes in the main course — to visit nearby restaurants for their favorite food.

The boom in the catering business is backed by sufficient food supply, rising incomes and the traditional interest of Chinese people in good food.

The contrast with the past could not be sharper. When I first came to Beijing 45 years ago, food was rationed. Near my workplace, there were just two or three restaurants, all serving simple fare. Eating out was a treat reserved only for distinguished guests because of the cost. Inviting two or three friends or relatives to a restaurant cost at least one week's income.

The newspaper I worked for in the early 1980s had an American editor who wrote a bi-weekly column on eating out. He relied on me to recommend restaurants and accompany him to eateries as his interpreter and guest. Eating good food for free sounded great but making recommendations was tough. I was not a foodie and there were simply not many restaurants to choose from.

As a result, his column mostly focused on restaurants in star-rated hotels. In the early years of China's reform and opening-up, such restaurants were largely inaccessible to ordinary Chinese because of high prices and other restrictions.

The story since then has been one of steady progress. Thanks to continuous investment in agriculture, China's per-capita grain reserves are now more than 500 kilograms — well above the United Nations' food security threshold of 400 kilograms and the world average of about 355 kilograms.

International trade also helps enrich the Chinese dinner table. When you go to a restaurant, the manager might boast that the crabs are from Canada, the beef from the United States, the salmon from Norway and the red wine from Australia. Tropical fruits, once rare and expensive, now fill fruit stores at affordable prices due to mutual trade agreements that reduce tariffs on fruit imports from many countries to zero.

Chinese people are very particular about food. It is one area where their creativity stands out. Forty years ago, the country had four main cuisines — Sichuan, Shandong, Guangdong and Jiangsu-Zhejiang. Then the pool expanded to eight cuisines and today many people argue that there are 12 cuisines in the country. Over the years, Chinese chefs have created hundreds or thousands of new dishes thanks to the profusion of new ingredients and cooking facilities.

Despite the abundance of choices, I hesitate to eat out or order takeout which can be delivered within 30 minutes in cities like Beijing. It's not because I can't afford it but because I think the food, though delicious, is too oily and salty for an old man who prioritizes his health. But that doesn't stop me from envying the younger generation for their good appetite for food from numerous restaurants.

Mohammad Shakil Bhuiyan and Mohammad Saiyedul Islam

How Dhaka can avoid missing the semiconductor bus

Artificial intelligence is transforming economies, jobs, productivity and global power. Semiconductors, the essential hardware for AI, drive this change. In the 20th century, oil shaped power; in the 21st century, semiconductors are playing a comparable role. The semiconductor market, valued at over \$630 billion, is expected to reach \$1 trillion as demand for AI grows. The Semiconductor Industry Association and the Boston Consulting Group both see the chip market breaking \$1 trillion by 2030.

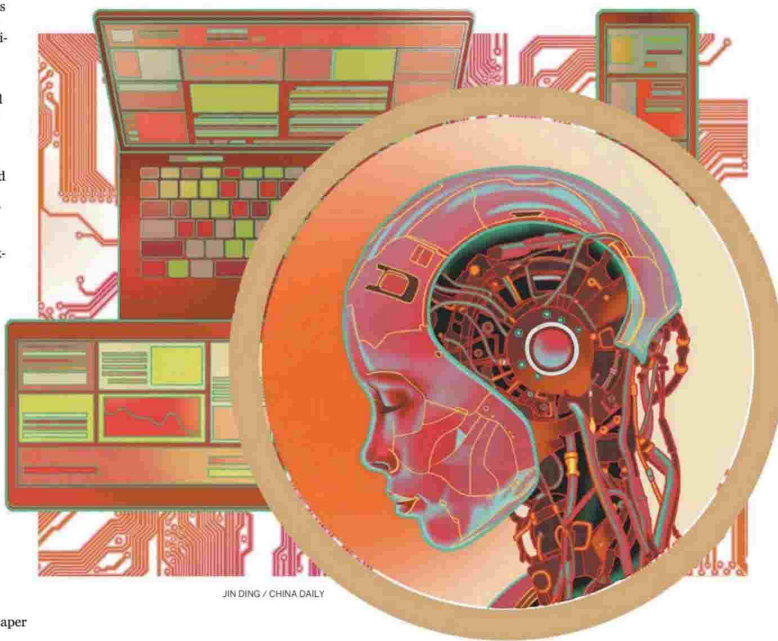
Analysts estimate that China will account for about 60 percent of the growth in the industry over the next five years. The country has launched the \$44 billion yuan (\$47 billion) "Big Fund III" to boost domestic chip manufacturing and strengthen equipment and materials supply chain.

Morgan Stanley projects China's AI market, including generative AI and infrastructure, could hit \$1.4 trillion by 2030, up from \$3.2 billion in 2024. For many investors, Chinese AI startups will attract more users in emerging markets because their solutions are cheaper and easier to use.

NVIDIA CEO Jensen Huang says China is only nanoseconds behind the US in AI chips. The Economist writes that China's chip industry will surprise the world as it aims for semiconductor self-reliance. GlobalData expects China to lead the semiconductor market, driven by fast-growing domestic demand.

Countries across the world are also investing heavily in AI and chips. Pakistan has announced its first large-scale chip manufacturing unit at Faisalabad's M-3 Industrial Estate. Vietnam has a national semiconductor strategy through 2030 and aims to build a long-term semiconductor sector by 2050. Vietnam is also running a workforce program to train at least 50,000 university graduates in the chip value chain by 2030.

But although Bangladesh has formed a national semiconductor task force, the country is lagging behind. This can change if Bangladesh leverages its partnership with China. China has driven Bangladesh's infrastructure through major Belt and Road Initiative projects. China has invested \$4.45 billion in 35 BRI projects in Bangladesh and secured construction contracts worth \$22.94 billion. This has strengthened Bangladesh's transport and energy sectors, improved logistics, and cut costs. China is Bangladesh's largest trade partner and a major source of foreign direct investment. Bangladesh Bank reports Chinese FDI stock at \$2.67 billion as of September 2024.



JIN DING / CHINA DAILY



Policymakers should implement the steps outlined above without delay or else the country might miss the semiconductor-led opportunities of the AI era.

It is time to expand the Bangladesh-China partnership into semiconductors for mutual benefit in the AI era. The cooperation can benefit both sides. China's semiconductor experience can help Bangladesh by fostering collaborative research and developing qualified engineers and technicians, enabling it to build a workable semiconductor ecosystem incrementally.

China, in turn, can strengthen its regional influence and mitigate supply chain risks. Simultaneously, Bangladesh offers emerging manufacturing locations, low-cost labor, a large pool of workers, and opportunities in Chi-

na-oriented industrial and economic zones.

The good news is that this cooperation has already started with the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Bangladesh Semiconductor Industry Association and the Hubei Semiconductor Industry Association of China. To put the cooperation on the fast track, policymakers in Bangladesh should consider the following measures.

First, Bangladesh should set up a special semiconductor investment priority desk to speed up approvals and provide land, utilities, tax, and customs support. It should offer plug-and-play facilities in special economic zones and custom incentives for chip testing, packaging, assembly, and design services. It should also identify five to 10 Chinese companies and create tailored packages for each.

Second, it should encourage joint ventures and public-private partnerships to share the costs and risks, attract anchor Chinese companies, and construct common facilities such as testing labs, packaging plants and training facilities.

Third, the country's semiconductor capacity should be enhanced by partnering with Chinese universities and companies on joint research labs, sponsored research, internships and exchange programs to build local talent and innovation.

A skilled workforce should be devel-

oped by offering scholarships, short courses and technician training in chip testing, packaging, electronics and classroom basics. At least one specialized training center with modern facilities should be built in each division.

Fourth, Bangladesh should also develop a national semiconductor strategy with clear objectives and a multi-year budget. It should establish division-level training centers, scholarships and a national testing lab through a special semiconductor and AI fund. Incentives should be provided based on jobs, exports, and technology transfer. Reliable power and connectivity should be ensured in special zones.

Finally, Bangladesh needs to act now to catch up in the global semiconductor race. Policymakers should implement the steps outlined above without delay or else the country might miss the semiconductor-led opportunities of the AI era. The message is clear: if we keep waiting for tomorrow, we will lose our chance to act today.

Mohammad Shakil Bhuiyan is a faculty member in political studies at Shaikhjalal University of Science and Technology in Bangladesh.

Mohammad Saiyedul Islam is a senior lecturer and researcher at the School of Overseas Education of Sanming University in China. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

EDITORIAL

Brinkmanship over Hormuz

Seoul should launch diplomacy for energy crisis

The Strait of Hormuz crisis shows no signs of ending. Washington and Tehran continue to exchange barbs, with neither side signaling a willingness to back down. Their confrontation is taking a toll on the global economy. Oil prices have skyrocketed, sending shockwaves across industries and stoking fears of rising inflation worldwide.

No country stands to gain, as long as the current standoff persists. In an interconnected global economy, every nation — including the United States and Iran — will bear the consequences of the Middle East conflict if a ceasefire is not reached soon.

U.S. President Donald Trump lashed out at Iran in an obscenity-filled social media post, demanding that Tehran reopen the crucial waterway through which nearly 20 percent of global crude oil shipments pass. "Tuesday will be Power Plant Day and Bridge Day, all wrapped up in one, in Iran. There will be nothing like it!!!" he wrote. He warned that if Iran failed to meet his Tuesday deadline, the U.S. would destroy Iran's power plants and bridges and they would "be living in Hell!"

Iran dismissed Trump's warning. Gen. Ali Abdullahi Alibabadi of Iran's central military command described the threat as a "helpless, nervous, unbalanced and stupid action," adding that "the gates of hell will open" for the United States.

Meanwhile, Iran has continued selectively reopening the strait. On Friday, several vessels successfully transited the Strait of Hormuz, including a French container ship, three Oman-linked tankers and a Japanese-owned gas carrier. South Korea-linked vessels are still unable to transit.

Iran's disruption of shipping through the strait has contributed to the surge in global oil prices. Tehran appears to believe that its effective control over the waterway serves its interests in two key ways: financially and psychologically. It is reportedly seeking to extract tolls from vessels in exchange for safe passage, potentially using the revenue to rebuild its war-damaged industries. At the same time, Iran seems intent on leveraging the disruption to shift global opinion, portraying U.S.-Israeli strikes as the root cause of economic instability and

thereby undermining U.S. leadership. In this sense, Iran uses the closure of the Strait of Hormuz as a cognitive warfare tactic to outmaneuver its enemies.

So far, this strategy has had some effect. Countries — particularly those most affected by the disruption — have begun voicing concern over the broader Middle East conflict. However, it would be a mistake for Iran to continue leveraging the strait in this way.

Global backlash is already emerging. The U.N. Security Council is expected to vote on a Bahrain-sponsored resolution aimed at protecting commercial shipping in and around the Strait of Hormuz. The vote has been repeatedly delayed, and the outcome remains uncertain. China, a permanent member of the council, has publicly opposed the measure, arguing that it could legitimize the "unlawful and indiscriminate use of force," potentially escalating tensions further.

Even if the resolution fails to pass, such international efforts are significant. They increase pressure on Iran to abide by international norms. Additional global initiatives may follow, as Iran's interference with a vital maritime corridor appears to violate established principles of freedom of navigation.

South Korea is among the countries most affected by Iran's control of the waterway. Approximately 70 percent of its crude oil and 20 percent of its natural gas imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz. Heavily dependent on oil imports to sustain its economy, Korea's future is deeply tied to the stability of this route.

Seoul must make its voice heard. As a nation heavily dependent on the strait, South Korea is well-positioned to lead a coordinated international effort to ensure its reopening. By working with other middle power countries that share a stake in maintaining open shipping lanes, it can amplify calls for freedom of navigation and increase pressure on Iran. At the same time, it could pursue direct diplomatic engagement with Tehran to secure safe passage for South Korea-linked vessels.

More broadly, Seoul should adopt a proactive and creative diplomatic strategy to help resolve the crisis.

'Gukppong' reality check

I watched, with admiration, the recent comeback performance of BTS on Netflix, which drew global attention. I also enjoyed, with a dose of Korean national pride, K-pop acts and the Korean-themed performances taking center stage at the recent Oscars and other international award shows. By most measures, Korea's cultural influence is blazing across the global stage.

Yet, if you spend time consuming Korean media — whether legacy outlets or YouTube and social platforms — it seems as if every single one in the world is fixated on outside perspectives on Korea. Korean media is saturated with what might be called "reaction stories," showcasing how foreigners are supposedly astounded by K-pop, K-beauty and K-whatsoever. At one point, I even encountered a flood of stories about K-defense, highlighting foreign praise of Korean military technologies used in the ongoing war between the United States, Israel and Iran. These stories typically arrive wrapped in familiar, clickable packaging such as "Why foreigners are envious of Korea," "Americans crying over K-drama" and "This is how (fill in the blank with foreign celebrities or top news sources like The New York Times) raves about Korean (fill in the blank with any Korean culture or product)."

There is, in fact, a term for this phenomenon: *gukppong*. It is the combination of the Korean words "guk" (nation) and "ppong" (slang for a drug). The term captures a kind of intoxication, a euphoric rush of national pride. Media content built around foreign admiration of Korea has come to be known, fittingly, as "gukppong content."

But here is a necessary reality check: The world does not revolve around Korea. It is not the center of the universe, even if its cultural



TIMES COLUMN

Min Seong-jae

and economic standing has risen through the roof. *Gukppong* content can only provide a momentary high. Why, then, are Koreans so hungry for foreigners' attention and recognition?

I believe part of the answer lies in Korea's cultural dispositions, particularly collectivism and the legacy of Confucianism. In a broadly collectivist cultural setting, the boundary between "me" and "us" is more porous. When Korean cultural products succeed globally, that success is not experienced as distant or abstract; it feels personal, like a shared elevation in collective status. When a Korean artist wins, many Koreans feel that we all have won. Confucian traditions further reinforce a sensitivity to others' perceptions. Confucianism emphasizes relational harmony and social awareness and cultivates habits of attentiveness. Influenced by this tradition, many Koreans exhibit a tendency to be attuned to others' opinions and behaviors so that they can belong to the group and be liked. Their identities are continuously negotiated through others' perceptions. At the national level, this can translate to a heightened concern with how Korea is perceived abroad.

Still, it would be oversimplification to attribute the *gukppong* phenomenon solely to culture. I think the more immediate driver is the Korean media ecosystem itself. *Gukppong* content is easier and cheaper to produce, emotionally rewarding Korean audiences and hence more profitable. It delivers quick validation, easy clicks and

strong engagement. Digital algorithms, ever hungry for attention, amplify such content and circulate it efficiently to receptive audiences. In this sense, media does not merely reflect public sentiment — it actively cultivates and monetizes it.

There is nothing wrong with taking pride in the achievements of one's compatriots. Every other country does it. But in contemporary Korea, this tendency appears unusually intensified, often tethered to an outsized desire for foreign recognition. What begins as pride can drift into dependency — an overreliance on external applause to affirm internal worth. If this pattern persists, one may get stuck in the bubble and lose the ability to see the world in a fair and balanced manner. A steady diet of *gukppong* content can create an echo chamber where admiration is amplified, criticism is filtered out and complexity and nuances are flattened. At its worst, it can foster intolerance, bigotry and racism as *gukppong* content sometimes is tinged with a sense of superiority and hostility towards others.

Korea's achievements are real, and they do not need constant external validation to be meaningful. A more grounded confidence would rest not on how loudly others cheer, but on a steady, self-assured understanding of what has been built — and what still remains to be done.

Min Seong-jae (min@pace.edu) is a professor of communication and media studies at Pace University in New York.

THOUGHTS OF THE TIMES

Iran war and Middle East

By Arthur I. Cyr

The current war raging between Iran and Israel plus the United States represents a departure from the behavior of previous U.S. leaders. The administrations of Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden maintained traditional strong alliance with Israel, including military assistance, but avoided being drawn into military combat in the Middle East.

U.S. President Donald Trump in his second term has decided to join Israel in air attacks on Iran, while moving U.S. Army and Marine Corps forces into the region.

Trump has reversed course from earlier sustained emphasis on the absolute requirement to avoid direct military engagements overseas. He is acting unilaterally, without securing any approval from Congress. This contrasts with the approaches of both President George H.W. Bush and President George W. Bush in respectively responding to the 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and launching an invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The current conflict is sometimes referred to as the Third Gulf War, but is distinctive from the earlier two wars in important respects, including so far relying on executive authority alone. Additionally, as yet we have no allies beyond Israel. The First Gulf War involved a comprehensive international coalition, authorized by the U.S. Congress and the United Nations. The Iraq War was also authorized by Congress, and we had several allies, notably faithful Britain.

This war has fully confirmed Iran's control of the Strait of Hormuz, drastically disrupting fuel transit and fertilizer markets. Historic context is important in view of this radical U.S. departure. In 1973, decisive efforts of the Nixon administration were crucial to Israel's successful defense against a combined Arab states' attack. This was followed by major peace agreements. President Jimmy Carter's determination and discipline achieved the historic 1978 Camp David peace between Egypt and Israel, which still survives.

In March 1991, following the expulsion of Iraq's army from Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush addressed Congress. He did not gloat regarding the defeat of Iraq but rather emphasized the importance of diplomacy, working with others for regional stability and peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

The 1956 Suez Crisis remains particularly important. President Dwight Eisenhower used economic leverage and astute diplomacy to end a secretly planned old-style colonial military invasion by Britain, France and Israel to recapture the Suez Canal, nationalized by Egypt's new military regime and seize the Sinai Peninsula. As usual, Ike's instincts were right; our alliance relationships survived.

In 1958, Eisenhower intervened directly in Lebanon with a sizable military force. American troops suffered only one soldier killed by hostile fire. Successful U.S. involvement has included detailed planning, clear objectives and at times distance from Israel.

Both NPR and PBS sued the Trump administration over this cut in funding, citing constitutional protections.

No matter how you feel about those decisions, the system works as it was designed. That's the kind of democracy Democrats were certain would be crushed and set on fire leading up to the '24 election, and every day since. (TNS)



Arthur I. Cyr (cyr@carthage.edu) is author of "After the Cold War" (WU Press and Palgrave Macmillan).



Overseas Comment

Court rulings prove US democracy still works

The Boston Herald

It must have been a confounding day for "No Kings" protesters. Their placards at rallies held around the country decry U.S. President Donald Trump's "authoritarian regime" and the "fascism" under which Americans now live. They've blasted the ballroom Trump was building adjacent to the White House.

Two federal judges upended that notion Tuesday by checking Trump's powers in making recent decisions. That's checks and balances in action.

As the Hill reported, U.S. District Judge Richard Leon halted construction of Trump's ballroom project, saying no statute "comes

close" to granting him the authority he claims he has to execute the \$400 million project.

Judge Leon said construction can continue when Congress authorizes it. Trump may have done an end-run around Congress when he started the ballroom project, but the judicial branch stopped him. That's democracy.

The same day, U.S. District Judge Randolph D. Moss permanently blocked Trump's executive order to halt funding to National Public Radio and the Public Broadcast Service.

Trump signed this order last May, which directs the Corporation for Public Broadcasting from paying out allocated federal funding to NPR and PBS.

"Because the First Amendment

does not tolerate viewpoint discrimination and retaliation of this type, the Court will issue judgment against the federal agency defendants declaring Section 3(a) of the Executive Order is unconstitutional and will issue an injunction barring those defendants from implementing it," the judge, an appointee of former President Barack Obama, wrote in his ruling.

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TODAY in HISTORY

529 — First draft of Corpus Juris Civilis or the Justinian Code (a fundamental work in jurisprudence) is issued by Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian I.
1948 — World Health Organization is formed by the United Nations.
1954 — U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in a news conference, is the first to voice fear of a "domino effect" of communism in the Indochina region.

1968 — Riots continue in over 100 U.S. cities following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.
1969 — The internet's symbolic birth date: publication of RFC 1 by Steve Crocker.
1994 — Beginning of the Rwandan genocide; the Presidential Guard begins killing moderate politicians and public figures in Kigali, including Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana.

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MAIN TELEPHONE NUMBERS
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* City Desk: (02) 724-2346
* Business Desk: (02) 724-2344
* Finance Desk: (02) 724-2345
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BTS at Gwanghwamun: Beyond the stage

On an ordinary workday, Gwanghwamun moves with quiet precision. Office workers pass through the streets without lingering. Tourists pause to take photos near Cheonggye Stream and Gyeongbok Palace. Traffic loops through an area designed for continuity and movement — a space designed less for spectacle than for function.

That cadence began to shift in the days leading up to K-pop phenomenon BTS' long-awaited comeback concert held on March 21. Barricades appeared, access became increasingly limited and police presence was heightened throughout the city. By the day of the concert, roads and subway stations were closed, pedestrian movement was restricted and tens of thousands of safety personnel had been deployed throughout central Seoul.

What unfolded that evening was not simply staged — it was managed. And yet, when the group's anticipated performance began, the outcome did not follow a familiar script.

According to reports, crowd turnout fell well short of the expected 260,000 fans from around the world. Nearby businesses that had prepared

for the surge of visitors encountered the opposite, with some restaurants and vendors incurring losses. A global event, streamed to nearly 19 million viewers worldwide, coexisted with a local environment that felt, at moments, surprisingly contained.

In a space like Gwanghwamun, an event is no longer evaluated as a concert alone. It's not really about filling seats or expanding the scale. Rather, it's handled at an entirely different level.

And for a comeback following several years of absence — and considering BTS' remarkable global left prior to the members' military service hiatus — this mattered significantly. It was less about whether to hold a concert, and more about where and how to place what comes next for the group.

Perception matters. A typical concert venue like Seoul Olympic Stadium would have been more straightforward. The infrastructure was already in place, the outcome was more or less predictable, and the crowds would have been massive but contained. Gwanghwamun, on the other hand, operates differently. It's a space where history, culture, govern-



TIMES FORUM

Soo Kim

nance and everyday life are layered together and already have their operating rhythm. Here, symbolic meaning and practical function coexist.

The performance at Gwanghwamun, then, carried ambition beyond making headlines.

For a global audience, Gwanghwamun already reads as distinctly Korean, culturally and symbolically. That resonance is amplified by BTS' album title, "ARIRANG," and the incorporation of the folk song into the track "Body to Body," recorded with Korean traditional musicians. The track operates on two levels: as a national touchstone, evoking identity and endurance, and as a collective experience shared with the group's global fan base. The comeback, therefore, wasn't just broadcast outward; it was anchored in place, history and culture. The choice of Gwanghwamun was

not about scale alone, but a deliberate positioning of BTS 2.0, a statement of where the group wants to stand in its next chapter. It wasn't about proving global reach — that has already been established. It was about how to anchor that reach in cultural context and resonance.

Performing in a space layered with centuries of history, administrative power and civic life created a frame far larger than a conventional concert stage.

The incorporation of "Arirang" was an essential part of this orchestration. A song that is simultaneously national and universal, it evoked identity and endurance while inviting participation across the group's global fan base. Paired with traditional instruments and modern production, it signaled that BTS' comeback is rooted in Korean culture, but designed for global connection. The space and the music operated in tandem, contextualizing each other and creating a resonance that transcended the mechanics of performance.

By launching its comeback at Gwanghwamun, BTS chose not just to return, but how to define the terms of that comeback. In some ways, it

could be read as a recalibration for the group, perhaps suggesting that its next step is not simply bigger or louder — which is linear — but more layered and attuned to both global and domestic audiences.

In that vein, the Gwanghwamun venue was a masterclass in spatial strategy. It illustrated how location, culture and performance can be integrated to create an event that is as much about context as content.

The stage was not just constructed on asphalt — it was built on history, perception, narrative and the collective consciousness of fans worldwide. Finally, BTS' performance showed that in a world saturated with optics and spectacle, true impact is measured by the thoughtfulness and deliberation of placement, the depth of resonance and the intentionality of every element from song to setting, timing to symbolism.

Gwanghwamun was never just a concert. It was a statement, and in that statement lies the blueprint for what comes next.

Soo Kim is a former CIA analyst and strategic risk consultant, and the host of the YouTube channel @skucidd.

“
What unfolded that evening was not simply staged — it was managed.”



Bondi departure no cause for celebration

Farewell to U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi, who was fired Thursday, joining the pantheon of President Donald Trump's awful cabinet secretaries who learned the hard way that there's no pleasing a fundamentally unreasonable person.

As terrible as Bondi was, her ultimate failing was that she didn't go far enough for Trump in trashing the rule of law in America. So while it may be tempting to celebrate her departure, her firing bodes ill for the state of the U.S. democracy. Whoever comes next could likely be a bigger threat.

The one-time Florida AG was narrowly confirmed as Trump's second choice to lead the Department of Justice (DOJ) after it became clear that his first pick, the horrible Matt Gaetz, would not make it through a confirmation process even with a pliant Republican Senate filled with lackeys and the weak-willed.

Bondi wasn't as outlandish as Gaetz; her scandal was that she was never a credible steward of the impartial rule of law and this nation's potent law enforcement apparatus, something she proved many times over during her short sojourn.

In the end, her greatest transgression in Trump's eyes was not that she had scorn for the law, but in fact that she was not able to violate laws and norms and bend reality exactly to his vision, and so she's

involved in them sooner or later anyway, but history will remember what she did.

In the end, Bondi was rewarded for her willingness to violate her professional responsibilities and oath of office with being unceremoniously shown the door, a predictable outcome in the context of a president for whom loyalty only ever runs one way.

We don't expect Todd Blanche, the deputy AG and now acting DOJ boss, to be any more committed to legal and constitutional principles than Bondi has been. But we do expect him to find, just as she did, that it is rather difficult to single-handedly kneecap 2½ centuries of relative jurisprudential institutional stability, especially through a department that's losing attorneys and their expertise left and right and angering even conservative federal judges with its defiance as public support crater.

The Senate should remember that its advice and consent function is a serious exercise of its own power, and never just a formality.

The prospect of confirmation failure already derailed Gaetz; the body should make clear that it will not consider anyone, Blanche or otherwise, that won't commit to the rule of law, on the Epstein files and all else.

Bondi kept saying that everything has been published, but then there is more.

This embarrassing about-face and dynamiting of any integrity she might have had left is unlikely to matter in the grand scheme of things, as we will all get to see the files and the full extent of Trump's

involvement in them sooner or later anyway, but history will remember what she did.

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This editorial was published by the New York Daily News and distributed by Tribune Content Agency.

Gen Z revolts show toppling leaders is just the start

By Mihir Sharma

South Asia has had three youth-led revolts and three changes of government — and still has three countries with problems that haven't changed a bit.

In February, Bangladesh's electorate gave Tarique Rahman, exiled in London for 17 years, a sweeping mandate; and in early March Nepal's voters overwhelmingly for Balen Shah, previously a rapper and mayor of Kathmandu. Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka, the former Marxist-Leninist Anura Kumara Dissanayake is just 18 months into his tenure and is already facing multiple crises, including a crippling shortage of fuel that has forced his government to institute a four-day work week.

All took power after mass protests forced out their predecessors, promising a clean break from the old elite's sloth, incompetence and corruption. And yet, as Sri Lanka is discovering and the others might, too, rupture is not replacement. Regime change is easier than transforming states, and, in the subcontinent, the old regime never really leaves.

Dissanayake's appeal lay as a clean break from the traditional politicians Sri Lankans had targeted in what they call the Aragalaya — Sinhalese for "struggle" — in 2022. In Bangladesh, the 15-year rule of Sheikh Hasina came to an end when student protesters took over the streets of Dhaka in the summer of 2024, in what came to be known as the July Uprising. And in Nepal, large-scale Generation Z protests six months ago were sparked by a ban on social media and coordinated on Discord.

But this part of the world too often confuses toppling leaders with transforming states. Protests promise an exciting new moral order, but actual governance requires boring competence: Regulatory reform, judicial independence, checks on the executive.

In Bangladesh, Rahman's return isn't even that much of a rupture with the past: His father was a military dictator and his mother prime minister. And we're already seeing the consequences of that. Legislators from his Bangladesh Nationalist Party are refusing to



Bangladesh Nationalist Party Chairman Tarique Rahman shows a victory sign after addressing a press conference in Dhaka on Feb. 14. APF-TNS

participate in a process to amend the constitution and constrain executive power, as was agreed last year.

Dissanayake, meanwhile, has found that cutting sleaze isn't as easy once in government, especially if you have made the mistake of blaming structural economic problems, such as Sri Lanka's chronic balance of payments problems, on corruption. The country's anti-bribery commission received just over 8,400 complaints last year; it made 84 arrests. A conversion rate of 1 in 100 isn't great.

Institutional reform, independent regulators, and depoliticized decision-making are the best antidotes to corruption. But that isn't on the agenda in Sri Lanka. The anti-corruption investigators are supposed to be independent, but government ministers regularly proclaim on their activities and the commission's head has complained that the finance ministry wants to control its funding. As a consequence, Dissanayake has had to take headline-grabbing but fundamentally unjustifiable steps like arresting a former president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, on what one Indian politician described as "petty charges."

The new government in Nepal seems to be speed-running the same script. Barely a day after it took office, a former prime minister, K.P. Sharma Oli, was arrested and detained. The new cabinet — presided over by Shah in black sunglasses — has produced a 100-point agenda for its first weeks, but the chances are that it will work on vengeance and pub-

lic relations first, and postpone the hard graft of institutional change. This is an error. The longer the gap between revolt on the city's streets and revolution in the corridors of power, the harder it is for real change to take hold.

Insurgent governments have a narrow window in which they have genuine legitimacy; they need to use that to transform hidebound or sclerotic bureaucracies. If they waste that on tempting headlines and political scores instead, they may be reelected — but they will never achieve what they've promised.

This has happened in South Asia before. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi rose to power claiming to be an outsider, after years of protest against a supposedly corrupt government in New Delhi. If he wanted to transform the country, as he pledged, he could have used that energy to reinvent how government works — for example, by replacing the coddled bureaucracy that independent India inherited from the British to make it more accountable.

But administrative reform was way down his list of priorities and, as a consequence, his government has never quite lived up to its initial promise. Too little has changed in how the Indian state operates. The subcontinent's insurgents will realize that winning power is easy. What's hard is wielding it without becoming what they replaced.

Mihir Sharma is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. This article was published by Bloomberg and distributed by Tribune Content Agency.

وقتي الموارد للأقوام تهلكت
إذا الموارد لم يعلم لها مصدر
(المغيرة بن حنينا)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
Peoples face ruin in their water sources when the origin of those sources remains unknown.
Al-Mughira bin Habnaa
(Umayyad-era Arab poet)

Opinion

Israel moves toward executing Palestinian children

DR. RAMZY BAROUD



Dr. Ramzy Baroud is a journalist, author and the editor of The Palestine Chronicle. His latest book, "Before the Flood" was published by Seven Stories Press. His website is ramzybaroud.net. X: @RamzyBaroud
For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

Under Israel's new death penalty law, Palestinian children, like adults, could find themselves facing the gallows. This might take some by surprise or even be dismissed as an exaggeration. Sadly, it is neither.

The law, passed by Israel's Knesset on March 30, mandates capital punishment for Palestinians convicted of carrying out deadly attacks. The legislation, often referred to as the "Death Penalty for Terrorists" law, requires that executions be carried out swiftly, within 90 days, while sharply limiting avenues for appeal or commutation, according to human rights organizations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Though the law itself does not explicitly mention children, it does not exclude them either. Knowing Israel's treatment and legal classification of Palestinian children, this distinction is not minor — it is decisive.

Under Israel's military court system, Palestinian children as young as 12 are

prosecuted. They are often treated as adults within a system that offers few safeguards and operates with an extremely high conviction rate.

Reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other rights organizations describe consistent patterns of abuse, including night arrests, physical violence, threats and psychological pressure. Many children, these groups note, are interrogated without adequate legal safeguards and in conditions that facilitate coercion and the extraction of confessions.

Under international law, children are protected persons, entitled to special safeguards under the Fourth Geneva Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child — both of which prohibit cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Not in Israel, however — a state that has consistently treated international law not as binding but as an obstacle to its political and military objectives.

For Israel, Palestinian children are often framed not as civilians but as potential threats. This framing represents a profound

assault on basic humanity and fundamental rights — one that goes even further than the cynical language of "collateral damage" by preemptively stripping children of their civilian status.

Israeli officials have made such views unmistakably clear. This has often been dismissed as routine racism in Israeli politics. It is not.

Since Oct. 7, 2023, Gaza's children have been killed in staggering numbers: at least 21,289 children are among the more than 71,800 Palestinians killed, while 44,500-plus have been wounded, according to UNICEF's February 2026 update.

In the West Bank, the pattern persists, with Palestinian children increasingly killed during Israeli military raids and settler violence.

With this in mind, it should not be surprising that the death penalty law does not exempt children from the horrific fate it envisions for Palestinians who resist Israeli occupation.

The death penalty law is, therefore, about something else: the projection of power.

But within this projection of power lies a deadly consequence: many people stand to be killed — including children.

Though some voices in the international community have spoken out against the law, these reactions have been limited and quickly overshadowed by other developments.

Without sustained pressure, Israel has no reason to refrain from carrying out executions — decisions that will be made by military courts that lack even the most basic standards of fairness or adherence to international law.

Once this is normalized, the threshold will shift again. And children will inevitably be drawn into it.

Israel has already normalized practices once deemed unthinkable. If it normalizes the execution of children, it will cross a threshold not even many colonial regimes openly breached.

There must be a limit — because its continuation will not only devastate Palestinians but reverberate far beyond, eroding the most basic protections of human life itself.

Palestinian children as young as 12 are often treated as adults within a system that offers few safeguards

COURTESY: ANASO MANSOUR/AL ARABYAT



As any Palestinian will tell you, Israel already has a policy of execution, just one that is not enabled through the courts

Israel reinforces its image as a pariah state

CHRIS DOYLE



Chris Doyle is director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding in London. X: @Doylech
For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

Blatant contempt for Palestinian life is a gold-star badge of honor within this Israeli government — and not just for the extreme right. Most Israeli ministers have a record of genocidal comments not just about Palestinians but also Lebanese and others. So, is it a surprise that the Knesset has passed a death penalty law that specifically targets Palestinians?

This law is the pet project of Itamar Ben-Gvir, the minister for national security, and his racist acolytes. Ben-Gvir celebrated the law with Champagne in the Knesset. Even before the vote, he posted chilling videos from Israeli prisons showing the preparations for the hangings he so clearly cherishes.

But this is not some extremist fetish. The Knesset passed the legislation by 62 votes to 48. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

voted in favor. And it is not a product of the post-October 2023 Israeli fury, as it was included in the coalition agreement four years ago.

Supporters argue that Israel is not the only state to have the death penalty. True, of course. But there is a monumental difference between this Israeli law and those of every other state that has legalized executions. What is so barbaric about this legislation is that it targets one group: Palestinians.

This hardens the regime of apartheid that Israel operates against Palestinians. Their lives are valued less than Jewish Israeli lives and this is codified in law. Even in the apartheid regime in South Africa, such a law was never passed.

Yet, as any Palestinian will tell you, Israel already has a policy of execution, just one that is not enabled through the courts. Israeli forces have for decades carried out

extrajudicial executions of Palestinians as a matter of state policy. Increasingly, these are no longer even targeted. In Gaza, the targeting policy permitted the killing of 300 Palestinians as collateral damage.

Settlers in the West Bank killed six Palestinians in the first three weeks of March, according to the UN. The chances of any of the perpetrators being arrested and put on trial are close to zero. They certainly would not face the death penalty under this law. Last month, 30 US senators demanded in a letter that President Donald Trump insist on an independent investigation into the February killing by settlers of a Palestinian American, the ninth US citizen killed in the West Bank since 2022.

The Israeli death penalty law is being challenged at the Supreme Court. Israeli human rights organizations are pushing this, but the only other opposition within the country is from the

ever-more-impotent left.

How has this gone down regionally and internationally? Palestinians went on a general strike in the West Bank. They have few options. Pakistan, Türkiye, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE issued a joint statement, as did six Western states.

The case for sanctioning the sponsors of this law is watertight. But spines are in short supply among European leaders when it comes to Israel.

Will this change how the world views Israel? Its reputation has already plummeted over the last two years. Will European leaders desist from referring to having shared values with Israel or from billing it as a democracy that adheres to the rule of law? Its reckless war against Iran reinforces Israel's image as a pariah state. The death penalty for Palestinians shows it is both rogue and racist.

Opinion

The Iranian carpet of embers

GHASSAN CHARBEL



Ghassan Charbel is editor-in-chief of Ashraq Al-Awsat newspaper. X: @GhassanCharbel

This was years ago. Commander of the Quds Force Gen. Qassem Soleimani was frank and adamant. He told his visitors that the "American troops had no choice but to leave Iraq. Baghdad was on fire under their boots, just like a carpet made of fire. Their withdrawal will damage their image and reputation. The Americans must feel that they are walking on fire anywhere they go in the Middle East."

Soleimani was turning into reality not just the dream of Ali Khamenei but that of founding Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini to oust the Americans from the Middle East as a precursor to isolating, weakening and then destroying Israel.

I recalled the tale of the carpet of fire as I watched the American and Israeli bombs rain down on Iran, while the latter fired at nonmilitary targets in the Gulf countries and Jordan. Has America decided to go to war in response to Iran's policy of expanding the carpet of fire that sought to control capitals, maps and straits?

Is it too much to say that the Arab world has, since 1979, been enduring the repercussions of the embers of the Iranian

revolution? The change that took place impacted a country that, even under the shah, did not hide its ambition to play an influential role in the region, with some circles even speaking of Iran "policing" the area. The Khomeinist revolution was born in a sensitive part of the world and a region that oil wells and straits run through.

Before the world grew preoccupied with talk about Iran's nuclear program, it was preoccupied with talk about the embers of the revolution. From its very inception, the revolution promoted a blunt project of "championing the weak" and "exporting the revolution." It soon enshrined this dream in its constitution. The revolution acted as though the Iranian

borders were too tight for its ambitions — never mind that Iran is a vast country.

Early on, Khomeini dreamed of expelling America from the region. Even during his days in Najaf, his ambitions were too grand to contain. And they became difficult to deal with after Iraq signed an agreement with the shah in Algeria in 1975 that openly said that neither side would support the opposition in their countries. This meant that the shah would stop backing the Kurdish revolution in northern Iraq

and that Baghdad would stop backing the opponents of the shah that it was hosting.

At one point, Iraqi intelligence proposed to Saddam Hussein the assassination of Khomeini in Iraq and blaming it on the shah. Saddam shocked them by responding: "Don't those people know that Iraq does not assassinate its guests?"

Some believed that the Iraq-Iran war prevented the flow of Iranian embers in the region. Iran, however, took advantage of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and, with Hafez Assad's approval, sponsored the birth of the Lebanese Hezbollah in what was seen as the first success of its operation to export the revolution.

The Iranian carpet of embers played its role in Lebanon, from bombing the US Marine headquarters and American embassy to kidnapping Western hostages. The carpet grew and developed deep roots, and southern Lebanon transformed into an Iranian-Israeli front.

There is not enough space here to list everything that happened, but Iran benefited greatly from Saddam's recklessness when his forces invaded Kuwait. The region and world became preoccupied with the threat from Iraq. In 2003, Iran received

the greatest gift with the overthrow of Saddam's regime by the American army. The Iranian carpet of fire flowed into Iraq.

The Iranian leadership concluded from its war with Iraq that it needed to keep conflict away from its territories and build walls to protect itself inside Arab countries. And so, Soleimani started to plan and surround the region with small roaming armies. Then emerged Daesh and the so-called Arab Spring and maps were shaken to the core, including Yemen, which would also feel the

Iranian embers and witness the birth of the Houthi player.

The militias assumed the role of expanding the Iranian carpet of embers and moving it to new maps. Iran expanded its ambitions, from uranium enrichment to extending the range of its missiles and growing the arsenals of its proxies.

Trump decided to return the Iranian embers back to the map they came from. The question here is will this war cool the embers or deepen the wounded supreme leader's conviction that the survival of the revolution hinges on the ability to produce and distribute these embers?

Trump has said that time is running out and that hell awaits with a hail of burning embers. This is a decisive battle in the Middle East.

The revolution acted as though the Iranian borders were too tight for its ambitions — never mind that Iran is a vast country

In 2003, Iran received the greatest gift with the overthrow of Saddam's regime by the American army

Fraud by Somali immigrants now a political football

RAY HANANIA



Ray Hanania is an award-winning former Chicago City Hall political reporter and columnist. He can be reached on his personal website at www.rayhanania.com. X: @RayHanania

It is very rare that an issue of fraud is so closely linked with one ethnic group, as it has been in Minnesota in a scandal involving the nation's largest concentration of Somali immigrants.

Government and elected officials have complained that fraud by Somali immigrants accounts for the theft or misuse of state and federal funding totaling some \$9 billion. That huge number represents only what is known, as the depth of the fraud uncovered so far may only be the tip of the iceberg.

Because of the power of Rep. Ilhan Omar's office and the influence elected Democrats have in Minnesota, from the governor's office to the office of the state attorney general, Democrats have been pushing back against calls by President Donald Trump and the Republican Party to pursue the Somali fraud accusations.

Republicans have argued that the fraud has spiraled out of control under Democrats in Minnesota and more needs to be done.

But this is not something that should be ignored or spun into a political battle between Democrats and Republicans.

American taxpayers of all political persuasions have been impacted and state and federal resources are at risk, as is the integrity of many state and government programs intended to help those in need.

Allowing the fraud to continue without a nonpartisan alliance to bring it to a halt will only result in more fraud and more losses to taxpayers.

The alleged fraud is so great, in fact, that Trump has directed Vice President J.D. Vance to establish a task force to

eliminate the problem. As of March 20, 63 convictions have been obtained by the prosecutors in this case.

The fraud accusations are rampant and cover numerous business categories, from child and senior care to food programs and post-

COVID-19 government relief funding.

In January, the Department of Homeland Security launched a program called "Operation PARRIS" (Post-Admission Refugee Reverification and Integrity Strengthening), which primarily targets legally admitted refugees in Minnesota for "reexamination" of their immigration status.

Previously, Trump, who has addressed the issue repeatedly during the past year,

showcased fraud in Minnesota as the basis for expanding the government's response. Trump ordered the Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement to enter Minnesota to target "illegal aliens" — immigrants who entered the country and established their residencies illegally.

The number of cases of fraud justify a national approach to the problem.

The Somali immigrant population in Minnesota has become the focus of the federal crackdown. Of the 98 people

charged in connection with fraud involving food for the poor in Minnesota, 85 were identified as Somali Americans, indicating a significant representation in these cases and prompting a focus on "Somali fraud."

The fraud itself is a threat to the integrity of protecting American taxpayers and the politicization of the fraud only serves to delay justice, block investigations and protect the criminals.

The evidence of fraud continues to grow, with no real end in sight, mainly because it has become a political football.

Americans are easily distracted from issues like the Minnesota fraud as they are more concerned about the worsening

economy, driven by the growing cost of war.

Trump last week announced he was requesting an increase of more than 40 percent in government spending on the military, or more than \$600 billion, bringing the total to \$1.5 trillion.

The president has also proposed ending federal support of healthcare through Medicare and Medicaid, shifting it to taxpayers at the state level instead — a dramatic shock for many Americans.

While a spotlight has been placed on the fraud in Minnesota by the White House, it requires the political powers in Minnesota, who are mostly Democrats, to take the issue seriously and pursue prosecutions.

But as long as the public's attention is focused on questioning the war in Iran and America's support of Israel's military expansions, at a great cost to the US economy, it should not be a surprise that the issue of fraud carried out by Somali immigrants is not getting the attention it deserves.

The longer the issue remains a point of political conflict, the worse the fraud will become and the more the losses to American taxpayers will increase.

Republicans have argued that the fraud has spiraled out of control under Democrats in Minnesota

The politicization of the fraud only serves to delay justice, block investigations and protect the criminals



Prince Ahmad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz

Jomana Rashid Alrahd

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Opinion

Ending the dream of remote-controlled war

A.I.'s significant targeting improvements aren't enough to overcome geography in Iran.

Marc Gustafson
Justin Kosslyn

In Washington, planning for a war with Iran always started with the same stubborn reality: It would be hard to fight and even harder to win. The country is vast and mountainous. Much of its military infrastructure is buried in caves and bunkers. Any serious plan to neutralize Iran's nuclear ambitions or topple the regime quickly arrived at the same conclusion — that success required ground forces and would result in American casualties.

Then came machine learning and artificial intelligence, and with them, the seductive idea that America might finally be able to fight a major adversary indefinitely without sending its citizens into the line of fire.

The promise is not mere fantasy. A.I., fused with increasingly precise weapons and blanket surveillance, has transformed what the U.S. military can do from a distance. The accuracy and speed with which American forces can now find and destroy enemies with potentially fewer U.S. and civilian casualties are a major advance in the nuts and bolts of warfare. As Adm. Brad Cooper, the commander of U.S. Central Command who is leading the war with Iran, said on March 11, A.I. tools can turn targeting processes that "used to take hours and sometimes even days into seconds."

Yet for all the increased speed and accuracy of A.I.-assisted targeting, the war is showing that the physical world still imposes major barriers to victory. The scale and dispersion of Iranian drones are more than A.I. alone can overcome. Short-range missiles, especially on mobile launchers, can survive even in a world of constant blanket surveillance. If planners had dreams of a final victory for remote-controlled warfare, in Iran they have awakened to a harder reality.

The changes technology has brought to warfare in a single generation are genuinely striking. On one occasion several years before Sept. 11, 2001, for example, the United States used satellite-phone data to target Osama bin Laden at a camp he was expected to visit in eastern Afghanistan, as Lawrence Wright reported in his book "The Looming Tower." By the time the Tomahawk missiles were fired, however, bin Laden had made new plans; in the end, he never appeared at the site the United States struck. Today, as missiles and drones take off toward Iran, real-time satellite

and drone footage of their targets allows them to adjust course and speed based on live inputs.

A.I. is also delivering better battlefield intelligence from a distance than soldiers deployed in the field could have done just a few years ago. Right now, U.S. drones are blanketing Iran, collecting video and images and intercepting signals, transmitting all of them to warships in the Persian Gulf. That data can be cross-referenced with people via their phone numbers, the transcripts of their communications and the places they recently visited. All of this informs strike decisions.

In remote areas of Iran, where missiles and drones are hidden in underground bunkers, A.I. can study changes to the soil, thermal signatures, the appearance of new construction and vehicular patterns in search of possible launch sites. When Iranian fighters exit bunkers to fire missiles or drones, surveillance drones can identify them as a threat, sending a signal to nearby ships or planes to fire before the munition is launched.

These capabilities have been discussed in public, including last year by Vice Adm. Frank Whitworth, then chief of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, and during the current Iran conflict by Cameron Stanley, the Pentagon's chief digital and artificial intelligence officer.

Used to create detailed A.I.-generated targeting packages, these capabilities could have given decision makers the impression of a low-risk, quick-turn war with Iran. The further into the conflict the United States gets, however, the more it seems that hope has been a mirage.

Iran is larger than France, Germany, Britain and Italy combined, and drones are hard to find even when you know where to look. Their launch does not emit a detectable explosion like a missile, and they are smaller and easier to conceal. Iran's Shahed drones can even be launched from the back of a pickup truck. There are simply too many trucks in Iran, spread across too large an area, for automated surveillance and precision strikes to find and destroy every target before it takes flight.

Short-range ballistic missiles have also proved harder to counter than the long-range ones that dominated Israel's and Iran's 12-day war last year. Most of the missiles that Iran has fired this year have been short-range weapons aimed at Gulf countries. These are more mobile and smaller, with shorter flight paths, which means that the United States has less time to collect data and respond. Short-range missiles are also easier to disperse and so, like



drones, are harder to track down and strike.

For all the advantages of A.I.-enabled targeting, it has not eliminated civilian casualties. The Pentagon has attributed the mistaken targeting of a school in southern Iran, where at least 175 people died, most of them children, to outdated intelligence. A government investigation is underway, but the episode shows that A.I. has not solved

the fundamental challenge of preventing civilian deaths in a dense, contested environment.

That shortcoming is especially worrying now, as the administration considers deploying ground forces into Iran. The limits of A.I. warfare will most likely only become clearer if troops fight Iranian adversaries up close. One thing is already clear: A.I.'s impressive capabilities have made it

easier to start a war, but they have not yet been enough to win one.

MARC GUSTAFSON was the former chief of intelligence at the White House, head of the Situation Room and a C.I.A. officer. He is a senior director of analysis at Eurasia Group. **JUSTIN KOSSLYN** was a director of product management at Google and is a special adviser at Eurasia Group.

Trump may be turning Iran into another North Korea

That would mean a state that is run less by clerics and more by generals, who seem even more repressive and determined to get nuclear weapons.



Nicholas Kristof

The United States has a long history of bungling Iran.

On New Year's Eve 1977, President Jimmy Carter hailed Iran as "an island of stability" and toasted the shah for the "love which your people give to you." Just over a week later, mass protests began that eventually forced out the despised shah.

The American ambassador, William Sullivan, suggested in 1978 that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the brutal architect of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, might play a "Gandhi-like position," Andrew Young, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, suggested in early 1979 that Khomeini would be "some what of a saint."

Now, once again, we've botched our way into an Iran cul-de-sac, and in the process we appear to have inadvertently strengthened the most dangerous and extreme forces in that country. President Trump is right that we have significantly degraded Iran's air force, navy and missile systems — but conversely Iran has gained leverage by controlling passage through the Strait of Hormuz. So even as he bombed it, and Iran is now earning almost twice as much per day in oil revenue as it was before the war, partly because of higher oil prices, according to The Economist.

It's healthy that President Trump is talking about wrapping up his war in Iran: "We will be leaving very soon," Trump said. The problem is that while President Trump could start the war, he can't end it on his own; Iran has a vote on that.

Trump is now blustering less about seizing Kharg Island, but he still preserves options for reckless escalation and indulges in bombast about bombing Iran "back to the Stone Ages." Does Trump understand that (a) targeting civilian infrastructure is likely a

war crime, and (b) Iran's response to such attacks could be counterstrikes on oil and gas infrastructure and desalination plants around the region?

After having started the war that led to the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz, Trump is now framing its reopening as a task for other nations. "We're not going to have anything to do with it," he said at one point. He also advised other countries: "Go get your own oil."

If Trump leaves Iran controlling the Strait of Hormuz, charging hefty tolls and barring the passage of ships linked to the United States or its military partners, he will have significantly set back the global economy, weakened the United States and strengthened Iran. And American ships will remain stuck, unable to leave.

Iran could earn \$500 billion over about four years just in tolls charged to passing ships, Reuters estimated. If that sum were allocated for weaponry, Iran would have one of the five biggest military budgets in the world.

"This war, in general terms, I think it's an operational success but a huge strategic failure," said Danny Citronowicz, formerly a longtime Iran analyst for Israel's military intelligence agency.

Perhaps the most apt description of Trump's policy toward Iran is an "incoherent maze" — a phrase Pete Hegseth applied in 2016 to Barack Obama's foreign policy. Lost in his own labyrinth, Trump granted sanctions relief to Iran even as he bombed it, and careened from threatening war crimes unless Iran opened the strait to suggesting that the strait wasn't our concern.

One fundamental misstep may have been the strategy of killing the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a deeply unpopular octogenarian, along with a top security aide, Ali Larjani. Both men, while responsible for innumerable deaths, also counted within the Iranian system as relatively pragmatic and cautious; their replacements appear more aggressive.

"Definitely we got a change in the regime, like Trump said, but a very, very bad change in the regime," Citronowicz said. He described the killing of Khamenei as "a major mistake," saying



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DAN SIOCKO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. SOURCE: PHOTOGRAPHS BY AYTA KENARI/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES AND MORTAZA ANSARI/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

that if the supreme leader had died naturally, his hard-line son, Mojtaba, would have had little chance of succeeding him. Instead, the successor might have been someone like Hassan Khomeini or Hassan Rouhani, both perceived as somewhat more open to change.

As Vali Nasr, an Iran expert at Johns Hopkins University, told me: "We essentially removed all the people who were still a restraint on the system and replaced them with the most hawkish people."

The new leadership is weighted toward the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, so we may see Iran

evolving in an even more militaristic direction. That's my fear: We've put Iran on a path to become another North Korea.

That would mean a state that is run less by clerics and more by generals, who seem even more repressive and determined to get nuclear weapons. If Trump walks away from this war without a peace deal — thus without nuclear inspections and limits on uranium enrichment — I worry that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons over the next five years.

American intelligence officials assessed last year that the previous supreme leader supported uranium

enrichment but did not authorize taking the next step by making nuclear weapons. That's apparently because he wanted to avoid the sanctions and isolation that North Korea had suffered.

But the new leadership may view that restraint as a historic mistake and prefer the North Korea model: Iran's uranium enrichment led to sanctions and war anyway, without the deterrence and grudging respect that come with an actual nuclear armory. Nobody messes with North Korea.

Indeed, some of those same American intelligence officials also concluded last year that "Iranian leaders were likely to shift toward producing a bomb if the American military attacked the Iranian uranium enrichment site Fordo or if Israel killed Iran's supreme leader," as The Times put it at the time. Trump and his Israeli counterpart, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, did both.

"Iran can never be trusted with nuclear weapons," Trump said last Wednesday, but he offered no plan to prevent that disastrous outcome, just as he offered no plan to reopen the strait ("It'll just open up naturally," he claimed). Any commando mission to try to recover enriched uranium from underneath rubble in Iran would be a reckless gamble with American lives.

Perhaps the biggest losers are ordinary Iranians. It was their pro-democracy protests in January, and the massacres that followed, that indirectly led to this crisis — and they now endure greater oppression in a bombed-out country as they mourn innocent war victims who include schoolgirls and volleyball players. In one sign of broadening repression, family members of a heroic human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, say she was arrested last week and taken to an unknown location.

The least bad option to end this war is to try to negotiate a peace deal with Iran, using as a basis the constructive five-point peace plan that China and Pakistan have put forward. But Iran appears to believe it has the upper hand, and negotiations will be difficult.

As I watch this war, my mind goes to an old proverb: A fool may throw a stone in a well, but 100 wise men cannot remove it.

OPINION

The New York Times

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I couldn't have imagined this new and exciting 'Cats'

Betty Buckley

In 1982, I walked onto a Broadway stage in the premiere of 'Cats' as Grizabella, a faded glamour cat lit by a single shaft of moonlight, and I sang about memory. We in the cast knew we were part of something exciting. Something great even. We didn't know yet that we were stepping into a cultural phenomenon.

What's easy to forget is how singular 'Cats' felt when it first arrived on Broadway. It was an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical built from T.S. Eliot's poetry with no plot to speak of. The evening unfolded less like a story than a ceremony — a tribe introducing itself one by one through music, dance and character, until a single cat would be chosen to begin a new life. It was extravagant, mysterious — a kind of pageant.

A few miles uptown, unknown to many sitting in the Broadway audience, another fantastically costumed ritualistic form of pageantry was underway known as ballroom. It's where the competitive dance form called "voguing" was first developed.

Members of the Black and Latino L.G.B.T.Q. communities built a dazzling cultural world entirely their own. They grouped themselves into chosen families called

A queer reimagining of the musical showed me something about the show I never expected.

Houses and competed against one another in elaborate categories. At balls, style, movement and identity were celebrated with fearless invention. In those years, even as the AIDS epidemic tore through those communities, ballroom became an act of care, of survival and of insisting on joy in the middle of devastation. It was theater in its purest form: performance as self-creation.

These two forms of pageantry traveled very different paths. "Cats" stepped immediately into the mainstream spotlight and became, for many years, the longest-running show in Broadway history and a must-see for generations of visitors to the city. The balls lived on in a parallel world, outside the tourism spotlight, sustained by the community that created them and the dreams of all those who watched and competed. The reasons aren't complicated: The most vital expressions of Black and Latino queer culture simply weren't welcome in the mainstream spaces where American entertainment took place. The artistry was always there. It just wasn't being let in.

I first saw a new production titled "Cats: The Jellie Ball" at the Peralta Performing Arts Center in New York in 2024 at the invitation of a friend. I had never myself been to a ball, and I knew little about ballroom culture. My exposure, as for many people, was through the documentary "Paris Is Burning," the music video for Madonna's "Vogue," and later, the television series "Pose."

From the first moment, the audience

went nuts! People were singing along. As I watched this new iteration of "Cats," I thought it was more than a reimagining. By intertwining two extraordinary traditions that were blooming in the same city at nearly the same moment, "Jellie Ball" revealed something to me about New York as a crucible of self-expression in all its forms.

Broadway grows and stays relevant when it listens to the culture outside. It has the power to introduce new audiences to forms of expression they knew nothing about, and to provide stages for performers who deserve the spotlight. Jazz, hip-hop, mambo — all these forms have found their way to the midtown stage.

But that journey is rarely smooth and rarely fast, and the terms on which it happens matter enormously. Broadway also has the responsibility to recognize the creators and innovators of those forms — and too often the industry has borrowed from underrepresented communities and neglected to credit the source.

I'm pleased to see "Cats: The Jellie Ball" bringing the architects of ballroom into the room itself — whether it's Leiomys Maldonado, who helped define the modern vocabulary of voguing, or Junior LaBeija, a legend in ballroom culture, or Chastity Moore, who steps into the role of Grizabella that I played more than 40 years ago. When Grizabella made her first appearance onstage, I felt protective of the character. I needn't have. As her journey in the show unfolded, Ms. Moore brought a beautiful, dynamic and resilient Grizabella to life.

The more I sit with the show, the more inevitable the connection between ballroom and Broadway seems. "Cats" has always been a ballroom: Distinct personalities enter the floor, presenting their style and story, and a community watches to see who commands the room. This new production doesn't impose anything foreign onto the musical. For me, it illuminates what was always there.

I've also spent a long time with the song "Memory." I sang it at the Tony Awards in 1983, and I sang it at The Saint, a gay club in the East Village. At the song's core is a simple plea of longing to be seen, again — to be recognized and to be welcomed back into the circle. It is Grizabella, after all, who is chosen for the evening's highest honor at the ball. It is Grizabella, the pariah cat who was neglected, cast out and left to fade at the margins of society, who in the end, is truly seen and celebrated. She reclaims her dignity, earns her acceptance and takes center stage.

It's fitting to me that she be celebrated again at "Cats: The Jellie Ball." This time, performers long kept at the margins can step into the spotlight, not as ornament, but as a force reshaping the stage itself.

BETTY BUCKLEY has performed in, among other shows, "Sunset Boulevard," "Triumph of Love" and "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" on Broadway and in the films "Carrie" and "Tender Mercies." In the Broadway production of "Cats," she originated the role of Grizabella, for which she won the Tony Award for best featured actress in a musical in 1983.



A scene from "Cats: The Jellie Ball" on Broadway. This reimagined production combines the competitive dance form called "voguing" into the 1980s musical "Cats."

Trump needs smarter sycophants



Ross Douhat

Kristi Noem is gone. Pam Bondi is out. If there's going to be a fall guy for America's ill-starred regime-change operation in Iran, it's likely to be Pete Hegseth, whose prewar overconfidence is being highlighted in hostile leaks from inside the Trump administration, emphasizing how he was "caught off guard" (never a good look!) by the scale and boldness of the Iranian response.

The former secretary of homeland security, the jettisoned attorney general and the embattled secretary of defense have often seemed like President Trump's ideal cabinet officials: selected for television looks and energy, lacking any political constituency apart from Trump himself, serving without qualm as pure conduits of his will. So their struggles offer a lesson for Republicans contemplating service in this administration's 33 (but who's counting?) remaining months: What Trump appears to want and what he actually wants are not exactly the same thing.

The seeming desire of the president is for loyalty, sycophancy and TV-ready swagger. He wants to turn on Fox News and see his top officials performing like reality-show characters in the drama of his administration. He wants to sit in a cabinet meeting and listen to a litany of his accomplishments. He wants the decisions made in the West Wing or at Mar-a-Lago to be simply rubber-stamped in his departmental files.

He wants all that, but at the same time he also wants victory rather than defeat, and he deftly doesn't want embarrassment. His preferences for success are unusual by normal presidential standards: He has a high tolerance for unpopularity, to put it mildly, and a remarkable shamelessness around corruption. But there is a point at which, even inside his cocoon, Trump senses that things aren't going well for him. And then sycophancy doesn't work, and it doesn't matter if you were acting on his orders; you will be punished for that unsuccessful service just as surely as if you'd tried to thwart his aims.



HEGSETH WITH THE NEW YORK TIMES

That's the position Noem found herself in after the immigration enforcement debacle in Minneapolis. The fact that the sweeping crackdown in Tim Walz's state and Ilhan Omar's city was almost certainly what the president wanted earned the former South Dakota governor no political protection after it all went wrong.

Loyal losers don't go very far with this president.

It's also the position Bondi found herself in after doing the president's bidding with the Epstein files and various other politicized prosecutions. The unpopularity of the former and the courtroom losses of the latter transformed her from sycophant to scapegoat, even though at every step she was expressing Trump's own wishes.

Likewise, when Hegseth reportedly told the president "let's do it" in the run-up to the war, he was merely being an enthusiastic yes man for a bellicose boss. But there's no reward for being a loyalist if Trump's grand plans don't actually work out. In that case, you

own the failure, not him.

Contrast this pattern with that of the cabinet officials whose jobs seem reasonably safe, like Scott Bessent and Marco Rubio. They, too, go along with the president in public without complaint or caveat. But then they find ways to manage his preferences, whether in trade policy or Russia-Ukraine diplomacy, such that the results are Trumpy enough to satisfy the boss but aren't a blind expression of his whims. The fact that they have political capital while the pure sycophants fail implies that Trump's revealed preference is for a version of that balance, not the more slavish alternative.

What might a more successful balancing act have looked like for an attorney general, defense secretary or homeland security chief? For all the talk about how Bondi tried to do everything Trump asked, it might be that she didn't need to prosecute a string of the boss's perceived enemies to stay in his good graces; she just needed a clear lawfare victory somewhere.

Likewise, Hegseth, if he had the sense God gave a goose, could have

tried to steer Trump to a purely military campaign against Iran — bombs and missiles without the strikes that targeted its leaders — satisfying the president's hawkish impulse without putting the Iranian regime's back against the wall.

As for Noem, well, maybe her own self-dealing and limelight thirst would have doomed her anyway, but in a timeline where the Minneapolis operation was condensed to a few theatrical raids rather than a near-occupation of an American city, she might still be starring in homeland security infomercials.

These alternate scenarios are implausible, of course, because they envision hacks and yes women suddenly discovering a different set of capabilities. But if there is to be any improvement at all across the (did I mention this number yet?) 33 months of Trumpism ahead of us, it can only come from officials able to learn something from their failures and give the president a taste of what he wants, at a dose the country and the world find easier to take.

How the president can still win this conflict

BOLTON, FROM PAGE 1 address to the nation last week fundamentally changed that posture. But Mr. Trump cannot blithely declare victory if reality says otherwise. Even to try would shatter America's credibility.

The place for negotiation here is with Beijing, not Tehran. While Iran has allowed some Chinese ships to go through the strait, President Xi Jinping remains the customer with the most to lose if no Iranian oil leaves the Gulf, and Mr. Trump believes their personal relations are excellent. Mr. Trump should tell Mr. Xi to pressure the clerics to back off the strait, or China will not receive another barrel of oil from any Gulf state. (Thanks to decisions by this administration, when Iran's own oil transits the strait, it is earning income to wage war against U.S. service members. What sense does that make?) Sanctions should be restored against all Iranian oil sales to increase pressure on China and others, including Russia, to call for the end of this regime. This is the moment to act, with both the Saudis and the Emiratis effectively advocating regime change in Tehran. The chief negotiator with Mr. Xi should be the secretary of state, not the vice president or outside volunteers.

Mr. Trump should have found it comparatively easy to align the positions of the Persian Gulf Arab states in order to articulate to European and major Asian buyers of Gulf oil (such as India, Japan and South Korea) why this war is also their war. One way to minimize European irritation with Mr. Trump would be for them to hear directly from Gulf oil producers such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates about why their cooperation is critical, especially amid signs that these countries are urging Mr. Trump to push ahead with regime change in Iran.

While Mr. Trump makes clear that Beijing must pressure Iran to step aside to open Gulf traffic, he should also tell China and Russia to cease any assistance they are currently providing to the clerics. If they fail to respond, our support for Ukraine and Taiwan should increase, hard as that may be for Mr. Trump to swallow.

America's efforts to restore international maritime traffic — because no, the strait won't reopen naturally — must work in parallel with regime change. The oil-producing Arab states have long argued that destroying Iran's oil facilities, to name one threat that the United States has already made, would precipitate attacks on their own infrastructure. Since their assets are al-

ready under attack, Mr. Trump should urge that incapacitating Iran's oil facilities is the only sensible way forward, as he did in his address to the country last Wednesday. If the Arab states have an alternative, let's hear what they suggest.

Military efforts to destroy Tehran's mine-laying capabilities, its squadrons of drones, fast-attack boats and anti-ship missiles must accelerate as fast as logistically possible. There is no need to occupy Kharg Island. Far better instead to blockade the strait and allow no Iranian oil out until all Gulf oil can transit safely as well. If American combat forces entering the region can help open the strait by controlling territory on Iran's side, acknowledging the inevitable risks, that would be more sensible strategically.

There is surely more to do to "obliterate" — to use Mr. Trump's word — Iran's

and ballistic missile programs and heavy-water production program at Arak was hit only in late March, along with a uranium processing facility at Aradkan. Other priorities may well have been deemed more important, but the delay in reaching these critical facilities shows just how much effort is required to destroy what is indisputably Iran's biggest threat, its nuclear program.

Every additional munition falling on Iran underscores that the regime cannot defend itself. As this reality grows ever clearer in the minds of Iran's citizens, so, too, does the inevitable conclusion that the regime's days are numbered.

America's strength and leverage over events in Iran are growing, not diminishing, and that strongly argues for maintaining a strategic perspective rather than responding to oscillating economic or political pressures, notwithstanding the loss of two American planes on Friday. Mr. Trump should continue destroying Iran's instruments of state power, primarily the Revolutionary Guards Corps and its subsidiaries that threaten America and its allies (the Quds Force) and the Iranian people (the Basij militias).

Rather than preparing for a huge "final blow" exit, America should not create any more self-imposed deadlines but should instead pursue more targets at a rate of our choosing, espe-



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ANDRÉS CUCIARINI. SOURCE IMAGES BY RUSSAN MADRIDOV, SAUL LOEBER/INTERMAGNET, ROBERTO SCHREIBER/RETNA/GETTY IMAGES AND CHALERSANG VALDETH/REUTERS

cially searching for nuclear manufacturing sites and storage facilities we have missed to date. Organizing military attacks are the best way to continue to thoroughly destabilize the regime, allowing Iran's opposition and potential defectors to exploit its crumbling authority and, with persistence and some luck, eventually collapse it. Removing Iran's enriched uranium, and removing or destroying critical equipment and other elements of its nuclear weapons program, will be necessary at some point, but not immediately, given current circumstances.

We cannot make regime change happen on our own. U.S. assistance to Iran's opposition is even more crucial now than before. The clerics' rule is enormously unpopular, but the opposition is not well organized. Iran's economic situation is grim. Its young people know they can have a different way of life, and yearn for it. Sparked by the killing of Mahsa Amini over three years ago, Iran's women have been defying the clerics' dress codes, rejecting the very foundations of the regime's legitimacy, the claim of the clerics to speak of the word of God. Iran's ethnic groups (Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, Arabs and others) deeply oppose

the Tehran regime, seeking autonomy or independence.

One way for Mr. Trump to dramatize efforts to aid Iran's people would be to name a special representative to the resistance, one who would signal U.S. resolve against the clerics, as President George H.W. Bush did in 1989 when he named Peter Tomsen the special envoy to Afghanistan with the rank of ambassador, backing Afghan rebels.

Arming, financing and helping to organize the opposition would empower Iranians to have a more forceful role in their future. Washington need not favor a particular opposition faction or individual. Who rules in Iran after the clerics depart should be determined then, not now.

These suggestions may be difficult for Mr. Trump and some of his supporters to swallow. But they come from the need for the United States to secure a strategically critical success in the Gulf — not another humiliating retreat in an increasingly dangerous world. Mr. Trump started the job; now he needs to finish it.

JOHN R. BOLTON was the longest-serving national security adviser in the first Trump administration.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES
"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

Britain needs a plan to invest in defence

Repeated delays are worrying partners and risk losing key technologies

The Iran war has brutally exposed Britain's lack of military readiness and shortage of defence assets, with its navy unable to immediately deploy an advanced warship even after a UK air base on Cyprus was targeted by drones. Donald Trump's jibe that "you don't even have a navy" was unfair, but hit home. Now, as the FT has reported, Britain risks losing cutting-edge defence technology amid delays in publishing the government's 10-year defence investment plan (DIP).

The root of the problem is the failure to find sufficient funds for military modernisation after years of underinvestment. Sir Keir Starmer's government is committed to lifting spending on defence and intelligence to 2.6 per cent of GDP from 2027. But it has only a

vaque "ambition" to raise it to 5 per cent in the next parliament, and to the 3.5 per cent Nato target by 2035.

The UK is spending a lot more on modernising its nuclear deterrent – made even more vital to Britain and Nato by the uncertainty over Trump's commitment to the US nuclear "umbrella". But the alliance estimates UK spending, including nuclear, was just 2.31 per cent of GDP in 2025, below the Nato average.

The squeezed public finances inherited by Labour require agonising trade-offs. Yet despite major wars in Iran and Ukraine, the government has failed to make the necessary case for rearmament, even as it struggles to rein in spiralling expenditures elsewhere. Funding shortfalls may be partly why publication of the DIP, initially expected last autumn to flesh out how Britain would meet goals set by a major defence review, keeps being pushed back.

The Ministry of Defence has rightly also focused on the need to cut delays

and cost overruns in weapons procurement. The rapid evolution of combat and technology makes it vital to get future planning right. But the delay is having knock-on effects – including raising doubts about the UK among key partners. Japan is fretting over Britain's commitment to a three-way next-generation fighter project with Italy that aims to challenge US dominance in military technology. Separately, Italy's Leonardo warned it would reconsider investments in the UK if the government did not proceed with a K16 battlefield helicopter contract, until the Treasury issued a last-minute approval days before the defence group's bid was set to expire in February.

While Starmer last month denied the stalled DIP was holding up defence contracts, FT reporting suggests that the UK is in danger of losing out on vital technology – some of which was developed in Britain or with British support. Executives say some promising start-ups are considering relocating to the US,

Executives say some promising start-ups are considering relocating to the US, Germany or elsewhere, while others could run out of funding

Germany or elsewhere, while others are at risk of running out of funding.

While long-established defence contractors can withstand delays, promising young companies may struggle to secure the next round of funding without contracts in place. But these companies provide the pioneering AI and drone technologies needed for modern warfare. City financiers say pension funds and insurers are primed to invest in modernising defence but need "demand signals" from government.

Labour has pledged to support ordinary working people, but keeping citizens safe is the first duty of any government. It needs to be more honest with the public about the choices the UK faces – a huge gap remains between its defence rhetoric and reality – and to continue to look for ways to raise defence spending more rapidly. But to avoid losing the confidence of allies and defence groups alike, it needs to come up rapidly with a credible and coherent policy to invest what funds it has.

Opinion Energy

The UK is turning the fuel crisis into a political mess



As a result of Donald Trump's ill-conceived war in Iran, there is less energy to go around than there was a month ago. I know that is, or at least should be, a statement of the obvious, but as I look around at various democracies across the world, it clearly bears repeating. Iran's blocking of the Strait of Hormuz means that less oil and liquefied natural gas is being transported – and therefore, surprise, surprise, there is more demand for what is being transported. We do not, despite what Sir Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves claim, have a problem with "profiteering" driving up energy costs in the UK. We have a problem because around the world everyone is bidding more for curtailed amounts of energy.

To the extent that there is profiteering, it is profit-seeking that benefits

We do not, despite the rhetoric, have a problem with 'profiteering' driving up costs

countries like the UK, who are paying more to secure supplies that would, before the war, have gone to poorer countries. The energy companies "profiteer" to London's benefit and Labour's cost.

In addition to the fact it is witless in policy terms to castigate companies in this way, Starmer and Reeves have been witless in political terms by offering opposition parties a free hit, enabling them to write even bigger blank cheques using the same rhetoric. The Greens have argued for a broad and indefinite subsidy to household energy bills, funded by, you guessed it, profiteering, while the Conservatives want businesses, particularly green ones, to take the hit.

But at least, thus far, the British government's response is only to say stupid things about the crisis. Other governments, such as that of Anthony Albanese in Australia or Micheál Martin in Ireland, are actively cutting taxes on fuel.

the limited aim of protecting life's genuine necessities and building further resilience into the energy supply. It should stop the poor from going to the wall and encourage the rest of us to install heat pumps and solar panels. The last thing the state should be doing is spending money to make us think that nothing bad has happened and that the war in Iran has little effect on the rest of the world.

What's going wrong? We should worry that so few politicians in the UK and other democracies are willing or able to articulate a defence of the best method yet devised for allocating scarce resources – free markets and consumer choices. Not to mention the best method yet devised for protecting the losers from that process – cash transfers to the poorest and most vulnerable. Instead they want to reach for approaches that already we know don't work. Some mainstream politicians may be reluctant to argue for market mechanisms because they don't believe in them. But the other reason, more insidious and more dangerous because it is more widespread, is that arguing for market mechanisms to respond to the energy crisis is harder if you don't have the fiscal firepower, the political capital or both to compensate the most vulnerable losers.

When market mechanisms mean that I have to put on a jumper or change my leisure plans, that is one thing. When they mean someone else has to experience real hardship, that is much harder to defend. If you can compensate the hard hit through cash transfers, you are better paid to tell me to suck it up and buy a caridigan.

But rejecting market mechanisms makes it harder to afford cash transfers: the alternative, spending money to blunt the market mechanism through capping costs to consumers, results in less efficient and dynamic economies, means less tax revenue, which means less money for cash transfers, which makes it politically harder to argue for free markets. The result is a vicious cycle of bad economics meaning less generous social policies.

The mess so many politicians are making for themselves over the energy crisis echoes a broader one across a whole set of subjects: much of the Labour government's malaise is a spiral of bad economics leading to bad social policies leading to worse economics. The inability to talk plainly and respond sensibly to the energy crisis is a big problem on its own terms. As a symptom of a crisis where our economies are not strong enough to afford to compensate the losers and as a result states are less and less able to let markets do their thing, it is even more alarming.

stephen.bush@ft.com

Letters

Small island states want a say in new world trade architecture

Maroš Šefčovič, the EU trade commissioner, is right that the World Trade Organization faces a crisis of relevance ("WTO risks sliding into irrelevance, EU trade commissioner warns", Interview, March 26). But the reform debate at the WTO ministerial conference at Yaoundé was, once again, a conversation among the powerful about rules they wrote for themselves.

From Mauritius' viewpoint, and that of the 38 other small island developing states, the WTO's dysfunction looks rather different. Our concern is not the Appellate Body deadlock, nor the

bilateral deal architecture that 'Washington is assembling to replace multilateralism. Our concern is more fundamental: the dispute settlement system, even when functional, has never been usable by states of our size. A trade sanction imposed by Mauritius against a major economy is economically infeasible. The legal right exists; the practical leverage does not.

Meanwhile, the preferential access schemes that were supposed to compensate for our structural disadvantage have delivered almost nothing measurable. Least developed

countries, many of them small island states, accounted for just 1.1 per cent of world exports in 2024, barely above their 2010 share, despite decades of special and differential trade provisions. The gap between the rules on paper and the development outcomes is an indictment of the pre-crisis system.

WTO reform that restores the Appellate Body and re-establishes most-favoured-nation status will matter enormously to Brussels, Washington and Beijing. It will matter almost nothing to Port Louis, Suva or

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Bridgetown unless it also addresses asymmetric enforcement capacity, the barriers to dispute mechanisms and the systematic exclusion of small economies from the bilateral deal architecture now being assembled in the WTO's shadow.

"Relevance", Commissioner Šefčovič, must mean relevant to all 166 members, not just the ones with the leverage to demand it.

Zaheer Allam
Climate and urban policy adviser;
Director, The Climate Transitions Centre,
Hermitage, Mauritius

Tracing the origins of Jobs' obsession with quality

As a former engineer who worked at a large Soviet-era industrial enterprise, I remember that Japanese quality was presented to us primarily through the prism of "national character" – psychology, discipline, group orientation and Confucian ethics often distilled into the notions of *kodowari* (pursuit of perfection) and *hikigai* (reason for being).

That's why Patrick McGee's Big Read article "Apple at 50: the roots of a tech revolution", describing how a little-known yet highly influential management course in postwar Japan paved the way for Steve Jobs' obsession with quality (April 1), is so illuminating. It shows that Japan's quality revolution lay not in some timeless cultural essence but in a postwar transformation of management and production, influenced to a considerable extent by American experts. It even suggests that certain features of traditional Japanese culture initially hindered, rather than helped, the adoption of this new philosophy of quality.



BANX

The broader lesson is clear: quality does not emerge from national mythology, Japan triumphed because it built quality into the structure of industrial life.

Armen Martirosyan
Ambassador (retired),
Yerevan, Armenia

What explains parents' vaccine hesitancy

In the Big Read article on public health in the UK ("The grim legacy of Covid", FT Weekend, March 21), you quote Greg Fell, president of the UK's Association of Directors of Public Health, suggesting that the decline in uptake between children receiving first and second measles, mumps and rubella vaccines can't be due to hesitancy. If it were, why were the children brought in for the vaccination in the first place?

My suggestion, based on 30 years as an osteopath working with mothers, fathers and babies, is that parents already feel conflicted between having or not having the child vaccinated; feeling fearful of not vaccinating but guilt at subjecting the children to risk. It's already an emotional minefield, but the parents bring the baby for the first vaccination partly to ease their consciences.

Then the baby cries as injected and, soon after, has a temperature, is unsettled and sleeps poorly that night. A normal evening vaccine response, but for the parents I feel it's a tipping

point. The first hurdle has been cleared, the results seen, but now there's less guilt about not doing the subsequent ones.

Feeling responsible for your baby crying and feeling poorly initiates a parent's natural desire to protect.

This is the moment of hesitancy and I'm not sure even being phoned by the doctor's surgery would change the parents' mind.

Mary Bolingbroke
Practising Osteopath, Bradford-on-Avon,
Wiltshire, UK

If museums are to charge foreigners...

If it has seemed inevitable that London museums would charge foreign visitors to visit ("Foreign tourists face entry fee to museums", Report, March 27; and "Free museum entry is the mark of a civilised city – and one of the best things about London", Arts, March 31), perhaps those foreigners should now invoice the museums for the cultural artefacts that were stolen during colonial times?

Gabriel Dubschek
Melbourne, Australia

OUTLOOK
WARSAW

Does 'Wymysorys' threaten Poland's national identity?



by Raphael Minder

In a small town in southern Poland, an audience recently gathered to watch a slapstick comedy performed in a language that has barely 30 active speakers.

Cug of Win (A Train to Vienna) was entirely in Wymysorys, which blends the hissing Slavic consonants of Polish with the rounded vowels of German and a few guttural tones reminiscent of Dutch. Most of the audience followed the performance via Polish subtitles projected above the stage.

Set at the start of the 20th century, the play tells the story of a journey shared by two families divided by wealth but united by language. Its playwright, Michał Walach, began learning Wymysorys after marrying a woman from Wilanowice, where it is rooted. He said he wrote the comedy "to show this language is not only alive but also fun".

In political circles, however, efforts to revive Wymysorys have been considerably less fun. They have become entangled in Poland's increasingly polarised debate over whether cultural diversity is compatible with a strong national identity.

Last October, President Karol Nawrocki, a nominee of the rightwing opposition Law and Justice (PiS) party, vetoed a law promoted by the pro-EU government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk that would have recognised Wymysorys as a regional

language. Nawrocki has since also struck down a similar bill created to protect Silesian, a more widely spoken minority language used by about 500,000 people.

"It's ironic that our president, who presents himself as a strong anti-communist, is now showing the same fears about diversity as the old communists," said Walach. Wymysorys traces its origins to settlers who arrived in the 13th century from the borderlands of present-day Germany and the Netherlands and formed a distinct community. It was spoken until the second world war, after which communist authorities banned it as part of an effort to impose cultural uniformity.

The language is not officially taught in schools and is only displayed on private premises, such as in the local museum whose bathroom doors are marked "der sympa" in Wymysorys alongside "toiletta" in Polish.

Formal recognition would allow the language's promoters to access public funding and install bilingual street signs.

In explaining his veto, Nawrocki argued that research was inconclusive as to whether Wymysorys qualified as a separate language or an "ethnolect", a variety of language associated with a particular ethnic group. A language had to be based on more than symbolic or political arguments, his critics said.

But the small group of academics

interested in Wymysorys's future say it has already been a unique success in terms of language revival. Last year the first Wymysorys dictionary was published.

Tymoteusz Król, who runs weekly language classes at the local museum and is a lecturer at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, says young people in particular seem keen to learn it. "Most of my students are young, which shows that we are managing very well a generational transfer, even against the wishes of our president, who sees diversity as something unwelcome for Poland."

Karolina Ostrozycska, a 27-year-old employee of the museum, agrees. "For many young people, being cool is also about having something different, so being able to share a language with your friends gives you a special sense of identity."

Król also runs online lessons for students like Małgorzata Zejma, an undergraduate in Kraków who enrolled remotely so she could learn the language spoken by her grandfather.

It was also an act of defiance. "I feel the real history of Poland doesn't align at all with the current political and nationalist narrative about our country being unified by one common culture," Zejma says. "I want to learn it to stay in touch with my inheritance."

raphael.minder@ft.com

Opinion

How Europe made Orbán

Sylvie Kauffmann

In her memoir *Freedom*, Germany's former chancellor Angela Merkel recalls her excitement as she took her seat in Rio de Janeiro in 2014 to watch the World Cup final between Germany and Argentina. Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, happened to be sitting in front of her. A huge football fan, he taunted her: "One thing is clear. Here, you cannot be sure that you will win."

Germany won 1-0. But for Merkel, beating Orbán at his own game back in Europe would prove more challenging. That same year, Orbán coined the expression "illiberal democracy", which would define his fight against the EU's established political order.

Orbán faces his most serious electoral challenge on April 12 – so serious that Donald Trump is sending his vice-president JD Vance to the rescue. In Brussels,

Berlin and Paris, some may find it useful to look back at Orbán's tumultuous 16 years in power and wonder how so much damage to European cohesion was allowed to be done. Until the last moment, the Hungarian leader has defied the EU, vetoing a vital €90bn loan to Ukraine. His foreign minister Péter Szijjártó admitted co-ordinating with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, on sanctions targeting Moscow.

Building an illiberal democracy in the heart of Europe started with taking advantage of the generous EU budget while relentlessly attacking what were viewed as Brussels' infringements on Hungary's sovereignty. EU cohesion funds financed more than half of the country's public investments, accounting for an average of over 3 per cent of Hungary's GDP for more than a decade. Meanwhile Orbán's associates have scooped up public contracts.

Germany soon became Hungary's dominant partner. Orbán wanted to industrialise his economy. Audi, BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Opel were happy to oblige, attracted by cheap labour and state subsidies.

Visiting Budapest in 2015, Merkel tried to lecture Orbán on the role of a democratic opposition; he replied by revelling in the 500,000 jobs created by German companies and the record exports to her country: "All I can say is the chancellor is: thank you, Germany!" Just as her dislike of Vladimir Putin did not prevent Merkel from increasing Germany's dependency on Russian gas

Building an illiberal democracy started with taking advantage of the bloc's generous budget

for the sake of German industry, she could not ignore the benefits that Hungary brought to her country's economy.

The two leaders soon found themselves at loggerheads. Later in 2015, when hundreds of thousands of Syrian and Afghan refugees tried to cross Hungary to reach Germany, Orbán built a fence on his border but Merkel welcomed them with open arms. That

episode was a turning point in the rise of populist movements in Europe. An official who sat through a European summit in September 2015 told me how leaders from central Europe and Donald Tusk, then president of the European Council, pleaded in vain with both Merkel and Jean-Claude Juncker, then the Commission president, not to impose refugee quotas on member states.

Western Europe's leaders completely misread the shock of the refugee crisis on post-communist societies unprepared for multi-ethnic immigration. Their uncompromising stance contributed to the victory of the Polish nationalist-populist party PiS and strengthened Orbán's status as leader of the illiberal camp.

He had another advantage, skillfully used: the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) group in the European parliament. It included his own party, Fidesz, as well as the CDU and its Bavarian sister CSU. The EPP hypocritically provided crucial protection to Orbán until 2019 when it finally suspended Fidesz – not expelled, though,

because it still needed its Hungarian members to vote in Ursula von der Leyen as Commission president with a razor-thin majority. Fidesz eventually left the group in 2021, but benefited from its complacency for two decades.

France's President Emmanuel Macron believed he could charm Orbán into more reasonable positions. Both fond of history, they had long, one-on-one intellectual conversations around the Elysee dinner table. That did not sway the Hungarian rebel either.

In the end, the EU's major mistake, says Clément Beaune, Macron's former European adviser, was to believe that member states, particularly those from central Europe, would inevitably follow the path of liberal democracy. "We did not anticipate what happened, so we don't have the tools," he notes. One answer could be to abandon the unanimity rule on foreign policy decisions. But, adds Beaune, "France and Germany always opposed the idea, because they thought it protected them. In fact, it protected Orbán."

The writer is a columnist at *Le Monde*

Future trade will depend on the Strait of Hormuz

Badr Jafar

The world's analysts have spent the past month mapping what the Strait of Hormuz crisis is breaking: disrupted shipping routes, surging insurance premiums and oil price volatility. But inside the region a different story is unfolding – one that will outlast whatever ceasefire or escalation comes next. A 50-year-old trade and infrastructure model is being redrawn in weeks.

I have spent the past month in discussions with hundreds of business leaders and senior Gulf government officials on the crisis and what comes after it. The conversation has already shifted – from managing the immediate crisis to redesigning the systems that created this vulnerability in the first place.

The scale of that vulnerability is staggering. Thirty per cent of global seaborne oil flows and a fifth of the world's liquefied natural gas trade normally transit a waterway that is 21 nautical miles wide. A third of seaborne traded fertiliser and nearly half the world's seaborne sulphur exports depend on the same passage, with direct implications for global food security. So do significant volumes of aluminium and helium – the latter essential to semiconductor manufacturing and the global AI supply chain. The concentration of so much global commerce through a single contested corridor is an anomaly the world has tolerated for decades. That tolerance has now ended.

Those investing in post-Hormuz resilience are constructing the trade infrastructure of the future. Saudi Arabia's Red Sea ports and expanded pipeline

This war is doing what years of summitry could not – creating genuine intraregional integration

capacity offer an alternative energy corridor. The UAE's east coast provides deep-water ports and pipeline routes connecting Gulf producers to the Indian Ocean. Oman's developments at Duqm and Sohar sit well outside the choke point. Goods and energy are already moving along these routes – in some cases through cross-border land bridge arrangements that would have seemed improbable just months ago.

The Middle East also holds a largely untapped inheritance: pipeline infrastructure built in previous crises and mothballed for decades, road and rail corridors, cross-border electricity grids and water systems that stretch beyond established networks. With renewed co-operation, these assets could deepen regional connectivity to global markets. The crisis is doing what years of summitry could not – creating the conditions for genuine intraregional economic integration. States whose ties were strained only weeks ago are now finding common cause.

Rerouting essential commerce away from a single chokepoint de-risks not only the economies of the region but global supply chains. For Europe, Asia, and Africa, this means fewer supply shocks and more reliable access to critical resources. For investors and private-sector infrastructure developers, it represents a generational opportunity to help build the corridors that will carry the next half-century of global trade.

The multinationals operating in the Gulf see this clearly and are positioning for what comes next. For many, the concern is not only the current disruption; it is whether they will be well placed to participate in the build-out.

As we in the UAE know to our cost, having lived through strikes on our soil, none of this should be seen through rose-tinted lenses. The vulnerabilities are immediate and geopolitical uncertainty remains a source of deep anxiety. But the region's direction of travel is now locked in, and it will not reverse.

However the current crisis is resolved, no government will return to a posture of strategic dependence on a narrow strait controlled by an unpredictable neighbour. The pipelines will be expanded. The port capacity will be built. The power grids, water systems and trade corridors connecting the region's economies will be formalised.

The world is watching what is being destroyed. It should pay equal attention to what is being built.

The writer is the UAE's special envoy for business and philanthropy

Trump hastens Britain's return to the EU

WORLD AFFAIRS
Gideon Rachman



Last week, Donald Trump and Sir Keir Starmer both gave big speeches to the nation. Trump's effort reminded me of Macbeth's verdict on life: "A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing." Starmer's felt more like a tale told by a lawyer, empty of drama or panache – but quietly significant.

The prime minister's address was the most pro-European speech that he has given since winning power. Starmer spoke of the need to be bolder in building a partnership with the EU "for the dangerous world that we must navigate together". There is an ambitious vision lurking behind those words. Future historians may look back on his speech as a crucial step down the long and winding path that will eventually lead Britain back into the EU.

Trump has done a lot to create the conditions for Britain to draw closer to the EU. The US president's erratic and abusive behaviour towards the UK – imposing tariffs, insulting the British armed forces, courting Russia – has alienated the British public and woken up the country's governing class. A YouGov poll last week showed that just

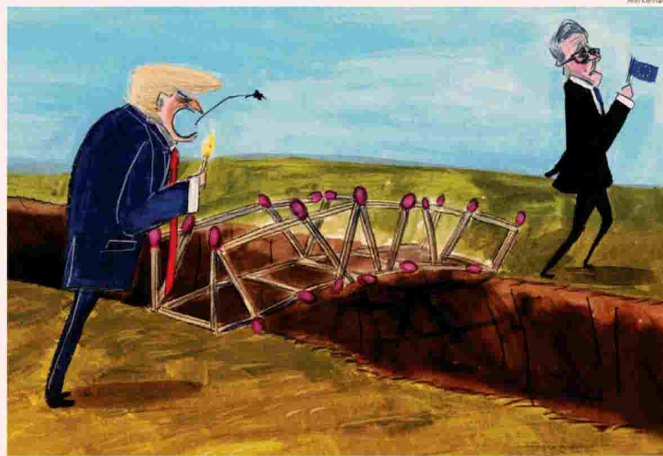
14 per cent of British people believed Britain and the US had a "special relationship" and only 18 per cent wanted to be closer to America. By contrast, 57 per cent wanted to get closer to the EU.

Economics, geopolitics and domestic politics now all point the Starmer government towards Brussels and away from Washington.

In his speech, the prime minister openly acknowledged that "Brexit did deep damage to our economy". America's non-partisan National Bureau of Economic Research recently estimated that it had cumulatively cost the UK up to 8 per cent of GDP. Supporters of Brexit dispute these figures. But they are lessixing the argument with the British public. A large majority now believe that it was a mistake to leave the EU.

Despite his warmer rhetoric towards the EU, Starmer's formal position remains cautious. He has ruled out rejoining the customs union or single market – let alone the EU itself. Some of his colleagues publicly favour the customs union. But, in private, senior figures in the government acknowledge that a customs union alone would not provide a significant gain to the economy. They believe that the ultimate goal has to be the boost to trade and investment that would come with rejoining the EU single market – and ultimately the EU itself.

The strategic case for getting much closer to the EU also strengthens by the day. Russia continues to wage a bloody war on Ukraine. But Trump is speaking openly about leaving Nato and had deni-



grated his European allies, including Britain, as "cowards".

The British know that – if and when America pulls back from Europe – only a collective European effort can continue to deter Russia. The UK would rely heavily on the troop numbers and manufacturing capacities of EU nations like Finland, Poland, Germany and France. The Europeans will also look to Britain. UK armed forces are in an alarmingly threadbare state. But Britain still has industrial and military capacities vital to collective European defence.

It is perfectly possible for Britain and other European nations to co-operate on security outside the EU framework. But UK membership would make it easier – as well as allowing Britain to access the billions of euros that the

Economics, geopolitics and domestic politics all point the Starmer government towards Brussels

EU is mobilising to spend on defence. Until recently, Starmer has been extremely tentative about making the case for Europe because he feared alienating pro-Brexit voters in the "red wall" of former Labour strongholds.

But the domestic politics have changed since the election. Labour is now trailing Reform in the polls. However, Reform and its leader, Nigel Farage, are closely associated with two things that are increasingly unpopular in the UK – the Trump administration and Brexit. As an election draws closer, it would make obvious sense for Labour to hang both around Farage's neck.

If Starmer is truly bold he would go into the next election advocating not just a closer partnership with Europe but rejoining the EU. That would give Labour something that it currently sorely lacks – a bold and positive agenda for the future. Rejoining the EU already commands majority support in Britain and is particularly popular among the young voters that Labour is losing to the Greens.

Of course, in reality, getting back in

would be no simple matter. Britain would probably have to commit to joining the euro and would not get a full restoration of the budget rebate originally negotiated by Margaret Thatcher. Initial public enthusiasm for rejoining the EU might swiftly erode when confronted with those realities.

The EU itself would also legitimately hesitate about even starting the process of negotiating a British re-entry, until it was backed by a clear national consensus in the UK. Having gone through Brexit once, there is zero appetite in Brussels, Berlin or Paris to repeat the exercise.

For that reason, Starmer is right to treat this as a step-by-step process for now. Trust needs to be rebuilt on both sides of the Channel and concrete benefits need to be demonstrated to encourage further progress.

But this cannot be too leisurely a process. Events are moving fast. Neither Britain nor Europe has decades to get it right.

gideon.rachman@ft.com

TECHNOLOGY
Elaine Moore



The internet is so vast and all-consuming that it's easy to forget how fragile it can be. Do something embarrassing online and there's a good chance it will live there forever, shared without your consent. But not everything that's posted is permanent. The last big study of web pages found that over a third available in 2013 were now inaccessible – leaving a trail of "link rot" in their wake.

Maybe you think this is a good thing. If you've ever scrolled back far enough to see your very first Facebook status update you'll probably wish that link was broken. Right now there's a trend for AI-generated videos of *Love Island* starting cartoon fruit that regularly get millions of views. Do digital bananas in

Hawaiian shirts chatting up pineapples need to be saved for posterity? Probably not. But disentangling what will and will not matter to our collective cultural memory is proving difficult.

Efforts to save absolutely everything haven't gone very well. There's too much and a lot of it is nonsense. In 2010, the Library of Congress took the view that Twitter was a crucial source of modern history and decided to archive every single tweet. It "may prove to be one of this generation's most significant legacies to future generations", the library wrote. That "may" seems over-optimistic. To most people, the repository is both unwieldy and uninteresting. As of 2017 the library seems to agree. It now opts to save just a few select posts.

The risk in being selective, of course, is missing something important. Dutch consultant Maurice de Kunder has been following the number of web pages indexed by search engines for over a decade and found that it has fallen from 4.7bn to 3.98bn.

Some deletions are more deliberate than others. Last year, Elon Musk's "Department of Government Efficiency"

launched a project to eliminate up to 20 per cent of US federal websites. Particular words, such as climate change, also evaporated. A couple of months later, large companies began rewriting their own sites to also remove references to climate change. The only reason we know this is because third parties were keeping track – the organisations themselves did not flag changes.

Because online content is regularly overwritten, what the historian Abby Smith Rumsey calls modern memory technology has a significantly shorter lifespan than pre-digital versions. There is neither a single record of everything posted online nor an agreed-upon way to save it. This has become more noticeable with the death of digital publications. You can see newspaper

Do digital bananas in Hawaiian shirts chatting up pineapples need to be saved? Probably not

editions printed in 1665, the year the Great Plague of London began, but you can no longer visit a modern news site like Wales' *The National*, which launched in 2021 and was then taken offline. Some sites, like Gawker, have been archived while others have disappeared into 404 errors (the status code that indicates a server can't find a webpage).

A few have entered into a strange afterlife. When cult site *The Hairpin* was shut down in 2018, its domain was purchased by a Serbian entrepreneur called Nebojša Vujanović, who specialises in buying old news sites and filling them with AI-generated clickbait. Now it just redirects readers to an online gambling site.

Despite relying heavily on digital data, we have left its preservation to a mishmash of individual efforts. The best known is the Wayback Machine, an initiative from the American non-profit Internet Archive. This takes snapshots of websites (it has preserved over 1tn so far) but it doesn't have everything. Copyright owners can seek content removal and some sites have begun to blacklist

the Wayback Machine, suspecting that AI companies are using it as a way to scrape content without permission. A report by the Nieman Lab found that the volume of snapshots dipped in the second half of 2025.

A second popular option is archive.today, a mysterious site operating under multiple domain names. How long it will last is anyone's guess. Last year the FBI subpoenaed the unknown registrar behind it and Wikipedia recently asked editors to stop linking to it "due to concerns about botnets, link-spamming, and how the site is run".

There is, of course, a sort of immortality in the fact that much of what exists online has been used to train AI models. But this isn't much help if you want to trace something's original form. Even online snapshots of web pages may prove less durable than physical archives.

We treat the internet as if it is limitless and permanent, but transience is inbuilt. If you see something online worth saving, you'd better do it yourself.

elaine.moore@ft.com

The internet is deciding what to forget

OPINION

Voters Still Want Normalcy



EDITOR AT LARGE
By Gerard Baker

There's a strange dynamic at work in American politics. In volatile times, the message of the last two presidential elections seems to be that voters are yearning for someone to restore a measure of normalcy to national life. Partisans on both sides always think the moment is ripe for radicalism. But voters in the middle seem to want normal.

They want leaders who will keep the country safe, protect its borders, manage the economy evenly, avoid dangerous and unnecessary messes abroad, and demonstrate that they understand things like the difference between a man and a woman. Is that so hard?

Apparently it is. Americans keep voting for normal and getting something else.

Joe Biden won in 2020 because after a turbulent year in which the nation seemed to be having a collective nervous breakdown amid a real national emergency (Covid) and a manufactured one (Black Lives Matter), voters wanted reassuring, dull ordinariness. Americans thought the unthreatening old man who had done essentially nothing in a 50-year political career might at least not do stupid stuff, to paraphrase his Democratic predecessor.

Instead they got a president out of a radical Hollywood

screenwriter's fever dream. Open borders, fiscal profligacy, an inflationary surge, a disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, and endless lectures on how there was no such thing as women or men. All that and a man whose cognitive faculties were far from normal.

No, no, no, Americans said again in 2024. That's not what we wanted. This time Donald Trump was the more normal one. He would secure our borders, get prices under control, avoid unnecessary foreign entanglements and assert common-sense ideas about sex.

So far, it's worked out well on immigration and sex, although neither the method of implementation nor the president's affect has been normal. But how are inflation and foreign entanglements working out for you?

No surprise then, that Mr. Trump's approval rating is almost exactly where President Biden's was.

Now would think there's a lesson here for Democrats. The party seems set for big gains in the midterm elections, a result that would set them up well for the next presidential cycle. But have they learned the lesson? Are they ready to be normal? The signs aren't encouraging.

It's hard to read too much into the party's performance in elections over the last year. They have won pretty much everywhere with a wide range of candidates—in special elections and regular elections in deep red territory and in more contested geographies, run-

ning candidates of the far left and the center-left.

Hard core, left-wing Democrats with self-proclaimed Democratic socialist Zohran Mammadani in the New York mayoral race and Anallia Mejia in a New Jersey tripartite primary have triumphed. Candidates with a broader appeal have prevailed in purple or purple-tilt states; such as the governors races in Virginia and New

Biden and Trump both failed to deliver it. Will Democrats do any better in 2026?

Jersey. So have heterodox types like James Taralico, the Bible-quoting left-wing populist who won the U.S. Senate nomination from Texas.

These offer few clues as to which of the party's wings is in the ascendant. But there is some clearer evidence from polling data, and it's not encouraging for those who think a dose of normal is on the way. A new comprehensive survey this week by the research group Focaldata digs deep into the attitudes of thousands of voters likely to take part in the Democratic primaries.

Headline figures for favored candidates in the 2028 presidential primary can probably be discounted on grounds that they largely reflect name recognition of the party's familiar leading figures: Kamala Harris leads, followed by fellow Cali-

fornia Gov. Gavin Newsom.

But the more detailed survey data indicates that 43% of Democratic voters have moved leftward and kept going.

Asked if they think their party's main problem is that they have moved too far left on social and cultural issues or that they haven't been bold enough, 60% say the problem is insufficient boldness. On whether the party should soften its positions to win back voters it has lost, only 17% say yes. Twenty-nine percent want bolder policies; 15% favor a fundamentally new approach.

There is a clue as to what that "fundamentally new approach" might be. By 57% to 13%, Democratic voters say they approve of "democratic socialism, with private enterprise, alongside strong public services and worker protection" as their preferred economic system.

There are predictably radical views on other topics: 43% say they want the U.S. to reduce its commitment and support for Israel while only 22% want to increase it. By large majorities, Democrats say they favor packing courts and abolishing the Senate filibuster.

We live in an age of radical politics, increasing polarization and a steady centrifugal momentum in both major parties. However much independent-minded voters may want normalcy from their leaders, Republicans and Democrats seem set on their own paths, each driven by a base that is ill at ease with the old, centripetal ways.

BOOKSHELF | By Meghan Cox Gurdon

The Pages Of Our Lives

Our Diaries, Ourselves

By Betsy Rubiner
Beacon, 272 pages, \$28.95

Not long ago, a woman stood at the sink and watched a year of her life run down the drain. Like countless diarists before her, including Samuel Pepys, Anaïs Nin, Beatrix Potter and David Sedaris, the woman had kept a record of her days with ink and paper. Like Queen Victoria, Zadie Smith and many others, she had concluded that posterity would be better served without her full diary than with it. As inky water rushed off the pages, the woman saw with satisfaction that her notebook, so lately crammed with reflections of personal specificity, was sufficiently sodden as to thwart the efforts of even the most determined forensic archaeologist, should such a person wish to go dumpster-diving in search of artifacts.

Betsy Rubiner is not our diary-destroyer. She is a diary-keeper so dedicated that she has been filling notebooks since she was 8 years old. In "Our Diaries, Ourselves," the Chicago-based journalist offers tidbits from her daybooks while exploring the history, practices and therapeutic promise of what she has come to call Diary-land. This realm is populated by diarists living and dead, those who read or study diaries, and those who buy, sell and preserve diaries.

"The diary's dalliance sets it apart in the self-writing sea," Ms. Rubiner observes. "While a memoir or formal autobiography aims to offer a retrospective story, the diary typically doesn't, or can't, because it is written from the middle of an unfolding life." Having said as much, she hastens to clarify that entries needn't be made daily for a diary to qualify; nor need the diarist use a physical notebook (some use video or apps); nor indeed need a diary contain personal reflections. The diaries of some consist of little more than, say, a dispassionate daily notation of the weather (my grandfather). The diaries of others (Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath) are rich, intimate and self-searching. Still others have charted terrible and turbulent periods of history, the most famous of these being the World War II writings of Anne Frank.

Ms. Rubiner's own entries, excerpted in "Our Diaries, Ourselves," trace the contours of her life, first as a girl who admires her father's tennis game, then as a young woman traveling abroad, then as an adult who becomes a professional writer as well as wife, mother and grandmother. In her diary, she notes 1973's "Tennis Battle of the Sexes" between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, 9/11 and the advent of Covid-19.

Ms. Rubiner makes a conspicuous effort to be judicious in her book, subtitled "How Diarists Chronicle Their Lives and Document Our World," but it is hard not to detect a note of grievance in the way that she writes about the association of diaries and "life writing" with women (feelings) and a corresponding association of journals or "autobiographical writing" with men (thoughts). It is a distinction to which feminists are apparently alive, though one that may not have occurred to readers who have enjoyed the inner accounts of C.S. Lewis or Charles Darwin. Indeed, sexual politics play a substantial role in "Our Diaries, Ourselves," which perhaps should not surprise anyone who recognizes the evocation, in the title, of the 1973 feminist work "Our Bodies, Ourselves."

The daily diary is distinct from a formal autobiography. It may recount turbulent times in history—but not retrospectively.

"Diary writing has long offered women a space to rebel against negative or limiting stereotypes," Ms. Rubiner notes at one point, later explaining that though focusing on "me-me" may intensify some psychological struggles, expressive writing can also be good for morale. Long-term benefits, we are told, include reduced anxiety, lower blood pressure and quicker healing. If those claims are true, oughtn't the grievance go the other way? If by chronicling their lives women and girls can improve their mental health, why wouldn't we want the same for men and boys? Are the perspectives of males not as valuable as those of females?

A similar query arises when the author comes to the vexed question of how, and if, a diarist's confidential work should be preserved. Ms. Rubiner has given it a lot of thought. Casting about for a long-term home for the (so far) 82 volumes of her life writing, she was delighted to discover the existence of numerous diary archives dedicated solely to preserving the words of women. After her death, the author plans to donate her diaries to one such repository in Iowa. (Is there in all our 50 states a single-sex diary archive for men? To ask the question is to answer it.)

Donation for posterity offers a paradoxical solution to two great problems associated with keeping a diary. The first is the dread of contemporaneous discovery, which is no problem if a donor arranges for his or her diary to be sealed until the people in it are dead. The second is the fear of hurting others with one's candid observations. "A diary is an assassin's cloak which we wear when we stab a comrade in the back with a pen," wrote William Soutar, a Scottish poet and diarist, in 1934.

Queen Victoria, who began her diary at 13 and kept it up for nearly seven decades, got around the difficulties posthumously by having her daughter Beatrice remove passages that might be painful to members of the royal family. Zadie Smith quit keeping a diary because the exercise made her feel phony and self-conscious. In 2015, she wrote: "I realize I don't want any record of my days." As for me, I washed my diary down the drain less to keep from hurting others than to protect my own privacy. Yet here I am telling you about it. The diaristic impulse dies hard, I guess.

Mrs. Gurdon is a Free Expression columnist at WSJ Opinion and the author of "The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction."

Pope Leo XIV Goes to War



MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

At the Easter Sunday celebration in the Vatican's St. Peter's Square, Pope Leo XIV delivered a bracing message about the war in Iran: "Let those who have the power to unleash wars choose peace!" he said. "Not a peace imposed by force, but through dialogue! Not with the desire to dominate others, but to encounter them! We are growing accustomed to violence, resigning ourselves to it and becoming indifferent. Indifference to the deaths of thousands of people."

The pontiff wrongly suggests that pacifism is the sole acceptable moral position.

Pope Leo didn't name names. He didn't have to. This was a shot at Donald Trump. In the abstract, the pope's words might apply to any number of leaders, including Ayatollah Mojtaba Kharrazi, the supreme leader of Iran. But the press are taking this as a shot against President Trump—and that is how it was meant.

It's a solemn development anytime America goes to war. For the enemy, war means de-

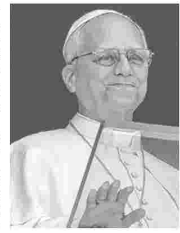
struction, the deaths of soldiers and, possibly, the tragic, unintended killing of innocents. So too for the U.S. The toll of this war is so far tiny compared with other wars, but the conflict has already claimed the lives of more than a dozen Americans.

Less obvious from the headlines, war causes soul-searching among our troops. The American in uniform must ask himself: Am I doing the right thing? Am I prosecuting the war honorably? When my test comes, will I do right by my fellow soldiers and the rules of war?

The Catholic Church has spoken on all these issues at least since St. Augustine. It's called the just-war tradition, and although it doesn't split out neat yes-or-no answers, it does point to the right questions.

Unfortunately, the public impression created over the past several decades is that pacifism is the only true Christian response to military conflict. And Pope Leo isn't the only leader to encourage this view. A few years back, in remarks that touched on the war in Ukraine, Pope Francis declared, "There is no such thing as a just war." Though he didn't go nearly as far, in early 2003, Pope St. John Paul II made clear he thought the U.S. war in Iraq was wrong.

The middle of Catholic teaching on war has been a long time in the making. Few churchmen will explicitly promote pacifism as the only proper Christian option. But



that is the effect. And the best answer to such pacifism is clarity.

"Christianity isn't a pacifist religion," says the Rev. Gerald Murray, a Catholic priest and commentator on EWTV. "Churchmen need to affirm that the legitimate use of force is virtuous. Protecting the innocent isn't simply the ideal we hope to attain, it is a clear duty."

If negotiation is the only way to solve conflicts, Pope Leo should send home the Swiss Guard and train negotiators to meet with anyone who shows up at Vatican City with a gun or a bomb. Right now, everyone is treated as a suspect by having to pass through metal detectors to get into St. Peter's.

In addition, pacifism is always an individual option, not a communal response. To put it another way, I have the right to turn my cheek. I don't have the right to turn my neighbor's cheek.

It's up to the actors, in this

The Constitution Could Let Noncitizens Vote

By Bradley A. Smith

THE SAVE America Act is tying the U.S. Senate in knots. Democrats will filibuster, and Republicans have no hope of getting the 60 votes necessary to overcome it. President Trump urges scrapping the filibuster to pass it, but that might not garner even a simple majority and would be a controversial precedent dividing his party.

But the battle is over tactics, not principle. The act's core objective—that only U.S. citizens should vote in elections for president and Congress—has overwhelming public support. A national poll from Remington Research Group last year found 90% of Americans favor citizen-only voting in national elections, with only 5% supporting non-citizen voting.

Politicians have supported citizen-only voting, too. Congress passed legislation in 1996 that banned noncitizens from voting in federal elec-

tions. The Senate vote was 97-3. President Bill Clinton signed it. For 30 years, both parties have shown nearly unanimous support for that statute.

In recent years, however, politicians and advocacy groups have pushed at the local level to give noncitizens

States could loosen their rules, and an amendment is the only way to prevent it.

legal eligibility to vote. Non-citizens now vote in certain elections (such as school board or mayoral races) in the District of Columbia and 23 jurisdictions in California, Illinois, Maryland and Vermont. This trend has spurred voters in 15 states to pass state constitutional amendments banning noncitizen voting in state and local elections. But

many state constitutions lack such bans.

When it comes to congressional and presidential elections, Article I of the Constitution grants Congress power to regulate the time, place and manner of holding elections but not who is eligible to vote. The Supreme Court affirmed this in *Arizona v. Inter-Tribal Council* (2013).

And the Constitution is clear: Under Article I and the 17th Amendment, any person who is allowed to vote in a state legislative election is automatically also allowed to vote for members of Congress. A federal statute can't trump the Constitution's explicit, exclusive grant of power to each state to determine who is eligible to vote.

Although no state allows noncitizens to vote for its legislature, that could change. A state law allowing noncitizens to vote for the state legislature would automatically, as per the Constitution, make noncitizens in that state eligi-

ble to vote for Congress, even if the SAVE America Act were passed.

The only way to close that loophole is with a constitutional amendment. Rep. Lee (R., Fla.) has introduced House Joint Resolution 152, a constitutional amendment that reads: "Only citizens of the United States may qualify to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress." If proposed by two-thirds votes of both congressional chambers, this amendment would then go to the states for ratification. It's the only legally effective way to ensure that only U.S. citizens would be eligible to vote in federal elections—and such a move would have overwhelming public support.

Mrs. Smith served as a member of the Federal Election Commission, 2000-05, and chairman in 2004.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Trump's Ultimatum Target List in Iran

President Trump hailed the rescue of the two U.S. airmen at a news conference on Monday, and he deserves his share of the credit. God knows he'd have been blamed had the high-risk mission failed. Involving more than 150 aircraft, this was "one of the largest, most complex, most harrowing combat searches" ever attempted, Mr. Trump said. "It'll go down in the books."

Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it well. "The nation needs to know this," he said. "This was an incredibly brave and courageous mission and a testament to the courage, skill and tenacity of the joint force and our leaders. Especially a daylight option—having the guts to try means so much to so many."

Americans in uniform saw the nation's commitment. Adversaries saw how a U.S. joint force was able to pull this off, rapidly, a mere 30 miles from a major Iranian city. CIA Director John Ratcliffe said U.S. intelligence showed the Iranian regime was embarrassed.

But not embarrassed enough to cease inflicting damage on their own country, alas. On Monday state media said Iran had rejected a temporary cease-fire in exchange for reopening the Strait of Hormuz. Controlling the Strait is Iran's only defense at this point, since two shoot-downs out of 13,000 U.S. combat sorties does not an air defense make.

The regime countered by demanding a permanent cease-fire and full sanctions relief but without the nuclear and other concessions to make it worth the ink.

This directs all eyes to Mr. Trump's Tuesday night deadline for Iran to reopen Hormuz. He could always delay it again, but at his news conference he laid out what he'd need to see. "We have to have a deal that's acceptable to me," Mr. Trump said, "and part of the deal's going to be

we want free traffic of oil and everything else."

If not, "we have a plan," the President said, "where every bridge in Iran will be decimated by 12 o'clock tomorrow night. Where every power plant in Iran will be out of business."

We will soon find out who's calling whose bluff, but don't expect Iran's regime to care much about what strikes like that would do to its people. Taken literally, Mr. Trump is proposing to hit many targets that would harm Iranian civilians, which could spark a refugee crisis.

Striking indiscriminately at critical infrastructure would be wrong as well as unwise, punishing the Iranian people we need on our side. "They would be willing to suffer that in order to have freedom," Mr. Trump said. Regime mismanagement has already left Iran's grid in a permanent state of crisis, but such an attack could give Iranians all the suffering with none of the freedom. It could also erode support for the war at home and abroad.

The obvious solution is to discriminate between types of infrastructure. Bridges can be legitimate targets, but it depends if they have any military use of note. Otherwise, why punish the people?

Energy sources can also be legitimate targets if they have a particularly notable military nexus, such as providing fuel for missile launchers. But not every energy target will meet that standard, and the military benefit doesn't justify plunging 90 million people into darkness.

One yardstick by which to judge any U.S. escalation is this: In addition to increasing "pressure," which may never be enough to sway Iran's regime, will it help prepare an operation to reopen Hormuz? The U.S. has a strong interest in causing chaos for Iran's military, and targeting can allow it to do so without bombing every power plant in the country.

An escalation shouldn't punish the people more than the regime.

The Farm Labor Shortfall Bites

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins last summer said the Trump Administration's goal is to create a 100% American farm workforce. Well, now the Administration is quietly conceding that too few Americans want to work these grueling jobs, and that its policies risk driving up food prices.

The Trump Labor Department to its credit has taken steps to make it easier and less costly for farmers to hire seasonal guest workers on H-2A visas. Last fall the department relaxed a Biden wage mandate that required farmers to pay guest workers on average \$17.74 an hour—and as much as \$19.97 an hour in California—in addition to providing housing and transportation.

The United Farm Workers (UFW) sued, arguing that easing the wage mandates for guest workers will undercut pay and demand for American workers. Vice President JD Vance makes a similar argument in support of reducing legal immigration.

The Labor Department disagrees. A Labor attorney told a federal judge last month at a hearing on the UFW lawsuit that "there aren't enough Americans to take these jobs," and making it more costly to hire foreign workers won't increase employment for Americans. "The near total cessa-

tion of the inflow of illegal aliens combined with the lack of an available legal workforce, results in significant disruptions to production costs and threatening the stability of domestic food production and prices for U.S. consumers," the Trump DOL warned in its rule-making last fall.

U.S. workers applied for only 182 of 415,000 jobs advertised last year.

Restrictionists say farmers could attract more U.S. workers if they increased wages. DOL disagrees: High wage mandates have "not resulted in a meaningful increase in new entrants of U.S. workers to temporary or seasonal agricultural jobs." Farmers received applications from U.S. workers for only 182 of 415,000 positions advertised in the last fiscal year.

Farmers report that crops are wasting in fields because they can't find workers. DOL warns that shortages are resulting in more food imports, which have become more expensive because of Mr. Trump's tariffs. Wholesale fresh vegetable prices have risen 48% in the past year, according to the producer price index. Americans no doubt have noticed in stores.

We're glad the Administration is trying to make it easier to hire guest workers, but how about making the case to voters that the country needs legal immigrants for vital jobs that drive the economy.

Jamie Dimon Warns on Private Credit

Private investment funds are restricting redemptions amid an investor rush to get their money. Fund managers say in response that alarms about private credit defaults are overblown, while the financial press seems to be anticipating the worst. On Monday JPMorgan CEO Jamie Dimon injected a note of good sense—and caution—into the debate.

"I do believe that when we have a credit cycle, which will happen one day, losses on all leveraged lending in general will be higher than expected, relative to the environment," Mr. Dimon wrote in his annual letter to shareholders. This is "because credit standards have been modestly weakening pretty much across the board." He's right.

The Federal Reserve's easy money policy for several years made credit cheap and encouraged more risk-taking. Private credit has been a prime beneficiary owing to banking regulations enacted after the Enron fiasco of the early 2000s and the 2008-09 financial crisis. These regulations made the banking system safer but have also pushed more lending into private markets that have less transparency.

Regulation and litigation risks have also resulted in more companies staying private longer. Private markets have supported the economy by providing capital and credit to these companies. Mr. Dimon notes that the leveraged private credit market—one slice of private markets—has soared to \$1.8 trillion. That's more than the balance sheets of all but four banks.

The sudden collapse of subprime auto lender Tricolor and parts supplier First Brands Group last fall has also exposed weaknesses in credit underwriting. Both companies were heavily leveraged and have been accused of fraud. As Mr. Dimon said last fall, "when you see one cockroach, there's probably more."

Cockroaches often become visible only during periods of stress. "If rates or credit spreads ever go up, the companies that borrowed will have to

borrow at even higher rates," Mr. Dimon warns—a timeless lesson often forgotten in credit manias.

The JPMorgan CEO puts the mini-panic in useful perspective.

Mr. Dimon adds in his letter that weakened underwriting has shown up in optimistic assumptions about future performance, eroded protections for creditors, increased arbitrage, aggressive private credit ratings and valuations and "payment-in-kind" in which creditors agree to defer collection of interest payments until a loan matures.

"By and large, private credit does not tend to have great transparency or rigorous valuation 'marks' of their loans—this increases the chance that people will sell if they think the environment will get worse—even if actual realized losses barely change," Mr. Dimon writes. Private fund managers may sniff that the JPMorgan CEO is arguing his book here, but he's right about the relative lack of transparency.

The good news is that Mr. Dimon says private credit probably doesn't pose a current systemic risk. That's the key issue for regulators, who have to make sure that private credit losses don't bleed into the banking system. Let's hope Trump regulators are paying closer attention than the Fed's Michael Barr and Mary Daly did to duration risk as interest rates were rising before the failures of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank in 2023.

Another reason underwriting may have deteriorated is that the feds have repeatedly rescued banks, as they did Silicon Valley and Signature depositors. The government may be tempted to do it again if a large private fund tumbles. But the best way to impose discipline on private credit is to let Adam Smith punish those who were overleveraged or took the wrong risks. Others will get the message.

So far cracks in private credit have been limited. But as we have learned over decades, it's the risks that nobody is paying attention to that jump up and bite.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

How Blue States Insulate Unions From Debate

Your editorial "Democrats vs. the Freedom Foundation" (Review & Outlook, April 2) outlines efforts to target the Freedom Foundation, a group that alerts public employees that they can opt out of paying union dues. The troubling developments you highlight reflect a broader pattern of blue states advancing a one-sided agenda in favor of public-employee unions.

My research shows that teachers and other public-employee unions have long been state-subsidized political actors. Beginning in the 1970s, many states adopted labor laws and bargaining arrangements that made it cheaper and easier for these unions to recruit members, collect dues and mobilize members in politics. Those policies gave unions a built-in advantage.

Reform groups—including parent activists, school-choice advocates and the Freedom Foundation—must organize and compete from the outside. By contrast, public-sector unions operate from the inside, with advantages created by the state it-

self. For example, in most states, public-sector unions aren't required to win re-election and instead get the privilege of representing all employees (even dissenters) year after year.

Strong efforts in progressive strongholds like Oregon and Hawaii to create new civil penalties for alleged impersonation of a labor union in worker outreach are less about preventing deception than protecting already advantaged political actors from competition. After decades of public unions benefiting from policies that tilt the playing field in their favor, it's hard to justify new efforts to shut out competition.

Reasonable people can disagree about the proper role of unions in American democracy. But policymakers should be cautious about crossing the line from regulating conduct to insulating one side of a political debate from challenge.

MICHAEL T. HARTNEY
Fellow, Hoover Institution
Palo Alto, Calif.

Bernie Sanders Is Wrong About AI Innovation

Sen. Bernie Sanders offers understandable concerns in "AI Is a Threat to Everything the American People Hold Dear" (op-ed, April 3). Those worries, however, shouldn't lead us to hit the brakes on innovation.

My husband and I recently hired a high-school student who uses AI tools alongside his own coding skills to improve our business operations. He sought us out, eager to learn our industry while sharing his expertise in this new technology.

The next generation isn't being bulldozed by AI; they're partnering with it. This reflects the entrepreneurial spirit at its best—human creativity cooperating with the gifts of reason and invention. Fear is a poor guide for policy. Instead of erecting burdensome bureaucratic roadblocks that would stifle progress, we should encourage responsible innovation that serves human dignity and the common good.

EMILY WADE
Dallas

Mr. Sanders seems to believe he can predict the dystopian future AI has in store for us. Yet he assures us that he and his colleagues in Congress can forestall the inexorable

march of technology to protect us from this fate. Contrary to these arguments, it's much more likely that AI will empower us to build a brighter future than we've ever imagined—so long as Mr. Sanders and his fellow politicians stay sufficiently out of the way to allow innovation.

PETER GOETTLER
President and CEO, Cato Institute
Washington

Joseph Schumpeter wrote in 1942 about the "creative destruction" that arises from capitalism, entrepreneurship and innovation. The U.S. has faced the Industrial Revolution, the age of steam, steel and railways, the era of electrification and the automobile, the digital age and so on. We're now in the AI era. In every prior case, innovation disrupted jobs and lifestyles, but our country was always propelled forward, creating more business and more value for people. Schumpeter predicted that the rise of an "intellectual class" would lead to regulation and the decline of entrepreneurship. Mr. Sanders is proof that Schumpeter was right.

MARTY CURRAN
Sarasota, Fla.

Britannia Doesn't Rule the Waves Anymore

Regarding your editorial "Why Britain Can't Afford a Navy" (Review & Outlook, April 3): When Ronald Reagan in 1982 became the first U.S. president to address both houses of British Parliament, the British military under Margaret Thatcher was still a naval power, winning a distant war over the Falkland Islands. Mike Johnson this year became the first U.S. speaker of the House to address Parliament, and the British military is an embarrassment—as your editorial points out, struggling "to deploy the navy to the Mediterranean to defend British assets during the Iran war."

In his speech to Parliament, Reagan spoke eloquently of British forces. "On distant islands in the South Atlantic young men are fighting for Britain," he said. "And, yes, voices have been raised protesting their sacrifice for lumps of rock and earth so far away. But those young men aren't fighting for mere real estate. They

fight for a cause—for the belief that armed aggression must not be allowed to succeed. . . . If there had been firmer support for that principle some 45 years ago, perhaps our generation wouldn't have suffered the bloodletting of World War II."

Today, the U.K. lacks the will to help prevent the Middle East's most destabilizing regime and the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism from building and eventually wielding an arsenal of missiles and nuclear weapons. "Britannia rules the waves" encapsulated Great Britain's command of the seas in a bygone era, but it's now an empty slogan indicting the British navy's decline.

CHARLES D. EDEN
Atlanta

Back-to-Basics Governance

Regarding Rahm Emanuel's op-ed "How Democrats Can Use Their Coming Majority" (March 31): Democrats need to provide a platform that focuses on the roots of governing. Here's what I want as a voter. Promise a simplified, non-policy-weighted tax code. Sell me on the need for reliable energy and how to achieve it. Recognize that we've created a healthcare system monster that needs reform by removing layers of expensive administrative costs. Convince me that sanity can be restored to our immigration system. Promise me fiscal responsibility and accountability. Tell me you'll walk away from clickbait and focus on sober, steady governing.

KATHLEEN HOLMES
Philadelphia

Why 'No Kings' Protesters Won't Win the Long Game

In "Protesters Throughout U.S. History Play the Long Game" (Letters, March 31), Michael T. Tusa Jr. argues that protests often achieve their goals after many years. But the protests he cites—related to civil rights and women's right to vote—had clearly articulated goals, while the No Kings rallies seem to be a potpourri of causes and complaints, none of which is well articulated.

JAMES H. BECHT
Bettendorf, Iowa

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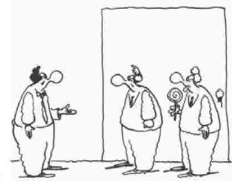


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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"It's not favoritism, Miller. Come up with a good idea and you'll get a lollipop too."

OPINION

The Iran War Around the World



GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

With the Iran war in its sixth week, we don't yet know how or when it will end. But we know that it matters. All wars matter intensely to those caught up in them, but not every war matters to the whole world. The Iran war does, and every great and near-great power is adjusting its foreign-policy strategies in light of a conflict that is reshaping world politics.

China is thousands of miles from the Persian Gulf, but between its own need for Gulf oil and the effects of the Iran war on China's neighbors

China sees opportunity. Europe is divided. Aside from Tehran itself, Russia has the most to lose.

and trading partners, the conflict is having major effects on Beijing. Some effects are positive, from Xi Jinping's point of view. China's return to its program of building new islands in the South China high seas has passed all but unnoticed in Washington, where attention is firmly fixed on the Middle East. But China doesn't welcome higher fuel prices, and its export-dependent economy will be hard hit by any global recession.

We can expect Beijing to focus

much harder on gaining the ability to project power in and around the Gulf. Already China has managed to take advantage of its relationship with Pakistan to enhance its diplomatic and security influence over events in the Middle East. This will likely lead, among other things, to an intensification of Sino-Indian competition in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf. China will seek more access to strategic ports and routes. India will struggle to frustrate those designs.

Japan has also discovered that distance doesn't insulate it from events in the Middle East. At the same time, Tokyo understands that doubts about President Trump don't insulate it from its need for a strong relationship with a powerful U.S. China's efforts to increase its power and sway in the Gulf and along the prime sea routes pose strategic threats to Japan's access to the Gulf's resources. Tokyo fully realizes that without American power, access to Gulf oil and gas will depend on the caprices of an Iranian government of religious fanatics aligned with Russia and China. Expect Japan to double down on its efforts to rearm, expand security partnerships with friendly neighboring states, and stay focused on maintaining the closest possible relations with an unpredictable Washington.

For India, the shock of the Iran war has been profound. The country has sustained a serious economic setback from high energy prices and disruptions in shipping and travel. In addition, India's rival Pakistan has managed to insert itself into the heart of Middle East diplomacy, even as it deepens its relationship with China. As a neighbor of Iran and a Sunni-majority country with historic



Philippine navy and Chinese coast guard ships in the South China Sea.

links to the Gulf Arab states, Pakistan is well placed to act as a broker for peace talks. Its success in selling itself to Washington as a potential mediator has given it renewed diplomatic clout that India must now work to counter.

For Europe, the Iran war is yet another example of the Continent's declining significance in world affairs, the problems of maintaining a positive relationship with the U.S. in the Trump era, and the difficulty of getting European states to align their policies on important issues. European countries weren't consulted over the decision to launch the war, they have little to no influence over the course of the war, and their interests are unlikely to be upmost in the minds of those who finally end the war. Worst of all, perhaps, the war has done more to divide European countries than to unite them. While Mr. Trump and

the Iran war are deeply unpopular almost everywhere in the European Union, Italy and Spain have taken actions designed to raise difficulties for the American war effort, while Germany and Romania have been more supportive.

Next to the actual belligerents, Russia may have the most to lose in the war. The fuel shortage has boosted Russian oil earnings at a critical moment, and a longer war will likely mean more demand for Russian oil and gas at higher prices in more markets around the world. Beyond that, Russia's interests are more complex. Ukraine's ability to sell its drone expertise to the Gulf Arab countries must have been a disagreeable shock to the Kremlin. The increasing bitterness between Iran and its Arab neighbors also creates problems for Russia's attempts to maintain its deep ties to Iran while building cooperation with countries

like the United Arab Emirates. Meanwhile, the risk of alienating the Trump administration is growing. The Kremlin may get some emotional satisfaction from retaliation against American support for Ukraine by helping Iran target American facilities in the Gulf, but the costs could be high.

From the Russian perspective, the worst possible end to the war would be a collapse of the Iranian regime and an end to Iran's long isolation from the West. This would deprive Moscow of an ally and reduce the perceived value of a Russian alliance among the world's despots. It would also seriously damage Vladimir Putin's most cherished goal: the restoration of Russian power across the former Soviet Union.

Reintegrating Iran into the global economy would lead to the development of multiple pipeline and freight routes for oil, gas and mineral exports from the landlocked ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia, likely ending any hope that Moscow could reassert dominance over any of them. From an American point of view, increasing the economic dynamism of Central Asia while reducing its dependence on China and Russia would substantially improve the chances for a long-term world peace.

The war shows us all that the security of the Gulf matters to everyone. If at the end of the war Iran retains the ability to close the Strait of Hormuz, every country on earth will need Tehran's blessing to access vital fuel and supplies. Whatever one thinks of Mr. Trump and his decision to initiate hostilities, a quick and comprehensive American victory offers the best hope for a peaceful future in the Gulf and beyond.

A Judge Mistakes the Claude Chatbot for a Person

By Bridget McCormack
And Shlomo Klapper

A federal judge in Manhattan ruled in February that when a criminal defendant used an AI chatbot to prepare for his legal defense, he waived attorney-client privilege. The prosecution can now read every word he typed and the answers he received. If this reasoning stands, the consequences will reach far beyond artificial intelligence.

The defendant in *U.S. v. Heppner* wasn't a rogue litigant trying to replace his lawyers with a chatbot. He was represented by counsel and had already received privileged communications from his defense attorneys. His lawyers confirmed that he used Anthropic's Claude to organize and analyze that material in preparation for meetings with counsel. He then shared the AI's outputs with his attorneys, who used them in developing their strategy.

Judge Jed Rakoff held that the Claude transcripts were protected by neither the attorney-client privilege nor the work-product doctrine. The court's reasoning: By typing information into an AI platform, the defendant "shared" it with a third party, and because Anthropic's privacy policy permits data collection and potential further disclosure, no "reasonable expectation of confidentiality" existed.

The judge's error was straightforward: He treated an AI model like a person. Throughout his opinion, he refers to the software engaging in "communications" with the user. But AI isn't a person; it is a computing process. It can't be coerced, call the police or betray a confidence. The third-party disclosure rule exists because sharing information with a human being creates a risk that the human will further disseminate it.

That risk doesn't exist when the "third party" is a statistical model running on a server. Judge Rakoff considered and dismissed the obvious point that typing into an AI tool is no different from typing into a cloud-based software, such as Google Docs. His answer, that cloud computing "is not intrinsically privileged in any case," is a non sequitur. The question isn't whether Google Docs creates privilege. It's whether Google Docs destroys it. No lawyer in America thinks drafting a confidential memo in Google Docs waives the privilege over its contents. Judge Rakoff's opinion doesn't explain why the same act in another application does.

No court has ever gone this far. The American Bar Association concluded in 2017 that lawyers may use cloud computing without waiving privilege, provided they take reasonable security precautions. State bar authorities in New York, California

and elsewhere have reached the same conclusion. The entire legal profession has operated on this understanding for more than a decade. Judge Rakoff's opinion doesn't cite, distinguish or acknowledge any of these authorities.

Other federal courts have reached the opposite of Judge Rakoff's conclusion. In *Warner v. Gilbarco* (2026), Judge Anthony P. Patti of the

Jed Rakoff holds that a defendant waived attorney-client confidentiality by asking AI about his case.

Eastern District of Michigan held that AI chatbots are "tools, not persons" and denied a motion to compel a litigant's AI materials. Last week, Magistrate Judge Maritza D. Braswell of the District of Colorado reached the same conclusion in *Morgan v. V2X*. Her order posed the question *Heppner* never asked: Does anyone with a Google account forfeit all rights to confidentiality? Citing the Supreme Court's reasoning in *Carper v. U.S.*, she held that routing information through a third-party system doesn't destroy privacy protections.

Consider the practical conse-

quences of *Heppner*. Google's terms of service grant the company a broad license to process user content and reserve the right to disclose data in response to legal process. Microsoft's terms are comparable. So are Amazon's, Apple's and Dropbox's. Under Judge Rakoff's reasoning, every privileged document drafted in Google Docs, every confidential email sent through Gmail, every sensitive legal file stored in any cloud service has been "disclosed" to the provider. The logic is identical. The only difference is that the tool in this case had the letters "AI" attached to it.

The ruling also creates an extraordinary asymmetry in criminal proceedings. Federal prosecutors use AI tools every day for investigations, case preparation and legal research. Those uses are shielded by government privileges. But under *Heppner*, a defendant who uses the same technology to prepare his own defense has created a road map the prosecution can seize. Every question asked, every draft generated, every strategic pivot is preserved in the platform's logs and available on subpoena. The government gets to use AI. Defendants don't.

For litigants navigating the legal system without a lawyer, the impact is massive. Under this ruling, every interaction they have with an AI tool is fully discoverable. This hurts the

population most in need of technological assistance and least equipped to absorb the consequences of AI log exposure.

We both use AI tools in our professional work, as does almost every lawyer, judge and executive in America. If using a computational tool to process information constitutes "disclosure" to a third party, the implications extend to everyone who has ever stored a confidential document in the cloud or sent an email. Much legal work is compromised.

Heppner is a single district court opinion. It binds no one beyond this case. But it grabbed public attention, and in law the opinion that gets read is the opinion that gets followed. Other courts may look to it for guidance. They should look elsewhere. The correct rule is straightforward: Using a tool to process information isn't the same as disclosing information to a person. AI is infrastructure, not an interlocutor. Courts should reject this reasoning before its logic spreads.

Ms. McCormack is president and CEO of the American Arbitration Association. She served as chief justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, 2019-22. Mr. Klapper is CEO of *Learned Hand AI*. He served as a law clerk on the Second U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, 2020-21.

NATO Allies Are Quietly Helping the U.S. in Iran

By Linas Kojala
And Vytautas Leskevicius

President Trump has turned the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into a political target of his Iran war messaging. "NATO has done absolutely nothing," he said, after earlier calling allied reluctance to help a "very stupid mistake" and warning that "we don't have to be there for NATO." Secretary of State Marco Rubio echoed the line, saying Washington would have to "re-examine all of this" after the operation ends.

That line may prove politically effective, but it doesn't reflect the full picture. Even as many European leaders keep their political distance from the war and continue to press for de-escalation, they are helping to enable the U.S. effort. They have provided

the essential operating platform for American power in the Middle East.

Look at the map of operations. London, after some delay, authorized the use of British bases for U.S. strikes on Iranian missile sites targeting shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. Portugal reaffirmed its decision to allow the U.S. to use Lajes Air Base in the Azores. Germany has kept Ramstein Air Base available under standing agreements—a vital U.S. hub for logistics, force projection, and drone-linked operations beyond Europe—even as Berlin insists this isn't NATO's war.

Italy still allows U.S. base access and overflights, although it says any Iran-related offensive use must be cleared by Rome first. Even France has allowed U.S. aircraft presence on French bases for missions supporting Gulf partners, while barring those

planes from taking part in strikes on Iran.

Spain was the clear exception. The leftist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez seemed eager to pick a fight with Mr. Trump. Last year Madrid alone refused to commit to NATO's 5% defense-spending target. Now it has denied the use of Naval Station Rota and Morón Air Base for Iran-related operations and closed its airspace to U.S. military flights linked to the war. Yet when Spain blocked some routes and facilities, flights were simply rerouted elsewhere in Europe, including through Germany.

The effect of allied support isn't merely symbolic. Access, basing rights, overflight permissions, maintenance, refueling and logistics are the skeleton of military power. Without them, American operations would become slower, costlier and riskier. Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete served as a working port for the USS Gerald R. Ford to resupply, refuel and undergo repairs before the carrier moved on to Split, Croatia, for further maintenance after a fire aboard the ship.

No one has made that point more clearly than U.S. Air Force Gen. Alex Grynkewich, NATO's top commander in Europe. In a March statement to the Senate, he wrote that the Continent's geography and posture allow the U.S. European Command to support other combatant commands with "critical logistics, ready forces, and lethal capabilities," and that U.S. power projection depends on European allies. In the hearing itself, he also said the "vast majority" of European allies had been "extremely supportive."

That is the paradox at the heart of the current trans-Atlantic debate. Politically, the war with Iran has widened the gap between Washington and many European governments. Operationally, it has underscored how heavily the U.S. still relies on Europe—and how cooperative most European governments are.

Spain is the exception, but the U.K., Italy, Germany, Portugal and even France are doing their parts.

We have been here before. Certain elements of the Iran operations echo war in Iraq. Especially during the later stages of that war in 2007-09, support had faded across much of Europe. Washington wanted to show it wasn't acting alone. In that atmosphere, the political symbolism of backing the U.S. often mattered as much as real military help. That was also the backdrop to the 2003 "Vilnius 10" episode, in which Central and Eastern European countries supported Washington. French President Jacques Chirac, a strong opponent of the effort in Iraq, rebuked them for having "missed a great opportunity to shut up."

Back then, the U.S. seemed to need more supporters' flags. The more, the merrier. And everyone's flag counted. This time, Washington likely needs both flags and capabilities. Yet a striking gap has emerged: While some allies quietly provide the capabilities, there is a visible lack of poli-

tical backing. This is a product of short memories. In 2010 NATO was already clear that Iran's and North Korea's nuclear and ballistic-missile programs threatened the allies—meaning Europe, too.

For various reasons, the political stance is unlikely to change. Yet it shouldn't obscure the reality of practical cooperation. Four years into Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, the risks of public passions taking over and damaging NATO as a whole are too high. NATO's eastern flank would bear the greatest cost, living as it does in the shadow of war and unable to afford any weakening of the American role in Europe's security architecture.

That is why allies should resist tit-for-tat rhetoric and focus on examples of working together. This is the backdrop to NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte's trip to Washington this week. The core message should be simple: Europe isn't only a consumer of U.S. security. It is part of the machinery of American power projection, hosting roughly 80,000 U.S. troops and some 40 bases that both deter enemies and support operations far beyond the Continent.

Europe may not want political responsibility for another Middle East war. But it remains strategically indispensable to Washington. Mr. Trump's own campaign has made that plain.

Mr. Kojala is CEO of the Geopolitics and Security Studies Center, based in Vilnius, Lithuania. Mr. Leskevicius is a senior policy analyst at the center and a former Lithuanian ambassador to NATO.

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EDITORIALS

Springfield defends us all against
Mayor Johnson's worst ideas

If anyone in the state legislature understands the challenges faced by a mayor, it's a former mayor.

So it's striking that state Rep. Anthony DeLuca, former mayor of south suburban Chicago Heights, is the chief sponsor of a bill moving through the Illinois House that would bid for bid counties or municipalities from imposing taxes on companies based on the number of workers they employ.

This measure is a direct response to Mayor Brandon Johnson's feverish attempt late last year to tax the largest private-sector employers in Chicago to the tune of \$21 per job per month.

Johnson was so intent on forcing that terrible idea through the City Council that he took Chicago to the brink of a government shutdown before allowing a budget without the head tax to become law without his signature.

DeLuca told the Tribune he has been a strong proponent of local rights. But, he said, the awful message sent to businesses by taxing the very jobs they create, made this issue an exception for him. "We must have a pro-growth, a business-friendly atmosphere in Illinois," he said.

In that effort, he is supported by an assortment of business groups, led by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association.

The bill cleared the House Revenue and Finance Committee March 19 on a 19-0 vote, which included the support of panel Chairman Curtis Tarver. Tarver represents a South Side district and has been a persistent critic



Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson speaks to the media after his proposed head tax was voted down in a City Council committee meeting on Nov. 17. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

of Johnson's approach to Springfield.

Ordinarily, like DeLuca, we wouldn't be supportive of state lawmakers telling localities what policies they can't pursue in trying to solve their own problems. But there are exceptions to every rule, and we agree wholeheartedly with DeLuca on this one. When both Chicago and Illinois have significantly lagged the nation as a whole in terms of economic growth, there are few tax ideas more counterproductive than penalizing big companies for employing people within a city's boundaries.

The Johnson administration didn't help its cause when it unaccountably failed to dispatch a representative to testify at the hearing on the bill. Asked about that, the mayor's chief of external affairs, Kennedy Bartley, said, "point well taken."

But, she added, "It isn't a secret what our advocacy is centered around, it's progressive revenue like the... head tax."

Sure, everyone is well aware of the mayor's fixation on higher taxes. But that doesn't excuse failing to execute on the ABCs of lobbying — such as not bothering even to show up at a hearing on

a policy the mayor considers an urgent priority.

While Chicago is at no imminent risk of instituting Johnson's jobs tax following the City Council's adamant rejection, Springfield ought to make the possibility of a later revival of that policy a dead letter. Taking that option off the table for good would help boost badly needed business confidence in the future governance of Chicago.

That said, Springfield has hindered municipalities in important ways from addressing their budget constraints. DeLuca over the past several years has

been a leading voice in the Capitol for sharing more of the income tax revenues the state generates with municipalities. What for decades was a 10% share with localities was chopped to closer to 6% when Illinois hiked its income tax to 4.95% in 2011.

The percentage has bounced around since then, but the bottom line is that the state has retained virtually all the revenues from the income tax hike while localities have resorted to one of the only revenue sources available to them — property taxes. In many parts of Illinois, we now have a full-fledged property tax revolt on our hands as a result.

Gov. JB Pritzker has proposed to make the situation even worse in his fiscal 2027 budget, proposing to shave localities' share of income taxes to 6.28% from 6.47% in order to help balance the state's budget.

The General Assembly should restore that higher share in its final budget next month.

It's distressing that Johnson's fellow Democrats in the Statehouse must expend time and energy trying to stave off his economically destructive policies. It used to be that when Chicago mayors spoke in Springfield, lawmakers listened and in most cases tried to help. That hasn't been the case for the entirety of Johnson's term, which now is about to enter its fourth year.

Until Chicago, the state's economic engine, can begin rowing in the same policy directions as our representatives in Springfield, getting Illinois out of the economic mud will continue to be an uphill battle.

What Artemis II explains about life here on Earth

Four astronauts are on a journey around the moon, a mission that offers a rare chance to see our world from a distance, and ourselves more clearly.

One of the reasons people appreciate travel is that it offers a different perspective on home. Distance has a way of recalibrating what actually is important.

Now imagine gaining such a perspective from deep in space.

The United States is sending astronauts around the moon for the first time in more than 50 years. Artemis II blasted off from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida on April 1, kicking off an approximately 10-day trip around the moon before a return to Earth. If all goes to plan, the four-person crew will travel more than 685,000 miles. Already, they have surpassed the distance record set during the Apollo era, travel-

ing farther from Earth than any humans before them.

Victor Glover, one of the Artemis II crew, is quickly becoming something of a spacefaring philosopher.

"I think, as we go into Easter Sunday, thinking about all the cultures all around the world, whether you celebrate it or not, whether you believe in God or not, this is an opportunity for us to remember where we are, who we are, and that we are the same thing, and that we've got to get through this together," Glover told CBS News on Sunday.

It's a welcome message. We've spent years focusing on what makes us different, growing angrier at neighbors and strangers alike for not sharing our views on politics, religion and an ever-widening range of other cultural touchstones. It has

become easier to sort ourselves into camps than to see what we share.

Artemis II's crew brings together a group of four explorers from different parts of North America — from Maryland to California to North Carolina — and different backgrounds, including American NASA astronauts Glover, Reid Wiseman and Christina Koch. Astronaut Jeremy Hansen will become the first Canadian to go around the moon.

Yet footage has shown their shared bond aboard the ship, along with their zero-gravity indicator plushie, a moon-shaped creation called "Rise," inspired by the Apollo 8 "Earthrise" moment. We watched as the astronauts embraced after naming a moon crater "Carroll," after Wiseman's late wife, who died from cancer

leaving the astronaut as a single dad of two daughters.

Adults and kids alike have been captivated by this mission and these human stories. They remind us that while we may feel bogged down by the weight of earthly difficulties and challenges, humans are capable of adventure, exploration and the pursuit of knowledge that will shape and benefit future generations.

Some of the stated goals of the mission include "preparing humanity to live and work on the Moon," a stepping stone for future trips elsewhere — to Mars. As NASA often puts it, "science enables exploration, and exploration enables science." It's a reminder that missions like Artemis II are not just symbolic, but expand what humanity knows and what it is capable of doing

next. Artemis is about growth and advancement, setting records and charting new territory, very much in keeping with America's pioneering history and spirit.

Glover's message hearkened back to the Apollo 8 crew in 1968, when crew members joined together on Christmas Eve to read from the Book of Genesis.

Apollo 8 was the first crewed spacecraft to leave Earth's orbit, reach the Moon, orbit it and return safely. This mission, too, took place during a tumultuous period in U.S. history marked by war, social and political upheaval. Before this first trip to the moon, the nation mourned the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy.

At a moment when the Middle East feels aflame, four people looking back at this planet from deep space didn't see borders.

ON THIS DAY 26 YEARS AGO
GIVE THE JUDICIARY A RAISE

Illinois legislators have apparently decided that reelection is the better part of valor. Senators have voted to reject a pay raise for themselves, lest voters take offense. The House is expected to follow suit.

That's a political judgment for the lawmakers, that they would prefer to reject modest pay raises recommended by an independent commission than to take the money and risk getting voted out of office. But there is more to this than their own care and feeding.

There is, believe it or not, a good government element to this. The Compensation Review Board... has made recommendations for the salaries of the lawmakers, as well as state department heads, judges and county prosecutors. The review board considers these increases to be what's needed to keep public salaries here competitive with those in other states and private industry.

The board has recommended that legislators get a 2 percent raise in January and another 2 percent in July 2001, on top of a 4 percent cost-of-living increase they will receive automatically this summer. That would raise the base salary for lawmakers to

\$58,000 in 2001.

Under state law, legislators will get the money if they do nothing. But they intend to vote against the raises. The problem is, the legislators also will sink the pay raises for everyone else. That would be a mistake, particularly for the judiciary.

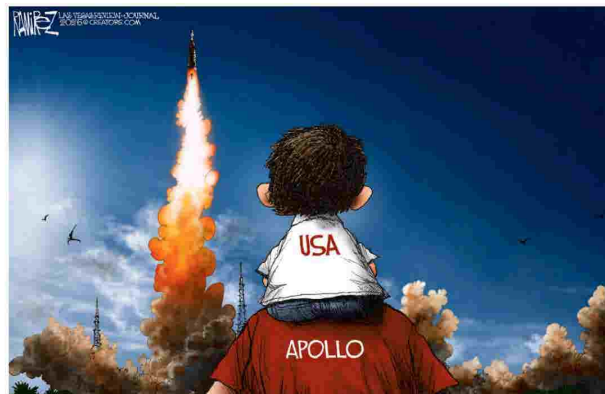
The review board has recommended a 2 percent raise for judges, which would be added to an automatic 4 percent cost-of-living increase.

No one is going to cry poor for judges. A Supreme Court justice receives \$147,024 a year. Appellate justices get \$138,376 and circuit judges pull in \$126,978. But this is a case where private industry—the legal industry—is quite competitive. First-year associates in major Chicago law firms earn more than \$100,000 a year.

The public has a stake in attracting well-qualified people to the bench and in keeping them there... The legislators should approve the recommendations of the review board. If they don't want their own pay raise, pass separate legislation to roll it back.

...
Tribune editorial board,
April 7, 2000

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OPINION

‘The Pitt’ dramatizes the very real burnout that threatens medical care workers and patients

By Jennifer Obel
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

In between patients at my oncology clinic, I couldn't catch my breath. I asked my nurse to check my oxygen level and pulse. My chest felt heavy, as if something were pressing on it.

I sat in the same examination chair my patients use, watching the monitor and running through possible diagnoses. But I knew what this was.

A panic attack.

My mother had just called. While she felt fine, her routine CT scan showed fluid around her lung. I didn't need anyone to explain what it meant. I'm an oncologist. Pleural effusion, in this context, is definitive: It meant her cancer had spread.

She didn't know yet. I did.

Over the next two years, as she lived with Stage IV lung cancer, I moved between my roles as daughter and doctor, managing my own patients and quietly absorbing her suffering. The message from my oncology division was clear: Keep working. There was no space to feel.

That expectation is not incidental. It is structural. The system holds because the people inside it are asked to absorb more than they should.

That's why a scene in the HBO medical drama "The Pitt" stopped me.

Dr. Samira Mohan is dealing with a chaotic emergency department while fielding calls from her mother. The pace is relentless. Her body gives way to chest pain, sweating and a sense of impending doom. She is triaged as a patient. But it isn't a heart attack.

When she returns to her duties, Dr. Robby, the attending physician, dismisses it as "mommy issues."

It was one of the first times I felt seen, and it came from a TV show.

"The Pitt" reflects the failures of our health care system — overcrowded emergency rooms, too few doctors and too many patients. It shows an uninsured patient who is suffering from diabetic ketoacidosis, a condition in which blood sugar spirals out of control, but who leaves before his treatment is complete because he cannot afford to stay. It shows a son who drives for more than an hour so his critically ill father can get dialysis after they discover their local hospital has closed.

But what the show captures with unusual insight is something more fundamental. "The Pitt" reveals not just what the system lacks, but the self-sacrifice



Actors Gerran Howell, from left, Amielynn Abellera, Noah Wyle, Sepideh Moafi and Supriya Ganesh in Season 2 of the medical drama "The Pitt." WARRICK PAGE/HBO MAX

required of the medical team in order for health care to stay afloat. Medicine does not just demand our competence as professionals. It demands that we ignore ourselves and our needs, even when the personal cost is high.

In a recent episode of "The Pitt," a student doctor who leaves promptly at the end of her shift instead of working over tells a senior resident that 60% of emergency physicians report burnout. Hers is a quiet act of refusal. Because in medicine, the expectation is that we should stay through exhaustion, personal crisis and the slow erosion of self we are trained to ignore.

Every part of medicine functions this way. The emergency department is just where the strain is most visible. In the operating room, care depends on layers of people — nurses, anesthesiologists, surgical technicians, assistants — contributing a different piece of the whole. Oncology clinics run on the same coordination, as do inpatient teams.

It is less like a hierarchy than an orchestra, each person entering at the right moment. There is little margin for error. When one note

is missed, whether from fatigue, overload or distraction, the entire performance begins to unravel.

"The Pitt" is filmed the same way, the camera moving continuously from one person to the next, as if there is no pause in the system.

Burnout is not simply an individual condition. It is the predictable result of a system that operates without a buffer.

Health care redistributes strain. When one physician is exhausted, others compensate. When a nurse is stretched too thin, someone else absorbs the delay. To patients, the system appears relatively intact because the people in it bend to keep it that way. But when enough people are depleted at the same time, what appears to be an isolated error is often the predictable result of a system pushed past its capacity.

"The Pitt" lays bare these pressures. In the first season, a charge nurse takes a break outside from a relentless shift. A disgruntled patient follows her and punches her in the face, knocking her to the ground. She returns to work.

In the second season, a patient under the influence wraps his

arm around a young nurse's neck and chokes her until the charge nurse intervenes. Though shaken, the novice nurse insists on finishing her shift. There is no pause long enough to process what happened and no space for recovery.

I have done this myself. Years ago, I had a nonviable pregnancy and chose a surgical termination — not because it was an emergency but because it fit around my clinic schedule. I saw nine patients that morning before driving to my gynecologist's office for the procedure.

I returned to work the next day without time to mourn. It was practical. I did not feel I could risk miscarriage at work because of the pain, the bleeding and the disruption it would cause me and my patients.

This is what medicine teaches: Endure hardship and organize your life around the expectation that patient care is paramount.

While we call resilience a strength, it is often a requirement that does damage over time. The system depends on people carrying on without time to recover or reflect.

At the Art Institute of Chicago, there is a painting I often return to: pointillist Georges Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte." It depicts a calm afternoon along the Seine River in Paris. But step toward it, and the image dissolves into tens of thousands of points, which you can see only up close.

"The Pitt" is that way, too. From a distance, the system seems coherent. Up close, it becomes clear that the system depends on individuals taking on more than they should, persisting when they should be allowed to stop and breathe.

Art preserves a moment by showing a historical portrayal of how people lived. It does not have to define the future.

We should hope that one day, physicians in training will watch "The Pitt" and find the burnout unrecognizable — not because medicine has changed but because what we ask of practitioners finally has.

Dr. Jennifer Obel is a retired oncologist who writes about the intersection of medicine, ethics and public policy.

After a year of leading Chicago's parks, here's what I've learned

By Carlos Ramirez-Rosa
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Every day across Chicago, children play in parks in every neighborhood. Families gather along the lakefront. Neighbors come together in the public spaces we all share.

Chicago's parks are woven into everyday life. Last year alone, more than 36 million visits were made to Chicago Park District parks and programs.

But the scale of our park system tells only part of the story.

A year ago, I stepped into the role of general superintendent and CEO of the Chicago Park District after serving 10 years as a Chicago alderman. As a lifelong Chicagoan, I knew our parks were special. What I've learned over the past year is just how extraordinary they truly are.

In my first weeks, I made it a priority to meet with park supervisors, leadership and staff across the district. Together, they represent more than 5,000 years of combined experience caring for Chicago's parks and delivering programming for our communities.

And that experience represents only a fraction of our workforce. That depth of knowledge and commitment helps sustain one of the largest and most dynamic park systems in the world.

The Chicago Park District operates 617 parks, 26 miles of lakefront and beaches, and 77 pools. Each year, we offer roughly 30,000 programs, serving millions and making the district one of the largest providers of arts, cultural and recreational programming in Chicago. Our municipal aquatics system alone is one of the largest in the country — larger per capita than that of New York City or Los Angeles.

Operating a system of this scale has not been without challenges.



Those experiences have reinforced the importance of building a stronger, more accountable and more resilient organization.

That's why we created the Office of Prevention and Accountability to centralize reporting and responses to misconduct. Engagement with the office continues to grow — a reflection of increasing awareness and confidence. In our 2026 budget, we expanded staffing to build on that progress.

At the same time, we have prioritized growing our lifeguard workforce. Through our partnership with After School Matters, our Lifeguard Explorers program helps young Chicagoans train for careers in aquatics. The program expanded from four sites to seven, with plans for continued growth. Thanks to those efforts — along with aggressive recruitment and training — last summer marked the first time since the pandemic that our outdoor pools were open seven days a week citywide.

Over the past year, I have also gained a deeper appreciation for the role revenue generation plays

in sustaining our parks. Major concerts and international sporting events at Soldier Field generate tens of millions of dollars each year to support programming across the city. Festivals such as Lollapalooza and other permitted events generate more than \$25 million annually.

Every dollar generated through these events is one less dollar that must come from property taxes — and one more that can be invested in neighborhood parks, programs and maintenance. These events drive tourism, support local businesses and create good jobs.

We have also worked to modernize systems that families rely on.

For years, summer day camp registration has been a source of frustration. This year, we are launching the first phase of reforms to make the process easier and more accessible. Improvements include a new map-based search showing available slots, clearer step-by-step instructions and preregistration webinars.

This is only the beginning. Our

team is already working on the next phase for summer 2027, with the goal of building a system that better serves families. We still have work to do, and Chicago families are right to expect a registration system that is simpler, fairer and easier to navigate.

We are also making our decision-making more transparent and community-driven. This year, the Park District launched a participatory budgeting initiative, giving residents a direct voice in how funds are invested in their neighborhood parks.

Across the district, we have strengthened core operations and modernized how we serve the public. In the past year, we launched a new website to make programs easier to access and restructured our Security Department into a Department of Public Safety with stronger technology, staffing and a focus on prevention. We also strengthened policies related to workplace violence and firearms and provided updated staff training to ensure our parks remain safe and welcoming.

We continue investing in the long-term future of our parks. Recent investments include lead service line replacement, Americans with Disabilities Act improvements at park facilities used as polling locations and environmental restoration efforts such as the planned transformation of the Calumet Confined Disposal Facility into a new lakefront park space on Chicago's Southeast Side.

Our commitment also extends to programs that support community safety. Night Out in the Parks brings music, culture and performances into neighborhoods across the city, activating public spaces and bringing people together.

At a time when many cities are grappling with public safety and social connection, parks are more than places to relax. They create opportunities for young people. They strengthen neighborhoods and our local economy. They serve as community anchors.

More than a century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt called Chicago's park system "the most notable civic achievement in any American city." After a year leading the Chicago Park District, I believe that still rings true.

In a city as big and complex as Chicago, there are not many things that truly belong to everyone. Our parks do. They are where Chicago breathes, where neighbors become community and where the future of our city takes root.

As I begin my second year in this role, I remain committed to protecting and advancing our parks for the benefit of all 2.7 million Chicagoans across 77 communities.

I hope to see you in the parks — because they belong to you, and to all of us.

Carlos Ramirez-Rosa is general superintendent and CEO of the Chicago Park District.

OPINION

Our NATO allies are unwilling to play Donald Trump's game this time around

Daniel DePetris

Mark Rutte may not be a household name in the Chicago area or the rest of America, but the man is perhaps the only thing standing in the way of a full-blown collision between President Donald Trump and the NATO alliance.

NATO's secretary-general has emerged as Europe's most capable Trump whisperer, someone who can fly to Washington at a moment's notice to talk the mercurial president away from the ledge. Last July, Rutte made a trip to the White House to push for a NATO-financed scheme that would sustain weapons shipments to Kyiv for Ukraine's war against Russia — following Trump's infamous blowup with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Rutte pulled it off again in October, when it seemed like Trump would bypass Ukraine to negotiate an end to the war directly with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

What Rutte did back then appears relatively easy compared with the challenge he faces in Washington this week. The relationship between NATO and its most important member, the United States, is shaky. The nearly six-week-long war in Iran may be occurring thousands of miles away from NATO headquarters, but its impacts are reverberating throughout Europe in the form of ballooning fuel prices and the risk of energy shortages. Trump has been in an increasingly agitated state, lobbing barbs at the alliance for refusing to help clear the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf chokepoint where around 20% of the world's oil flowed until Iran effectively shuttered it. It may be time, Trump recently said, to consider withdrawing from the organization.

Ordinarily, such words would set off panic throughout Europe. When Trump blasted NATO allies during the organization's 2018 summit for penny-pinchers on defense, European heads of state responded by pledging more defense spending. Last year, in the midst of Trump's attacks on Zelenskyy and a growing perception in



NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte speaks during a meeting with President Donald Trump on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland on Jan. 21. DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

European capitals that Trump was ready to leave NATO behind, the alliance's members mollified him by pledging to spend 5% of their gross domestic product on the military over the next decade.

This time, Trump's pressure tactics are sparking resistance, not appeasement. He is huffing and puffing like he did before, but Europe isn't responding in the way he'd like by sending their limited naval assets into the Strait of Hormuz. Instead, NATO is staying on the sidelines, and some members such as France, Spain and Italy are prohibiting U.S. military aircraft from using their bases for the war effort. As one can imagine, this is enraging some Republican talking heads.

Ari Fleischer, George W. Bush's former press secretary, accused NATO's Western European heavyweights of compromising the unity of the alliance. Ditto U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham: "The repercussions of providing little assistance to keep the Strait of

Hormuz functioning are going to be wide and deep for Europe and America."

The Europeans are shrugging off these comments, if not ignoring them entirely. None of them believe waging a war of choice against Iran is a particularly smart thing to do — and the reasons for that are clear. Nobody wants higher oil and gas prices. Their interests aren't served when Iranian missiles and drones target Qatari natural gas facilities, Saudi refineries and Kuwaiti oil fields.

And with the war in Ukraine still very much churning along, the last thing European states want to do is deploy their warships, surveillance assets and combat aircraft to serve a war they weren't consulted about. French President Emmanuel Macron spoke for many of his European colleagues when he implied that the U.S. is essentially asking for a bailout.

"I'm not here to comment on an operation that the Americans decided on with the Israelis, on

their own," Macron told journalists last week. "They can later complain that they aren't being supported in this operation that they decided on alone."

The average American may find all of this fairly abstract, but the Iran war actually provides a good lesson in what alliances are — and, just as importantly, what they're not.

Alliances involve security relationships between two or more states against a common threat; ideally, the countries that enter into them all benefit. NATO is often referred to as a golden class because all of its members are entitled to the same protection: An attack on one is considered an attack on all. By pooling resources and committing to one another's defense, deterrence is strengthened and a potential attacker likely will think twice before waging war.

Alliances, however, do not mean states have to engage in warfare just because an ally chooses to do

so. For instance, if Poland were to attack Belarus, the U.S., France and Germany, among other NATO members, would not be required to enter into the conflict. States still have agency and the capacity to make decisions for themselves, and ultimately national interests override other considerations.

If a state concludes that entering a conflict is not in its own interest, then it has the sovereignty right to be a spectator.

Trump, of course, probably didn't take an international relations course during his days at Penn's Wharton School. If he did, he would understand that the United States having allies does not entitle it to automatic support of its decision-making. This is especially the case if the decision involves starting a war none of those allies wanted.

Daniel DePetris is a fellow at Defense Priorities and a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

Voice of the People

Weaponizing religion

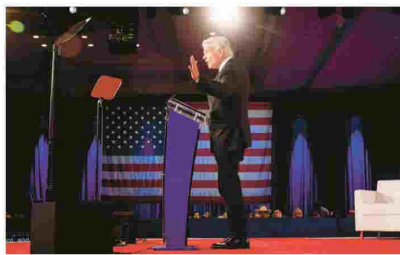
I am an Iranian American. The leader of my adopted country is bombing my country of birth and threatening to send it — and its people — "back to the Stone Ages." I am watching one government endanger the very people who nurtured me as a young man, enabling me to come here, build a family, and contribute meaningfully to this nation's economy and technological advancement. I write this fully aware that our secretary of state finds it important to scrutinize dissenting voices, even among naturalized Americans. So be it.

The war on Iran is illegal and immoral — there are no Iranian weapons capable of reaching American soil, and no credible evidence has been presented to suggest an imminent threat. By and large, Americans are decent people. Many see this war for what it is. A majority oppose it, and those in power know that.

So how is such a war justified? A prominent Christian Zionist pastor, Franklin Graham, claims that Persians — by which he means the people of modern Iran — seek to murder Jews. He invokes the story of Esther, recounting how a Jewish queen and her cousin thwarted a plot against their people in ancient Persia about 2,500 years ago. From this, he implies a moral justification for today's war.

This is a misleading and selective retelling. It omits that the same biblical account also describes the killing of 75,000 Iranian Persians by the Iranian Jews in the aftermath. It ignores that the traditional burial site of Esther and Mordecai lies in present-day Iran, in the city of Hamadan — respected by Iranians across religious lines. It overlooks that Cyrus the Great, founder of the Persian Empire, liberated the Jews from Babylon, supported their return to Jerusalem and funded the rebuilding of their temple. These are not obscure facts; they are foundational to our shared story.

The distortion uses religion as a tool to inflame hate and justify violence. Such rhetoric echoes



Evangelist Franklin Graham speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference CPAC in Grapevine, Texas, on March 25.

DESIREE RIOS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

in official statements as well — in prayers for destruction, in invocations of divine sanction for war and in casual references to catastrophic violence.

Religious and public leaders must be held accountable when they weaponize belief to justify suffering. Condemnation from moral authorities, including Pope Leo XIV, has been important — but it is not enough. The media, too, must do more than simply report these claims. It must challenge them.

Silence, or neutrality in the face of such distortion, is complicity. — Mehran Arbab, Chicago

Displacement of people

Our military campaign in Iran, along with Israel's goal of eradicating Hezbollah in Lebanon, is displacing people throughout the Middle East. Who are we to lecture our European allies about limiting migration of people, when our own actions, along with Israel's, have created this humanitarian crisis? — Silvana Santilli, Oak Park

Let president end threat

Reading some of Friday's letters, I wonder if the writers are too young to remember or if they have memory loss when it comes to Iran's threat to America. I remember watching on a daily basis the status of the hostages taken in Iran in 1979,

who remained hostages for 444 days. Let's not forget 9/11, when nearly 3,000 people died due to a terrorist attack on our country. Let's remember Oct. 7, 2023, when Israel was attacked by Hamas, which is financed by Iran.

Do we need to wait until we are decimated in our own country? The threat has been there for 47 years. Let the president end it. — Patricia Bonk, Midlothian

Hegseth's decision-making

As Robert Geist's letter "Soldiers will follow Hegseth" (April 3) reached print, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth unceremoniously fired revered Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy George; Gen. David Hodne, head of Army training; and Maj. Gen. William Green Jr., the Army's chief chaplain. All this a month into a war of choice going terribly wrong.

The Army has been senselessly thrown into chaos. U.S. military morale is in free fall. Hegseth may just have made the biggest military leadership mistake in U.S. history. Geist might view Hegseth as a military leader he could follow. But if so, it's doubtful a single active Army soldier would be following behind Geist. — Walt Zlotow, West Suburban Peace Coalition, Glen Ellyn

Wait out the fluctuations

Watching the wild fluctuations of the markets clearly amazes

me because they turn on a dime and dramatically go up and down whenever President Donald Trump says something or posts something on Truth Social.

I find this unwerving to a certain extent, because I would not trust anything coming from him. He is a consistent liar, makes exaggerations and often contradicts himself.

I am not an economist and do not own any stocks directly, but I am aware that my annuities and pensions are affected by market turmoil. My advice to those who own stocks? Just hold on to them for the long term until this highly unpredictable man is out of the White House.

— Larry Vigon, Chicago

The Democrats' hypocrisy

How ironic is it that the Democrats in Congress are denying they are responsible for the government shutdown, yet are saying they won't fund the Department of Homeland Security till their demands are met? Then again, there is U.S. Rep. Eric Swalwell, D-Calif., who advocated for the Jeffrey Epstein files to be released, but does not want the files on his involvement with an alleged Chinese spy released. — Al Zivnakis, Lemont

Republicans doing nothing

How do you negotiate without skilled diplomats? How do you start a war without understanding your opponent and the consequences of your actions? How do you justify the accidental killing of scores of children and the displacement of millions? How do you explain that a major threat to the global economy can be caused by one mentally unstable man?

All of this could have been avoided had Congress taken a more forceful role with this president. But that has not happened.

The majority of Americans do not want a war, do not want higher prices, are concerned about climate change and want

immigration reform that doesn't include storm troopers. Many Americans cannot afford housing or medical care. Pretty much all of us are exhausted by political polarization, lies and misinformation, and are disgusted by video game memes and artificial intelligence-generated videos put up by the White House that demonstrate a complete lack of humanity — as if "humanity" demonstrates weakness.

Here's what weakness is: people who feel so inadequate and fearful deep inside that they need to inflict pain and cruelty on others. When these people come into power, very bad things happen.

Over the past year, we've watched the U.S. Agency for International Development shuttered and hundreds of thousands die as a result. We've watched this administration blow up fishermen, kidnap the president of Venezuela, threaten to invade Greenland, start a war in the Middle East, refuse to help end a war in Ukraine, reward Russia, threaten to take over Cuba and denigrate NATO, whose soldiers died alongside ours on behalf of our war in Afghanistan.

We've watched a president who is motivated by weakness rather than by strength and by greed rather than charity. We've watched him dismantle our democracy, piece by piece, along with the East Wing of the White House. The only ones who have tried to stop him are independent judges — and often too late to undo the damage. The toll this has taken on Americans and on our standing in the world is incalculable and will certainly come back to bite us.

That Republican members of Congress have nothing to restrain him means one of two things: They see him for who he is but are too fearful to speak up, or they don't see him for who he is.

This citizen honestly does not know which is worse. — Francesca Kelly, Highland Park

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