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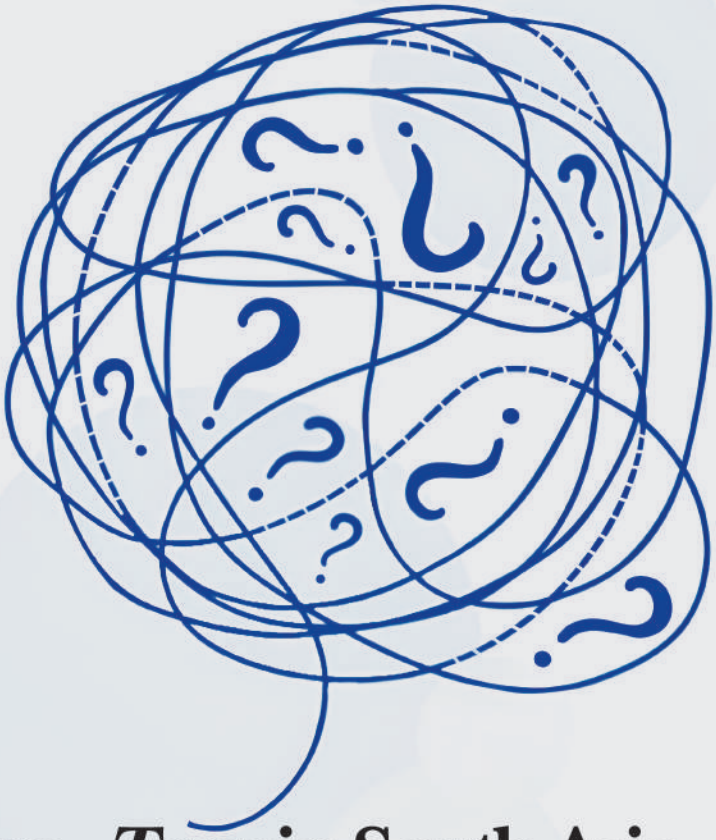

Future - *Tense* in South Asia

AJAY DARSHAN BEHERA

Najeeb H. Jung
Bridging Divides: How Ethical Values Shape Democracy & Economy

Sejal Sharma
Big Brother Takes Root in South Asia: Rise of AI Surveillance

Tony Klug
Can Middle East peace be carved out of the Gaza rubble

Stephen Kotkin
Trump and the Future of American Power

The SenseMaker
Damascus Unveiled: Eugene Rogan on a Divided City's History

Oscar Rickett
UAE's Growing Footprint in Africa

The **Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA)**, established in 2023 and affiliated with **Shree Guru Gobind Singh Tricentenary University** in Gurugram, India, serves as an Interdisciplinary research center dedicated to enhancing the understanding of Asia. It aims to navigate the complexities of various fields, including International Relations, health, law, and societal issues, by leveraging the expertise of leading scholars and practitioners through a multidisciplinary lens.

OUR VISION

ASIA aims to be a crucial platform for exploring Asia's social, political, and health-related issues by producing research that is introspective and reproducible, supporting diverse perspectives through various initiatives and media content.

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Asia is marked by complex dynamics in fields like international relations, health, law, and society. There is a pressing need for nuanced, interdisciplinary research to decode these complexities and provide informed insights.

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There's a significant gap in comprehensive, multidisciplinary research focusing on Asia. ASIA aims to fill this gap by bringing together experts across various fields to contribute to a deeper understanding of the region.

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The need for a platform that supports diverse perspectives on Asia's historical, political, and health-related issues is crucial. ASIA is working towards becoming such a platform through its various initiatives, including publications, conversations, and media content.

De/Cypher is a product of the Advanced Study Institute of Asia.

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Editorial

In the second edition of the De/Cypher Journal, we delve into the intricate and ever-evolving landscape of security—a concept rooted in human history yet continually reshaped by the challenges of our modern world. From the geographical fault lines of South Asia to the behavioural underpinnings of decision-making in crises, this issue seeks to connect diverse narratives under the broad canopy of security.

One question that emerges repeatedly is whether we are still "*prisoners of geography*". While the rise of globalisation once seemed to diminish the importance of physical borders, recent events—from Russia's invasion of Ukraine to renewed tensions in South Asia—remind us that geography continues to shape power dynamics and political decisions in profound ways. Geopolitics, in its purest sense, refers to how political behaviour is influenced by geographical markers. The natural contours of the land—mountains, plains, rivers—still guide national strategies, reinforcing the notion that leaders are often limited by their environment.

For our lede piece, we have Prof. Ajay Darshan Behera, who offers a perceptive analysis of South Asia's regional dynamics. His piece considers the "lost potential" of the region, inviting readers to reflect on how historical and political missteps have stifled opportunities for cooperation.

Building on this theme, for the flanking essay, Priyanka Garodia turns to the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship, tracing its historical, cultural, and geopolitical complexities. From the unresolved tensions of the Durand Line to the role of external powers like the United States and China, her article argues for greater cooperation to address the region's multifaceted security challenges.

In our coverage of the recent U.S. 2024 Elections, we have three articles that combine to form a package.

In the first essay of the package, Aurko Chakrabarti shifts the focus to the digital age, illustrating how new media, generative AI, and disinformation are reshaping traditional ideas of influence. Using the 2024 U.S. elections as a case study, he demonstrates the growing impact of influencer-driven platforms such as podcasts and social media on political and security landscapes.

From a global perspective, Prof. Stephen Kotkin links the power struggles of the Cold War to current security dilemmas. His reflections on the resurgence of nationalism and isolationism provide a valuable lens for understanding today's geopolitical environment.

Bringing a cultural dimension to the discussion, Prof. Badri Narayan explores how collective memory and identity influence electoral perceptions in South Asia. His article underscores the profound impact of cultural narratives in building or undermining societal resilience.

In the Middle East, Tony Klug offers a sharp critique of protracted conflicts, urging the need for diplomacy that moves beyond conventional frameworks. His call for innovative approaches underscores the urgency of resolving entrenched disputes in the region.

Turning to India, Najeeb H. Jung reflects on the challenges of governing a large and diverse democracy. He examines the ethical and social responsibilities of leadership while addressing pressing urban security issues, including rapid urbanisation and climate risks. His call for practical and holistic solutions resonates with the broader security discourse.

Our SenseMaker feature with Prof. Eugene Rogan focuses on his book The Damascus Events: The 1860 Massacre and the Making of the Modern Middle East. Rogan recounts how the tragic events of 1860 influenced the region's political and social structures, offering insights into the historical roots of today's conflicts and the lasting impact of colonial interventions.

In the Spotlight, Amogh Dev Rai discusses the human toll of Syria's protracted conflict. He emphasises the resilience of local communities and the importance of grassroots efforts in fostering hope and rebuilding fractured societies.

On a broader scale, Oscar Rickett examines the influence of global powers in Africa, where the intersection of aid, resource politics, and security crises creates a complex narrative of external engagement and its consequences.

Joe Adam George focuses on the evolving dynamics of India-Canada relations amid recent diplomatic tensions. His thoughts highlight the political and economic implications of these strained ties and their broader impact on international partnerships.

Shivani Singh turns to the Global Innovation Index (GII), discussing its significance for policy and economic growth. Her article reflects on the role of innovation in driving resilience and the importance of policies that support inclusive development.

Looking ahead, Sejal Sharma analyses the dual-edged role of artificial intelligence in security. She raises crucial questions about whether AI will serve as a stabilising force or a source of disruption in both national and global contexts.

Prof. Amit Suman compares the education policies of India and China, linking their historical legacies to modern strategies for economic growth. His article examines how education systems shape the ambitions of these nations to emerge as global superpowers.

The influence of Yuval Noah Harari's works on historical interpretation and foresight is studied by Jeff Rich. He critically examines Harari's perspectives on history, exploring how his ideas have shaped modern debates on the intersection of technology, politics, and human identity.

Farheen Yousuf writes about the rise of nudge units across Asia, focusing on how behavioural insights are being applied to influence decision-making among the region's 4.6 billion people. Her article discusses the potential and limitations of using behavioural science in governance and policy, drawing on examples from countries like India and China.

As we close this edition, we also bring to you information about the latest cultural events across Asia as well as book reviews related to the theme of security, geography, and culture.

These diverse perspectives together show that security cannot be defined as a monolith. It is a mosaic of history, culture, economics, technology, and human behaviour. We hope this edition provokes thought, spark dialogue, and perhaps bring to mind some of the most pressing security challenges of our time.

Aurko Chakrabarti, Editor, De/Cypher

lede :

“a geography in search of security.”

ajay darshan behera | priyanka garodia

SAARC

BIMSTEC

Elusive Regional Cooperation in South Asia: Is it in India's Interest?

AJAY DARSHAN BEHERA

Introduction

South Asia, comprising eight nations—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Afghanistan—is home to over 2.04 billion people, nearly a quarter of the global population. Given its vast human resources, shared cultural heritage, and geographic proximity, this region holds immense potential for socio-economic transformation through regional cooperation. Yet, despite these advantages, South Asia remains the least integrated region globally. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in 1985, was conceived as the principal mechanism for fostering regional unity and economic collaboration. However, decades later, the organisation's efficacy has been stymied by entrenched political rivalries, most notably between India and Pakistan, and diverging national priorities.

This lack of amity and cooperation has serious implications not only for South Asia's collective development but also for India, the largest and most influential country in the region. India's strategic interests and global ambitions are intrinsically tied to the stability and prosperity of its neighbourhood. Understanding the reasons behind South Asia's elusive cooperation—rooted in historical legacies, political obstacles, and strategic dynamics—and evaluating India's role in overcoming these challenges is essential for charting a path toward a more economically vibrant South Asia.

The Paradox of Proximity

The irony of South Asia lies in its deeply interconnected history and geography juxtaposed against its fragmented political and economic landscape. Shared borders, rivers, and cultural ties have not translated into effective cooperation. Instead, historical grievances and asymmetric power dynamics have entrenched divisions.

The shadow of colonialism looms large over South Asia's political landscape. The 1947 partition of British India, which resulted in the creation of India and Pakistan, remains a traumatic and polarising event. The partition led to widespread violence, displacing 15 million people and leaving nearly a million

AJAY DARSHAN BEHERA is a Professor at the Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, specialising in South Asia's security, political violence, and foreign policy. A former Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution, he is the author of Violence, Terrorism and Human Security in South Asia and co-editor of Pakistan in a Changing Strategic Context. He is a recipient of the prestigious Kodikara Award.

dead. Beyond the human cost, it entrenched territorial disputes, particularly over Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), a region claimed by both India and Pakistan. Partition also institutionalised mistrust that extended beyond India-Pakistan relations. Nepal's deep-seated suspicions of Indian intentions trace back to colonial-era treaties that rendered it reliant on Indian trade routes. Similarly, Bangladesh, despite its independence with India's support in 1971, has voiced concerns over water-sharing agreements, such as the contentious Teesta River dispute, accusing India of prioritising its interests at the expense of smaller neighbours.

The rivalry between India and Pakistan remains the most significant impediment to regional cooperation in South Asia. The two countries have fought four wars—in 1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999—and have been locked in a tense and adversarial relationship for more than seven decades. At the heart of this hostility lies the unresolved dispute over J&K, with Pakistan demanding its resolution as a prerequisite for broader collaboration. This entrenched conflict has spilled over into nearly every aspect of their bilateral relations, affecting trade, diplomacy, and efforts at regional cooperation. Pakistan's foreign policy is heavily influenced by its military establishment, which perceives India as an existential threat. This perception drives Pakistan's reliance on asymmetric warfare tactics, including support for terrorist groups that target India, further deepening the mistrust between the two countries.

India, on the other hand, has become distrustful of Pakistan's sincerity in fostering regional cooperation, particularly given the lack of concrete action against anti-India terrorist groups operating from Pakistani soil. After the 2016 Uri terror attack, which India attributed to Pakistan-based militants, New Delhi withdrew from the 19th SAARC summit slated to be held in Islamabad, citing Pakistan's role in the incident. Since then, India has sought to isolate Pakistan diplomatically and has championed sub-regional platforms like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) to bypass Pakistan's obstructionism. India has also made it clear that it will not re-engage in SAARC summits unless Pakistan takes demonstrable steps to combat terrorism.

This rivalry not only undermines bilateral ties but has also paralysed regional platforms like SAARC. For the smaller countries in South Asia, the dominance of India-Pakistan disputes within SAARC has rendered the organisation ineffective, leading to frustration and scepticism about its viability as a forum for regional cooperation.

Another significant impediment is the absence of a shared threat or vision. Unlike the European Union, which unified around the need for post-war reconstruction, or ASEAN, which coalesced to counter communism, South Asia lacks a shared narrative. India's focus on countering terrorism and expanding economic influence often conflicts with the priorities of smaller nations. Bhutan and Maldives emphasise environmental sustainability, Nepal seeks infrastructure development, and Bangladesh prioritises climate adaptation. This divergence has prevented the alignment of policies and priorities necessary for regional integration.

The structural and geographical asymmetries in the region, dominated by India's preponderance, have also not fostered a sense of security among its neighbours. India's geographic centrality and economic dominance are both an asset and a liability. While its size makes it a natural hub for connectivity, it also creates a sense of vulnerability among its neighbours. Countries like Bhutan and Nepal, landlocked and dependent on Indian routes, perceive this dependency as a source of inequity. Such asymmetries extend to trade, where protectionist policies and high tariffs further isolate smaller economies.

Strategic and Economic Imperatives for Cooperation

The harsh reality facing South Asia is that it remains one of the world's most underdeveloped and impoverished regions. This stark reality underscores the imperative for regional cooperation also as a means to address widespread poverty, underdevelopment, and shared challenges. With its unique geographic position and untapped potential, South Asia has the resources and opportunities to transform its socio-economic landscape. However, this potential has been persistently undermined by entrenched rivalries, divergent national priorities, institutional weaknesses, and structural deficiencies. Regional cooperation, particularly through economic integration and collective action, offers a viable pathway to overcoming these challenges. Yet, realising this vision requires addressing economic fragmentation, non-traditional security threats, and the strategic dynamics reshaping the region, including China's growing influence.

South Asia presents a paradoxical economic landscape. Despite being home to some of the world's fastest-growing economies, such as India and Bangladesh, it remains one of the least integrated regions globally. According to the World Bank, intra-regional trade accounts for a paltry 5% of the region's total trade, a glaring disparity compared to 35% in East Asia and 60% in Europe. This glaring disparity highlights the untapped potential of regional economic integration.

For India, fostering deeper regional cooperation could unlock vital markets and reduce its reliance on distant trading partners. For example, Bhutan and Nepal's substantial hydropower resources could help meet India's growing energy demands while providing much-needed revenue for these smaller neighbours. Similarly, Bangladesh's thriving textile industry could significantly benefit from enhanced access to Indian markets. However, structural inefficiencies, including high tariffs and inadequate transport infrastructure, continue to hinder the realisation of these opportunities. The cost of transporting goods within South Asia remains prohibitively high, further reducing regional competitiveness.

Smaller South Asian states also stand to gain significantly from greater regional trade. Landlocked countries like Bhutan and Nepal depend on India for connectivity. At the same time, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are well-positioned to leverage their strategic ports and integrate into global supply chains. However, mistrust of India's economic dominance often drives these states to seek alternative partnerships with external powers like China. This dynamic has created a fragmented economic landscape where opportunities for collective growth are routinely squandered.

India's approach to regional trade is often perceived as domineering. The smaller states have accused India of leveraging its economic power to impose unfavourable terms to its partners, such as maintaining trade imbalances with Bangladesh and Nepal. Furthermore, India's preferential focus on non-SAARC trade partners, as seen through initiatives like its Look East Policy and robust trade relations with China, has diluted the potential benefits of South Asian integration.

Smaller South Asian states approach economic integration with caution, fearing that closer ties with India could result in dependency and imbalance. For instance, Bangladesh, despite its growing economic ties with India, has expressed frustration over trade imbalances and Indian tariffs on Bangladeshi textiles. Similarly, Pakistan's long-standing refusal to grant India Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status reflects its apprehension that economic reliance on India could exacerbate its geopolitical vulnerabilities.

Beyond economic imperatives, South Asia faces pressing non-traditional security challenges that threaten the stability and livelihoods of millions. These include climate change, pollution, terrorism, and pandemics.

These challenges transcend national borders and require collective solutions, yet political rivalries have stymied regional cooperation.

Climate change is among the most pressing, with rising temperatures, glacial melting, erratic monsoons, and rising sea levels threatening millions. With its low-lying geography, Bangladesh is at the forefront of this crisis, facing annual flooding that displaces millions and threatens agricultural productivity. India, as the largest carbon emitter in the region, has a critical role in driving regional climate action. Despite these shared risks, regional efforts to address environmental challenges remain piecemeal. Efforts to establish comprehensive frameworks for water management and climate resilience, such as in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin, have been hampered by political disputes and mistrust. Regional frameworks like SAARC's Environment Action Plan exist but remains largely underutilised.

Terrorism and organised crime also pose significant regional threats. South Asia is home to multiple insurgent and extremist groups that exploit porous borders and weak governance structures. Networks operating between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India exacerbate regional instability, while trafficking in drugs, arms, and people undermines socio-political cohesion. While terrorism affects all South Asian countries to varying degrees, mistrust has hindered efforts to establish a unified counterterrorism framework. The SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, established in 1987, was an attempt to create a cooperative framework but has been undermined by Pakistan's support for extremist groups and India's reluctance to trust Islamabad. It remains ineffective due to India-Pakistan hostilities and mutual accusations of harbouring militants. Without a unified counterterrorism strategy, South Asia remains vulnerable to extremist violence.

Public health is another area where regional cooperation is critical. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inadequacies of South Asia's healthcare infrastructure, with countries struggling to contain the virus and secure vaccines. While India attempted to lead regional efforts through vaccine diplomacy, these initiatives were undermined by bilateral tensions and Pakistan's reluctance to engage through SAARC. This disjointed response highlights the need for stronger regional health mechanisms. Greater investment in regional health mechanisms, such as a South Asian public health fund or a shared disease surveillance system, could strengthen collective resilience. With its robust pharmaceutical industry, India is well-positioned to lead such initiatives.

A new layer of complexity to regional dynamics has emerged due to China's growing presence in South Asia, facilitated by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing has established itself as a dominant economic player through investments in infrastructure projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port. According to a Brookings Report, China has further increased its exports to SAARC countries from $1.2 billion in 1992 to $51.7 billion in 2018. For smaller South Asian states, Chinese funding offers an alternative to Indian dominance, enabling them to diversify their partnerships.

However, these relationships come with significant risks. The Hambantota Port's transfer to Chinese control under a 99-year lease agreement due to Sri Lanka's debt default is a stark reminder of the dangers of over-reliance on Chinese loans. Similarly, Nepal's growing engagement with China has raised concerns about Beijing's influence on its domestic policies.

India views China's presence in its neighbourhood as a direct threat to its regional leadership. Beijing's investments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Nepal challenge India's strategic interests, and projects like the Gwadar Port provide China with a foothold in the Indian Ocean. In response, India has sought to counterbalance

China through sub-regional initiatives like BIMSTEC and the BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) corridor. However, these efforts often bypass SAARC, alienating countries like Pakistan and raising questions about India's commitment to inclusive regionalism. Against this backdrop, India, as the region's most influential power, finds itself navigating a challenging predicament. It has to find ways to balance its aspirations for global leadership with the pressing need to stabilise its immediate neighbourhood. It is worth reflecting on whether our neighbours are increasingly aligning with China-led initiatives as SAARC continues to languish in stagnation.

The Role of SAARC and Alternatives

Since its inception in 1985, SAARC has grappled with issues that have undermined its efficacy. Chief among these is its consensus-based decision-making process, which requires unanimous agreement for any major policy or initiative. This framework often stalls progress, as member states prioritise national interests or use their veto power to block regional initiatives. For instance, Pakistan's refusal to sign agreements on regional connectivity during the 2014 Kathmandu summit exemplifies how bilateral disputes overshadow collective goals.

Another critical challenge is SAARC's inability to address pressing issues like terrorism, climate change, and economic inequality. Despite adopting frameworks such as the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (1987), mistrust between member states has prevented effective implementation. Similarly, initiatives like the SAARC Food Bank have failed to deliver tangible benefits, as countries prefer bilateral arrangements over regional frameworks. The absence of enforcement mechanisms further weakens the organisation, allowing member states to bypass agreed-upon commitments without consequences.

India's frustration with SAARC's inefficacy has led to a pivot toward sub-regional platforms like BIMSTEC and BBIN. These initiatives have allowed India to bypass Pakistan's obstructionism and focus on functional cooperation with willing partners. BIMSTEC, which connects South Asia with Southeast Asia, has made progress in areas like connectivity, energy, and maritime security. For instance, BIMSTEC's efforts to enhance trade links and build regional infrastructure have attracted investment and strengthened ties among member states. Similarly, the BBIN corridor facilitates cross-border transport and trade among its four members, providing a model for pragmatic and issue-based cooperation.

Despite its shortcomings, SAARC remains the only forum encompassing all South Asian states, making it indispensable for comprehensive regional integration. Revitalising SAARC requires addressing its structural flaws and focusing on achievable goals. Narrowing its agenda to specific areas, such as trade liberalisation, climate resilience, and public health, could help rebuild trust and demonstrate the organisation's relevance.

India, as the largest and most influential member, must take the lead in this effort. This involves fostering trust among smaller countries by addressing their concerns about asymmetry and dominance. Engaging Pakistan on targeted issues, such as trade and counterterrorism, could also serve as a confidence-building measure, paving the way for broader cooperation. By demonstrating its commitment to inclusive regionalism, India can reinvigorate SAARC and restore its credibility as a platform for collective progress.

India's Role in Shaping the Future

India's leadership is pivotal to shaping South Asia's future. As the region's largest economy and most powerful state, India bears both the responsibility and the opportunity to drive regional integration. However, its dominant position in South Asia is a double-edged sword. While its economic and strategic clout naturally positions it as a leader, it simultaneously fuels perceptions of hegemony among smaller nations. Balancing strategic aspirations with the concerns of its neighbours is essential for fostering trust and building a cooperative regional framework.

Despite numerous challenges, initiatives like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement illustrate the potential for functional cooperation when political barriers are set aside. India's leadership in these efforts, coupled with its recent strides in improving bilateral relations, reflects an understanding that its stability and prosperity are intertwined with the region's success. The Gujral Doctrine, emphasising non-reciprocity in India's relations with smaller neighbours, still serves as a vital blueprint for fostering trust and reducing asymmetry. Offering equitable terms in trade and infrastructure projects remains central to this effort. For instance, India could address trade imbalances with Bangladesh by reducing tariffs on Bangladeshi textiles and increasing market access. Similarly, regional infrastructure investments, such as transboundary energy grids or climate-resilient agricultural systems, would benefit all parties while easing fears of domination.

Engaging Pakistan pragmatically remains one of India's most significant challenges. While the enduring rivalry between the two countries hinders regional progress, separating bilateral disputes from broader regional objectives can pave the way for issue-based cooperation. Targeted collaborative projects, such as joint water-sharing initiatives or public health campaigns, could serve as confidence-building measures, demonstrating tangible benefits of engagement even amid political tensions.

India's cultural and historical ties with South Asia provide a strong foundation for fostering goodwill. People-to-people connectivity through educational exchanges, cultural programmes, and tourism initiatives can strengthen regional bonds. India's leadership in vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated its capacity for soft power, earning goodwill and highlighting the benefits of cooperative action.

Conclusion: Navigating the Path Forward

South Asia, despite its shared history, interconnected cultures, and common challenges, remains deeply fragmented. The status quo is unsustainable. The lack of integration has profound economic, security, and social costs. Intra-regional trade, comprising just 5% of total trade, represents a colossal missed opportunity for growth. The fragmented approach to shared challenges like climate change, terrorism, and public health leaves millions vulnerable to instability and poverty. A unified South Asia, leveraging collective resources and expertise, could transform these shared vulnerabilities into opportunities for growth and resilience.

India, as the largest and most influential state, holds the key to unlocking the region's potential. Its leadership is not only a strategic necessity but also a moral imperative. By addressing the asymmetries that fuel mistrust and adopting inclusive frameworks, India can create a foundation for a united and prosperous South Asia. Revitalising SAARC is crucial to this effort. Narrowing SAARC's focus to functional areas such as trade, public health, and climate resilience could rebuild trust and deliver tangible outcomes. Simultaneously, India's engagement with Pakistan, while fraught with challenges, is essential. Pragmatic and issue-specific

cooperation, such as joint water management or collaborative health campaigns, could lay the groundwork for broader reconciliation.

Pakistan, too, must play a constructive role. Its fixation on parity with India and its reliance on external patrons like China has isolated it within South Asia. A shift toward regional cooperation, even amid political disputes, would yield significant benefits. For SAARC to thrive, Pakistan must demonstrate a willingness to separate bilateral disputes from regional objectives, signalling its commitment to collective progress.

The role of smaller South Asian nations—Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh—is equally critical. These nations must advocate for inclusive frameworks that address their specific needs while maintaining a balanced approach in their external partnerships. A regional vision that leverages both internal and external resources can ensure stability and autonomy.

While the path to regional integration in South Asia is fraught with obstacles, it is not without hope. By addressing mutual concerns, fostering trust, and embracing inclusive approaches, South Asia can unlock its immense potential. For India, leading this transformation is both a regional and global imperative. Its aspirations for major power status hinge on its ability to guide South Asia into a new era of stability and prosperity. ■

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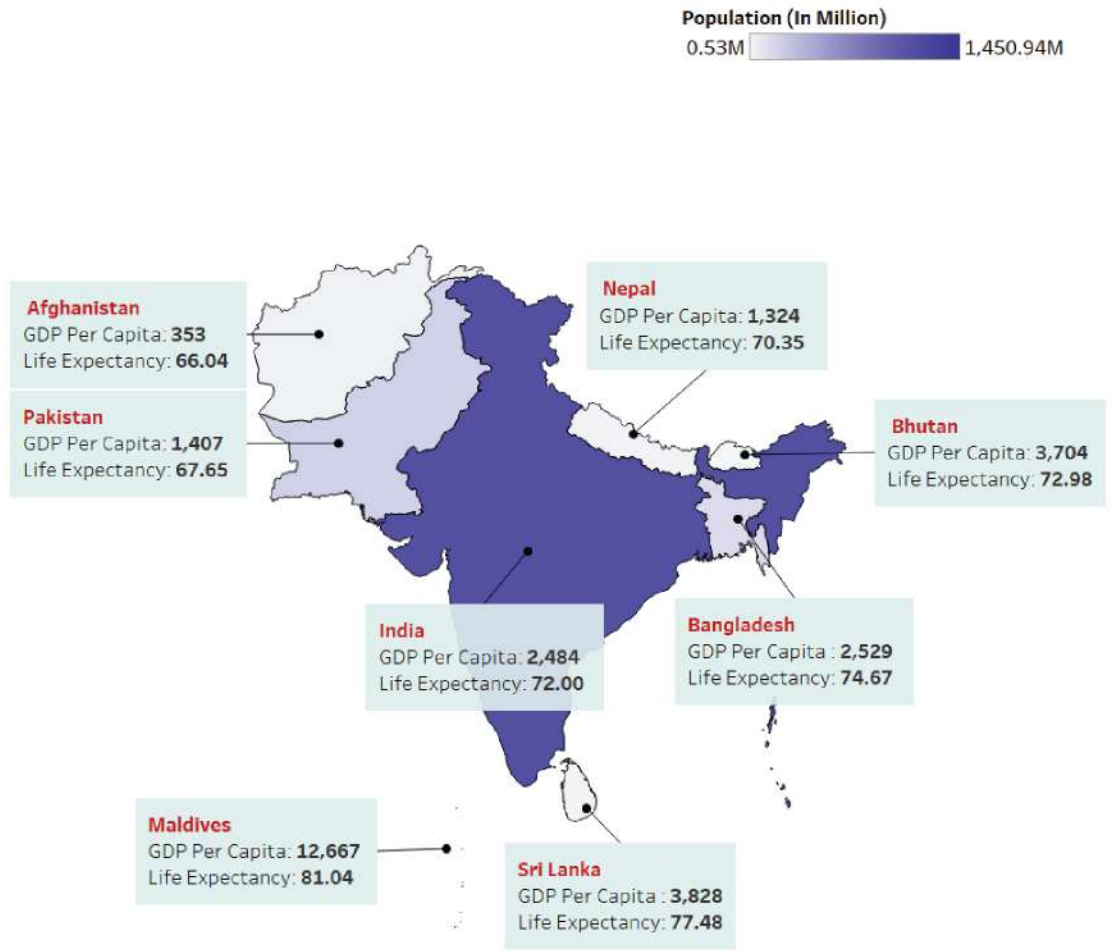
DATA TEAM

Development Indicators in South Asia: GDP and Life Expectancy

1. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Per Capita **in Current US $**
2. Life Expectancy **in Years**



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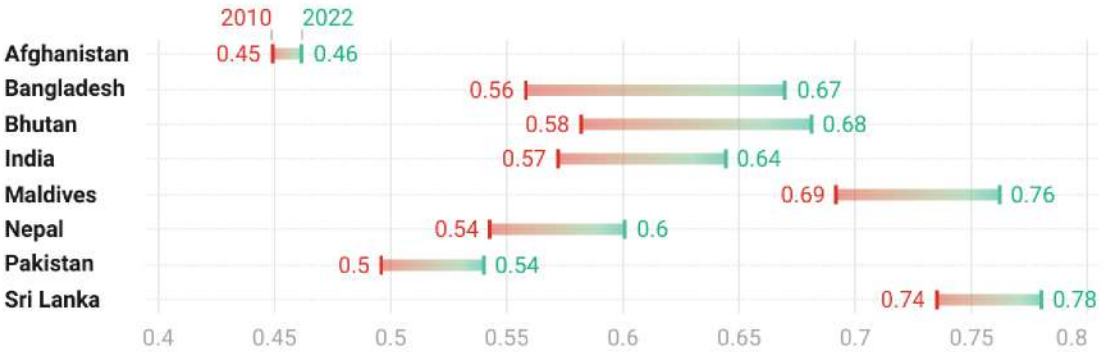
Source: World Bank, United Nations – World Population Prospects 2024

Human Development Index (2010 and 2022), South Asia

A value of 0 represents the lowest possible human development and 1 represents the highest level of human development.



***Pakistan and Afghanistan** are under the low human development category [below 0.55]. **Sri Lanka and the Maldives** are two countries that are categorised under High Human Development [0.700–0.799] while **India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar** are under Medium Human Development [0.550–0.699].*

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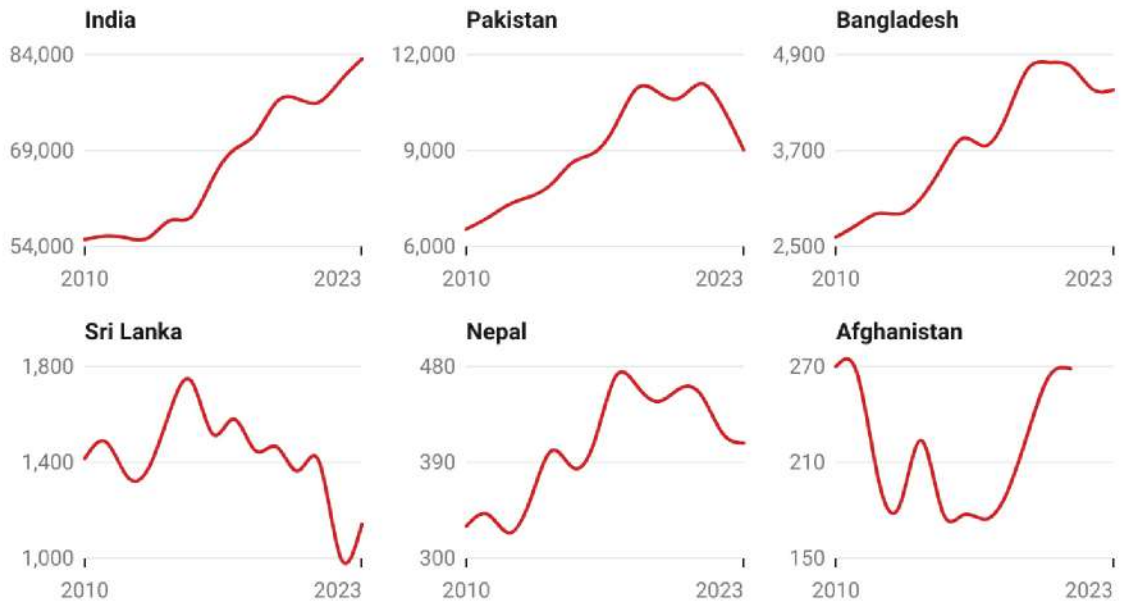
Created by Data Team

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Reports

Military Spending by South Asian Nations (US$ Million)

2010-2023



Data is expressed in constant 2022 US$

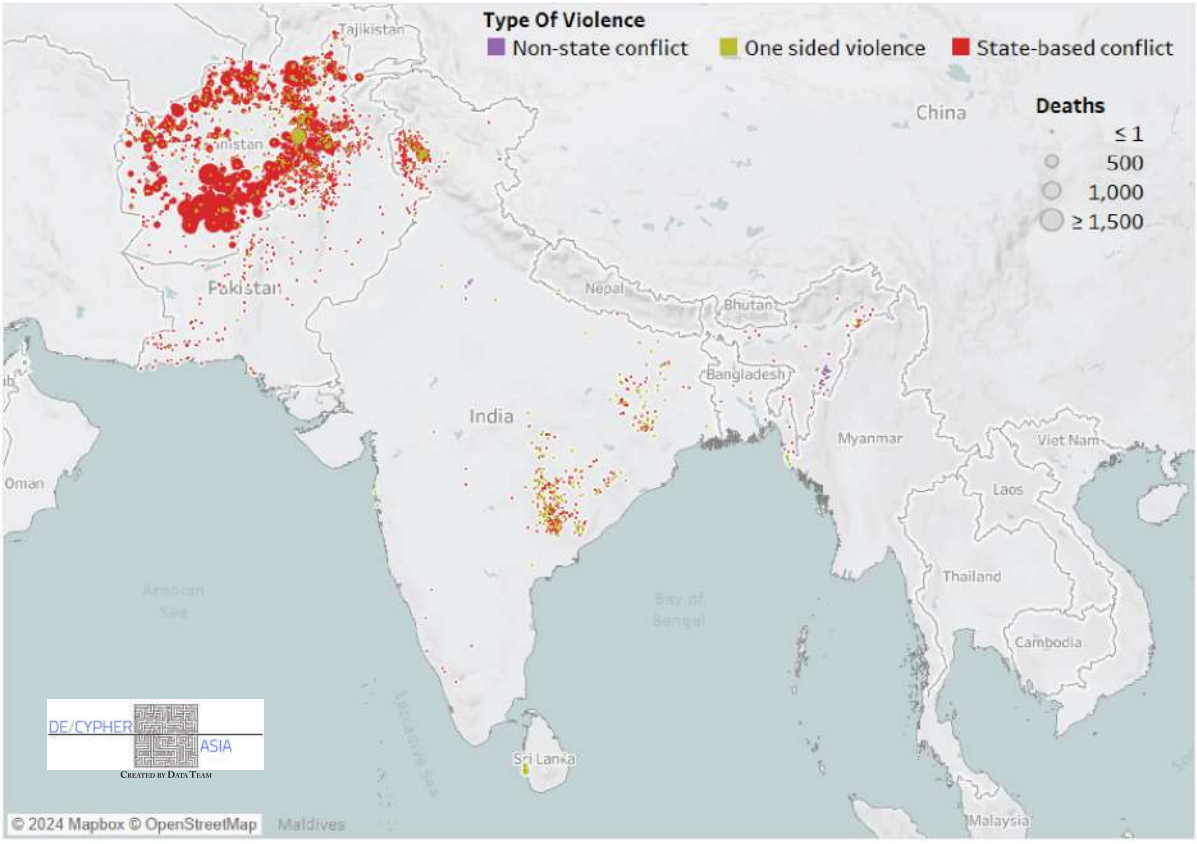
DE/CYPHER ASIA
Created by Data Team

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024)

Conflicts in South Asia in last 5 years: 2019-2023

Note: The colour depicts the type of violence and the size shows the number of deaths

Most of the conflicts are State Based Conflicts. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Jammu & Kashmir region have more conflicts in South Asia.

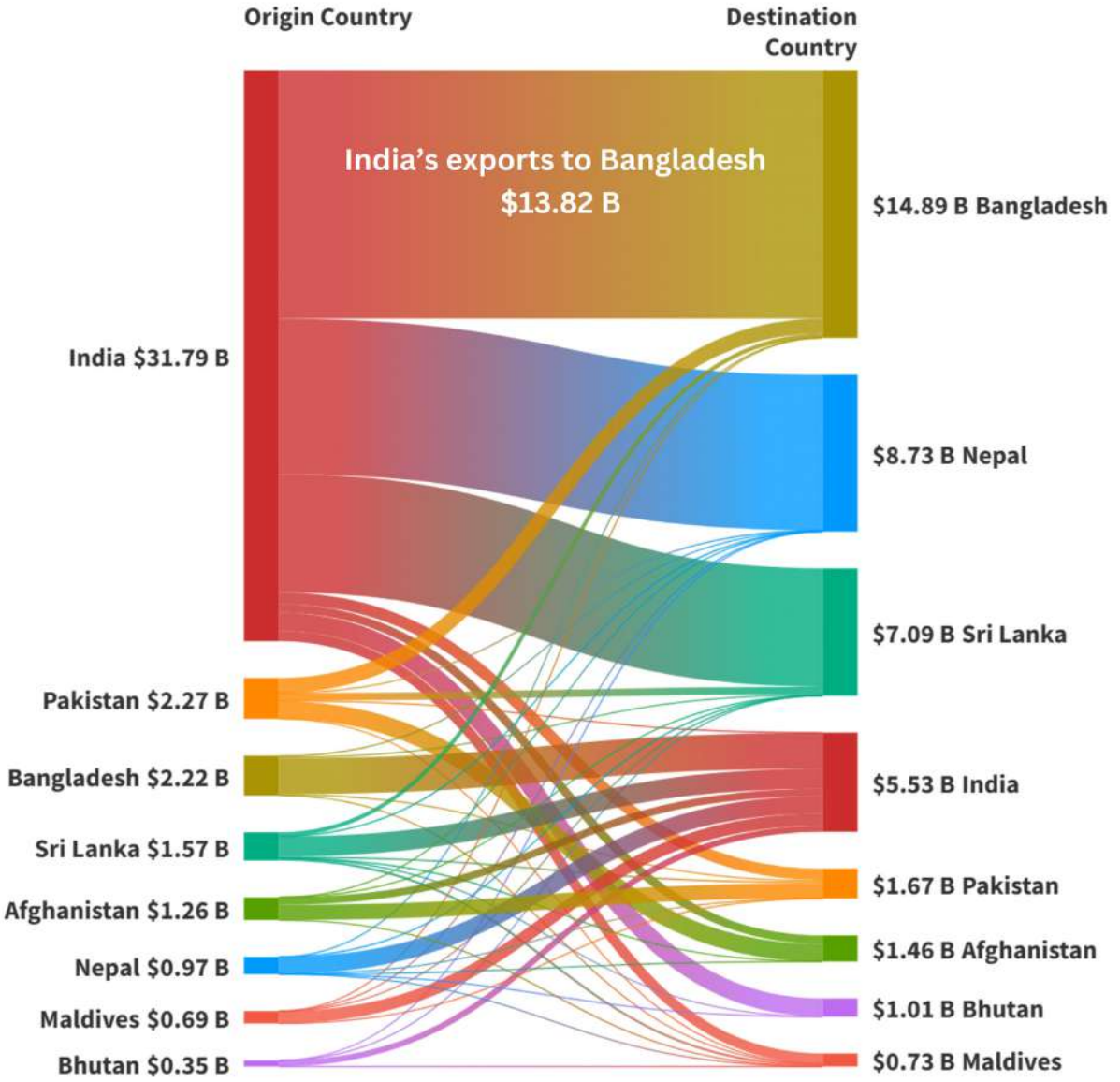


Source: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

- Non-State Conflicts: Violence between groups that are not state actors
- State-Based Conflicts: This refers to organized violence where at least one of the parties involved is a state government
- One-Sided Violence: Violence, when one group attacks unarmed civilian

Inter-Regional Trade in South Asia, 2022
Product Exports (In $ Billion)

India's inter-regional trade exports are around $31.79 billion



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Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)

Afghanistan and Pakistan: The Haunting Shadow of the Great Game

PRIYANKA GARODIA

South Asia is a theatre riddled with complex problems of security, territorial disputes, internal conflicts, economic discrepancies and non-traditional security concerns like climate change and public health issues. With a rich cultural tapestry and civilisational status it is region of great significance – both economic and geopolitical. However, the regional needs of South Asia have often taken a backseat to national priorities and bilateral tensions between member nations, making cooperation in security hard to achieve.

South Asia has been subject to the increasing acrimony like the United States and China who have become significant actors here. The proximity of South Asia to the Indo-Pacific has also had direct implications for the region. The Indo-Pacific is a vast network of sea lanes that comprises of the Indian Ocean and the western and central Pacific. It houses 60% of the world's population and is an important trade-route in the 21st century. The election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States in 2024 and the future of US-China ties in disarray – could have considerable consequences for South Asia. The complex security needs of the domain ranging from territorial disputes between India and Pakistan, terse ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan to the domination felt by Bhutan and Maldives by India, and the surge in non-traditional threats like climate change, mass migration, and cyber vulnerabilities, has made cooperative security vital in the region. The lack of multilateral cooperation, failing regional institutions and open dialogue between nations is greatly felt.

Given that most modern-day issues are not restricted to borders, the absence of regional and global cooperation makes it hard to achieve solutions to problems of security whether the threat be tradition or non-traditional. The uniqueness of the South Asian security landscape lies in fragmentary nature and the abject failure of institutions like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). While minilateral institutions like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) offers platforms to countries to come together and communicate, they have meet with limited success.

The deteriorating state of bilateral relations in the area has been a significant reason for the breakdown in cooperation and warrants closer attention to promote regional integration. While there are many countries to look at, Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak)

PRIYANKA GARODIA is a Research Analyst at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA), SGT University, India. Her work focuses on security, international affairs, gender politics, and feminist international relations. Her dissertation on armed conflict and gender roles has kept her interested in exploring this domain. She continues to publish on current affairs on multiple platforms.

relations with its complicated history, cultural proximity and strategic diversity offers an interesting case study for investigation. The tension and animosity between the two countries comes with a high-risk of spillover to disrupt regional stability. It also offers an understanding of how external powers like the United States and China have emerged as significant actors who are embroiled in the affairs of the region.

Afghanistan-Pakistan: Unfriendly Neighbourhood

Afghanistan and Pakistan's relationship carries significant weight of colonialism, Cold War politics and terrorism. Some the issues that plague their relationship include a disputed border with the Durand Line to the problem of Pashtunistan. Terrorist financing, destabilisation of internal affairs, migration issues and a plethora of other problems have emerged in recent times and the once consolidated block of Af-Pak does not remain so. However, things were not this bad always. Pakistan's sympathies for Afghanistan and their support for the Taliban was no secret. The clerical section of Pakistan and the Taliban shared close ties over an orthodox interpretation of Islam and the call for Jihad. Pakistan supported the Taliban with training, arms, money and political support from General Pervez Musharaff, in fact a sizeable chunk of the Taliban fighters even received their training in the Madrasas of Karachi.

Things took a turn for the worse with the 9/11 terror attacks, the Lal Masjid attack in 2007 and the Safoora Chowrangee Massacre on Pakistani soil. Pakistan's pro-Afghanistan stance wavered when America threatened to withdraw all favours granted to Islamabad since the Cold War which included millions of dollars that greased the wheels of the Pakistani economy and military and the fear of being declared a 'terrorist state'. Pakistan's anxiousness over international isolation and pariah status, if it continued supporting the Taliban led to it severing ties with Afghanistan. However, the seeds of extremism that were sown during the early 1990's and Islamabad's support for Mullah Omar had taken deep roots on either side of the Durand Line and were going nowhere. What followed is a quagmire that is riddled with issues of a porous border, the presence of militant groups, and cross-border terrorist attacks attached with a high civilian price.

Where are Things Now?

The two South Asian countries are in various stages of decay – Afghanistan has been taken over by the Taliban who rules it with an iron grip and Pakistan is dealing with a mammoth economic crisis with its total public debt and liabilities estimated at $223.86 billion. Security concerns like the resurgence of the Tehrik-e Taliban (TTP) and rise of the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K) has been a major concern for Pakistan. Given the state of diplomatic decay between Af-Pak, the Taliban have not been cooperative in dealing with issues of increased terrorism in Pakistan. The Taliban has refused to assist Pakistan in curbing the activities of the TTP whose resurgence has caused destruction, loss of life and severe damages for Islamabad. It is alleged that TTP militants are trained in Afghanistan in areas surrounding Khost and Paktika and leverage the porous border in North to slip in and out of Pakistan. Given that Afghanistan has historically never accepted the Durand Line, it makes patrolling and securing the border difficult for Pakistan.

In 2021, the TTP carried out 282 terrorist attacks alone. In 2022, more than 80 security personnels were dead. It mostly functions in the former Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) which is now part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region in Northern Pakistan. The TTP is Al-Qaeda's strongest ally in South Asia and shares close ties with Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) that fights for

Deobandhi supremacy in Pakistan. Pakistan has accused Afghanistan of creating a mini-Jihadist arena in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region and for not cooperating in containing the TTP.

Afghanistan has always maintained that the rise of the TTP is an internal issue for Pakistan and it is simply not their business to intervene. Issues like poor governance, law and order problems and high levels of corruption have made it easy for organisations like the TTP to setup in parts of Baluchistan and Karachi. Pakistan alleges that while these issues did posit conducive conditions for terrorism to germinate and spread, Afghanistan has been critical in providing the logistical support that the TTP require to cause terror. Afghanistan's major contention has been that Pakistan has always meddled in its internal affairs and has made governance a challenge.

The Problem of Community

A lot of the issues that characterise contemporary Af-Pak relations are manifestations of historical and communal grievances. The Durand line was an artificial border drawn by the British that divided the Pashtuni tribal territory into Afghanistan and Pakistan. While the Pashtun's make up 42% of the Afghani population, they comprise only 15% of Pakistan's population. The Durand Line has been unsuccessful in dividing the tribe and the Pashtuni people refuse to accept its demarcation. This has added to the tensions of Pakistan that sees Afghanistan's non-acceptance of the northern border as a direct attack on its sovereignty. Even if the Taliban do intervene and accept the division, the Pashtuni people do not seem to accept the division in territory.

An immediate aftermath of this conundrum has been the creation of a Pashtuni nationalism and that has complicated efforts on both sides of the border to settle issues. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) has emerged in Pakistan demanding for more rights and are often supported wholeheartedly by Afghanistan. Given Pakistan's historic treatment of its minorities, the issues has resulted in substantial damage for Pakistan's internal security. These internal discontents are then systematically harnessed by extremist groups who infiltrate the psyche of people and propose radical terrorist activities as the only solution to such problems. The radicalisation of Pashtuni nationalism with Islamist extremism has been done quite well by the TTP to wreak havoc in the northern side of Pakistan. The mutual distrust on either side of the border has resulted in multiple border conflicts and skirmishes taking place. How is this a regional problem?

The securitisation of Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan and the constant eruption of terrorist activities has left South Asia in a state of constant tension. The extremism perpetuated in either country could easily spillover across the region. The Jihadist movements could easily be mirrored and used to fuel more violence in other parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the rest of South Asia. The fact that these countries lie in close proximity to Central Asia should also not be overlooked. Pakistan's counter-terrorist strategies have been limited in reach including the National Action Plan (NAP) introduced in 2014 and operations like Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad.

Bangladesh has already been impacted significantly with the Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan, the further radicalisation of South Asia in Islamist extremism. Organisations like the Hifazat-e-Islam and Jamaat-e-Islami have already been emboldened by the Taliban and given the recent political instability may find rising extremism in the region as more conducive to their growth. India faces troubles with Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). There isn't a single nation in South Asia that will not be impacted by terrorism and rising extremism.

External Players and Af-Pak Dynamics

The United States of America withdrew from Afghanistan with a failed agenda. Its hasty withdrawal and the takeover by the Taliban resulted in feelings of betrayal and hurt in the people of Afghanistan. This has not boded well for Pakistan as well given that the US sees it as ineffective in controlling terrorism and the quality of the role that Pakistan plays in the War on Terror. Pakistan feels if not a little betrayed by the United States and has been public in voicing its difference. While Pakistan demands a more equal sitting with all of America's allied, America believes Pakistan has not been successful in weeding out unwanted elements from its backyard. An assessment that one can hardly argue with. What this also points to is that the basis of cooperation between the US and Pakistan has mostly been ad-hoc and limited to achieving immediate security need – whether it was the cold war, fighting the Al-Qaeda post-9/11 or using it to destabilise Afghanistan in retribution.

The American retraction from Af-Pak affairs and the inability of both Afghanistan and Pakistan to main economic stability has resulted in China getting embroiled in the fore. While China's intentions of engagement are purely economic, given that it has no intentions of social or political engineering in either Pakistan or Afghanistan. Its primary interest lies in the two countries because of their strategic location and what they can do for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) especially through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan with its faltering economy jumped at the chance of procuring a $62 Billion investment and began an "all-weather" partnership with the Red Dragon. This worked in both their favours as their alliance could also balance a rising India, a country the former are not particularly fond off.

China also prioritised its economic needs when dealing with Afghanistan and was the first country to host the Talabani Ambassador. Given that it has no qualms in dealing with countries that espouse non-democratic and ill-liberal values, both Af-Pakistan are some regional allies of China in South Asia. China has not only made economic investments but when it felt that the security concerns in the region could impede economic cooperation, set up multiple counterterrorism initiatives and border patrolling measures. China also sees positive ties with both Af-Pak to be essential in its India Policy. Thus, a deepening presence of China can be seen in - what is an already turbulent quagmire.

Whether it be the United States or whether it be China, South Asia has emerged on the international scene as an important strategic zone. Its problems are unique and its merit plenty. We need to understand that the forces at play here are often opposing and against the national interest of most countries, which has left regional integration weakened. Regional cooperation has been elusive in South Asia for many reasons but nothing as strong as the lack of any economic impetus to cooperate as often observed in other regional blocs like Europe and South-East Asia. With the fragmentation of the region into individual security calculations, it becomes easy for outside forces to come and push players around. It also makes dialogue and trust hard to come by.

The Future of Cooperation in South Asia

Such a preliminary investigation of Afghanistan and Pakistan reveals great insight into some of the problems that plagues South Asia. The complex security landscape and its multiple architects all point to failed multilateralism and open dialogue, the cloud of mistrust and the nature of the threats present in South Asia, points to the need for a cooperative framework of security to be adopted. Given the transnational nature of most security threats today, the

only pragmatic solution is - to cooperate. Cooperation is not simply for traditional notions of security that deal with military threats and missiles, it includes issues like climate change, public health, migration and cybersecurity.

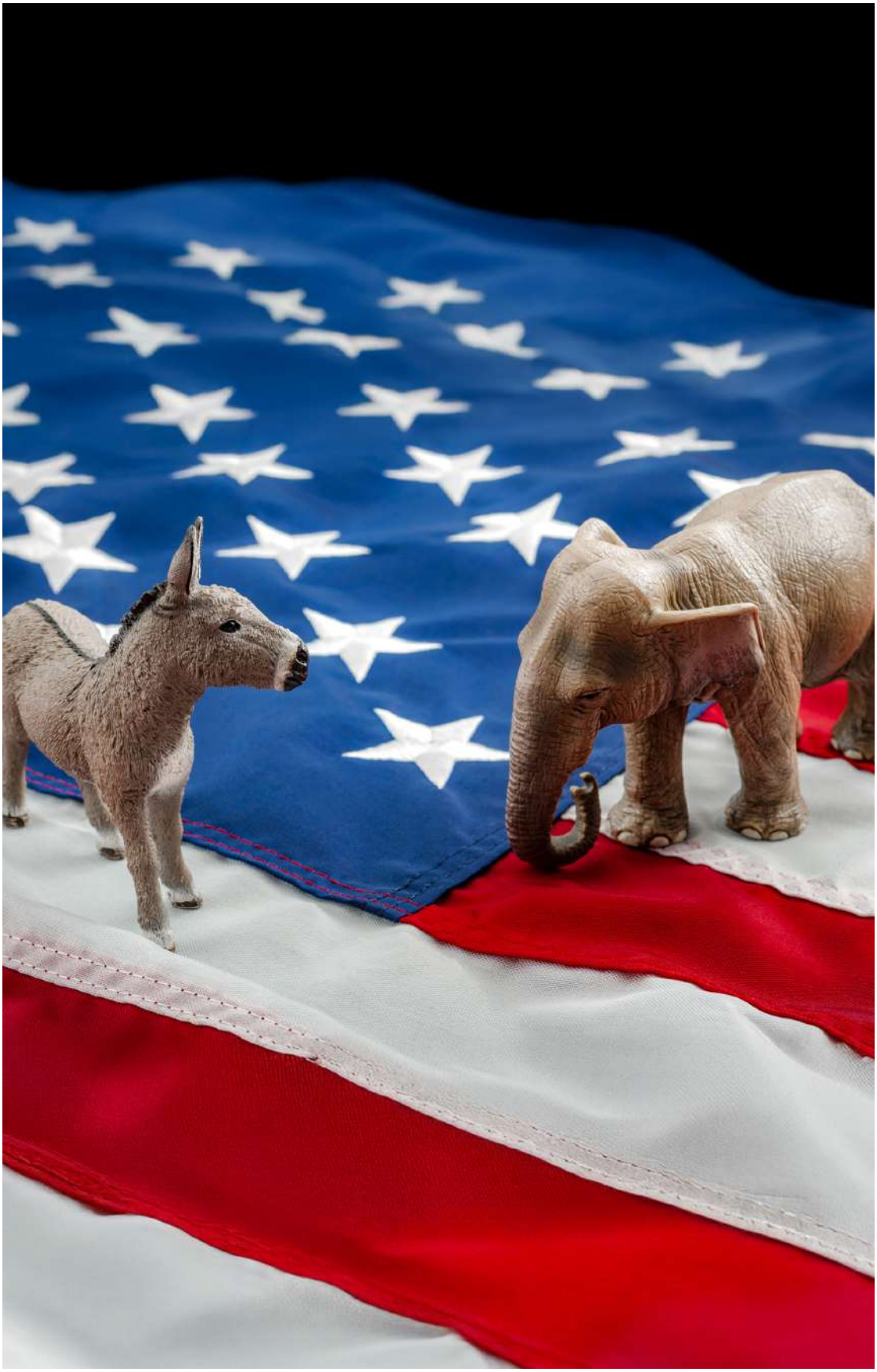
Countries like the Maldives, India and Bangladesh are projected to suffer from devasting effects of climate change soon, if not addressed in a timely manner. The impact of the climate crisis can be mitigated in due time but if the countries collaborate to create disaster preparedness mechanisms, creation frameworks for resource management and sharing and cooperate in technological innovation for green futures, they could reduce the level of destruction borne by one country.

Secondly, regional health cooperation in building South Asia's public health systems is vital. The Covid-19 pandemic had devastating effects for the entire world, but South Asia faced unprecedented consequences given that its public health care system is already stretched due to its large population. A regional framework that could help in mitigating the effects of the next global health crisis is the need of the hour – vaccination development and management, distribution plans, research and development along with disease surveillance methods are crucial to develop. Thirdly, underpinning all of these problems is the need for technological innovation and the prevention of maladaptive uses of technology. Cybersecurity is becoming an increasing important concern in South Asia. The region is home to some of the fasted growing digital markets and health economies in the world and has been facing increased cybersecurity threats. The creation of a comprehensive plan on the sharing of technology to solve for issues and a plan on cyber defence is needed.

Conclusion

The contention seen in Af-Pakistan relations is just one strand of the confusion and mistrust seen among South Asian countries. The historical mistrust, the lack of a comprehensive regional identity and the increasing presence of external forces are factors that make South Asia a volatile theatre. The mistrust and non-alignment between the countries of South Asia have made cooperation hard to obtain in the region.

To truly understand the potential of South Asia – a shared sense of being needs to be constructed in the region that allows nations to see that their gains are not mutually exclusive from one another but complimentary in nature. The problems that they face do not recognise national borders or national security calculations and thus the methods to resolve should also be innovative and transnational in nature. This will only be possible is South Asia adopts a newer and more comprehensive understanding of what security encompasses. ■



US Elections 2024: A Pivotal Turning Point

DE/CYPHER

"Not my President," echoed through the streets of California, New York, and other Democratic strongholds on election day in 2016, a repudiation of the results that saw Donald Trump secure victory despite losing the popular vote by millions. Eight years later, Trump finds himself declared the victor once again, but this time, the protests have turned to parties. The stigma surrounding "publicly" supporting Trump has dissipated, making him the first Republican to win the popular vote in over 20 years. His rise in mainstream popularity disrupted polling predictions, which had forecasted a cutthroat race to the finish line.

Trump's first term in office came with its share of controversies, with his handling of the Covid-19 pandemic seemingly sealing his fate as a one-term president. However, his political revival has been shaped by lessons from past mistakes. His 2024 campaign strategy was notably tailored, nuanced, and robust. For a time, the Trump campaign seemed to be running a tight ship—until the shock announcement of Kamala Harris as the Democratic nominee threw a spanner in the works.

An aged and fatigued Joe Biden was replaced by Harris, bringing a burst of much needed youthfulness to the Democratic ticket. Annoyed at the prospect of having to recalibrate his campaign, Trump cried foul, calling for Harris's campaign to be invalidated before it even began. Meanwhile, Democrats, trailing in the polls, found themselves reinvigorated. Harris's announcement sparked record donations, with $540 million accumulated during the Democratic National Convention.

Her choice for Vice President, Tim Walz, initially appeared strategic. His background as a war veteran, American football coach, and Christian resonated with core American values. He started strong, targeting his Republican counterpart JD Vance, and employing smear tactics that momentarily destabilised the Trump campaign. Labelling Vance as "weird" gained traction in the media, creating challenges for Trump's team. However, Walz's momentum faltered when his embellished military record and other missteps came to light. His inability to counter sustained attacks from the media and his lacklustre showing in the vice-presidential debate against the legally adept JD Vance diminished his credibility. As Vance grew into his role as a prosecutor of media narratives, Walz's airtime diminished, and he became a liability for the Democrats.

The Democrats' greatest misstep, however, was straying too far from their long-standing ideologies. Crowning Harris as the nominee without a presidential primary proved catastrophic. She became the first major-party candidate since 1932 to fail to turn a single county across the country. Her selection bypassed the autonomy of Democratic voters, projecting authoritarian undertones that alienated the base and contributed to lower voter turnout compared to previous elections.

Harris struggled to connect with voters. Her campaign, largely recycled from Hillary Clinton's, focused on admonishing Trump, echoing warnings about the threat he posed to democracy. However, Americans, having already seen Trump in power for four years, were less receptive to these arguments. The overreliance on attacking Trump left little room for Harris to present her vision for the nation's future. When asked what she would do differently from the Biden administration amidst rising inflation and illegal immigration, Harris's response "Nothing" further reinforced her image as an extension of Biden rather than an independent candidate.

The next four years will provide ample time for the Democrats to regroup and reassess their approach to politics. A reluctance to accept the changing status quo will leave them at risk of complete alienation. Given that the Republicans won a clean sweep of the Senate and House of Representatives, as well as the people's mandate, they will be looking to implement major reform as soon as possible. ■

Source: AP News, 18th November, 2024

Clinton
TRUMP

Trump and the Future of American Power

A CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN KOTKIN

Stephen Kotkin is a preeminent historian of Russia, a fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, and the author of an acclaimed three-volume biography of Joseph Stalin. (The third volume is forthcoming.) Kotkin has also written extensively and insightfully on geopolitics, the sources of American power, and the twists and turns of the Trump era. Executive Editor Justin Vogt spoke with Kotkin on Wednesday, November 6, in the wake of Donald Trump's decisive victory in the U.S. presidential election.

Interviewer:

You've written a number of times for Foreign Affairs about the war in Ukraine and what it means for the world and for American foreign policy. So let's start with an obvious question. It's impossible to know, of course, but what do you imagine Russian President Vladimir Putin is thinking right now, with Donald Trump poised to return to the White House for a second term?

Stephen Kotkin:

I wish I knew. These opaque regimes in Moscow and Beijing don't want us to know what they think. What we do know from their actions as well as their frequent public pronouncements is that they came to the view that America was in irreversible decline. We had the Iraq War and the shocking incompetence of the follow-up, where Washington lost the peace. And we lost the peace in Afghanistan. We had the 2008 financial crisis and the Great Recession. We had a lot of episodes that reinforced their view that we were in decline. They were only too happy to latch onto examples of their view that the United States and the collective West, as they call it, is in decline and, therefore, their day is going to come. They are the future; we are the past.

Stephen Kotkin:

Now, all of that happened before Trump. True, it looks like Trump is potentially a gift to them, because he doesn't like alliances, or at least that's what he says: allies are freeloaders. But what happened under Biden? It's not as if American power vastly increased under Biden, or under Obama, for that matter. So Trump may accelerate what Moscow and Beijing see as that self-weakening trend. But he's unpredictable. They may get the opposite. And they have revealed a lot of their own weaknesses and poor decision-making, to put it mildly.

Stephen Kotkin:

On Ukraine, Trump's unpredictability could cut in many directions. Trump doesn't believe one thing or the other on Ukraine. And so in a way, anything is possible. It may turn out to be worse for Ukraine, but it may turn out to be better. It's extremely hard to predict because Trump is hard to predict, even for himself. You could even have Ukraine getting into NATO under Trump, which was never going to happen under Biden. Now, I'm not saying that's going to happen. I'm not

saying there's even a high probability—nor am I saying it would be a good thing, or a bad thing, if it happened. I'm just saying that the idea that Trump is some special gift to our adversaries doesn't wash with me. And he may surprise them on alliances and on rebuilding American power. It might well cut in multiple directions at once.

Interviewer:

OK, but if you had to give Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky advice right now, what would it be?

Stephen Kotkin:

I'd say the same thing I've been saying for the past two years or so, which is similar to what Richard Haass wrote so eloquently in Foreign Affairs just this week. [Editor's Note: Haass wrote, in part, that Washington "should jettison the idea that, to win, Kyiv needs to liberate all its land. So as the United States and its allies continue to arm Ukraine, they must take the uncomfortable step of pushing Kyiv to negotiate with the Kremlin—and laying out a clear sense of how it should do so."

Stephen Kotkin:

The main problem is that there's been insufficient political pressure on the Putin regime. Until he worries that he has to pay a political price for his war, until his regime might be at risk—not his per capita GDP, not his soldiers, his cannon fodder, not his replaceable weapons—he can expend things that he doesn't care about: the lives of his own people, more and more ammunition, his domestic automobile industry, whatever. So if Trump is unable to bring significant pressure on Putin's political regime, then the outcome is that Ukraine will be condemned to fight a rear-guard action, a war of attrition against a superior power that can sacrifice lives more easily at a far higher scale. And even if the Ukrainians can be successful in the short term, and keep surviving through continued courage and ingenuity, they still have to figure out some modus vivendi with Russian power, which is adjacent to them and isn't going anywhere. Ukraine has to win the peace. And the reality is that Russian aggression is hardly the biggest risk Trump faces.

Interviewer:

So what is?

Stephen Kotkin:

The nontrivial chance of a great-power war breaking out in the Pacific theatre in East Asia—a war that the United States could lose, which is something we as a nation haven't talked about in a long time. I'm not defeatist by any means; I'm not suggesting we would lose. But the mere fact that it's thinkable is a big change.

Interviewer:

It's also been a long time since Americans have thought about mobilising for such a war.

Stephen Kotkin:

Right. And to put it bluntly, we don't have the people to die in a war at that scale. Everyone talks about the demographic problem the Chinese face. But they have 50 million 18-to-24-year-old men. [Editor's Note: There are around 12 million American men between 20 and 24 years old.] So even if a lot of young Chinese men go down to the bottom of the Taiwan Strait, a lot more can be sent into action.

Stephen Kotkin:

The United States is used to renting a land army. That's how U.S. military power works. It's a lend-lease approach to war. In World War II, we sent the Studebakers and the Jeeps and the radios and the Spam, and the Soviets sent 27 million people to die in defeating Hitler's land army. In the Pacific theatre, we sent Chiang Kai-shek some planes and weapons, and he provided the soldiers. And he lost at least 13 million. So we rented the Soviet land army in one theatre and the Chinese land army in another theatre, and we sent materiel and finances, and we won in both theatres as a result. But who are we

going to rent now? Who's available to rent?

Stephen Kotkin:

Yes, in the first Gulf War, we used superior technology. That keeps casualties low, even in a land war, which is usually very deadly for soldiers and civilians. But that degree of technological superiority is gone now, vis-à-vis China, in too many ways.

Interviewer:

Earlier this year, you wrote this in Foreign Affairs: "The supreme irony of American grand strategy for the past 70 years is that it worked, fostering an integrated world of impressive and shared prosperity, and yet is now being abandoned. The United States was open for business to its adversaries, without reciprocation. Today, however, so-called industrial policy and protectionism are partially closing the country not just to rivals but also to U.S. allies, partners, friends, and potential friends. American policy has come to resemble China's—right when the latter has hit a wall."

Interviewer:

How does Trump fit into that story?

Stephen Kotkin:

Well, we weren't ready for our success. The goal was to create this open global system that everyone could join and prosper from: a liberal international order. And it was going to be amazing for everybody. And they could join on a voluntary basis, not through some coercive "spheres of influence" approach. And they were going to get wealthy; they were going to go from poor to middle income. Win-win.

Stephen Kotkin:

And it worked. It happened. It's stunning how many people around the world benefited from this U.S.-led order, including in America. And we're not just talking about China; we're also talking about India. It's our neighbours, too, in Mexico. And it's the developed world, as well, to a certain extent: Japan and Germany, the two enemies of World War II, became our closest allies and the second- and third-largest economies. There's never been a geopolitical turnabout bigger than that.

Stephen Kotkin:

So it worked, but we're not ready for this success. It turns out that well, geez, you know, these other countries, they want a voice. They're not just going to become middle-income countries and continue to be told what to do. They want international institutions that reflect their achievements, their hard work, their entrepreneurialism, their creation of middle classes, their place in the world. They're justifiably proud countries. And we don't know how to accommodate their aspirations. The conventional argument is seductive: the liberal order is supremely flexible and can accommodate everybody, and so therefore it's going to survive. But it doesn't work in the Iranian case, it doesn't work in the Russian case, and it doesn't work in the Chinese case. What are the terms of the accommodation? They see themselves, in several cases, as rooted in ancient civilisations that predate the U.S.-led order. What if they don't accept our terms, even if they're the beneficiaries?

Stephen Kotkin:

Beyond the Eurasian land powers, what about the rising powers, whose rise the open order facilitated and who don't see the existing U.S.-led order as a threat to their regime's survival? What's the opportunity set for them? Where do they fit in? How are their voices heard?

Interviewer:

Let's talk about Trump himself a little bit. In 2019, you wrote an essay for Foreign Affairs about the investigation into Trump's 2016 campaign and its links to Russia. As I watched the returns last night, I kept thinking about one passage from that piece: "Showmanship, a buccaneering spirit, and go-for-broke instincts are [among] the traits that made America what it is. ... Trump is a phenomenon. Only a genuinely formidable

personality could withstand such intense, unremitting investigative pressure and hostility, even if he has brought no small degree of it on himself. Trump lacks the facility to govern effectively, but he knows how to command the attention of the highly educated and dominate the news cycle. There is a reason he proved able, in a single election cycle, to vanquish both the entrenched Bush and Clinton dynasties."

Interviewer:

"Trump," you wrote, "is as American as apple pie."

Interviewer:

The results of this election seem to confirm the idea that, far from the aberration or fluke that many observers have portrayed him as being, Trump captures and reflects the American spirit, at this moment in history, far more accurately than his meritocratic, elite, Establishment foes.

Stephen Kotkin:

I get impatient when I read or hear people say about Trump, "That's not who we are." Because who's the "we?" I don't mean when Trump is called a racist and people insist "we" are not racists. Or when Trump is called misogynist and people say "we" are better than that. I just mean that Trump is quintessentially American.

Stephen Kotkin:

Trump is not an alien who landed from some other planet. This is not somebody who got implanted in power by Russian special operations, obviously. This is somebody that the American people voted for who reflects something deep and abiding about American culture. Think of all the worlds that he has inhabited and that lifted him up. Pro wrestling. Reality TV. Casinos and gambling, which are no longer just in Las Vegas or Atlantic City, but everywhere, embedded in daily life. Celebrity culture. Social media. All of that looks to me like America. And yes, so does fraud, and brazen lying, and the P. T. Barnum, carnival barker stuff. But there is an audience, and not a small one, for where Trump came from and who he is.

Stephen Kotkin:

The system proved incapable of punishing Trump personally for his concerted, multifaceted refusal to accept his defeat and accept a peaceful transfer of power in 2020. Paradoxically, the efforts to punish him, legally, ended up propelling him back from political irrelevance to the top of the Republican ticket. At the same time, this election saw massive turnout, extraordinary levels of voter commitment, by American standards.

Stephen Kotkin:

And it happened in a great year for democracy, for all the efforts in multiple countries to deny or overturn the voters' will. Globally, half the adult population participated in or will participate in elections this year, and around the world, voters by and large threw out or incumbents when they could. Even in stolid Japan!

Stephen Kotkin:

In America, no incumbent party with presidential approval ratings as low as Biden's has ever retained power. Voters in democracies cannot always get what they want, but they can punish those in power. The Democrats overreached. Biden eked out an electoral college victory, having campaigned as a moderate, a stabiliser. He proceeded to govern as if he had won in a landslide, and often from the hard left, on a whole range of things: the border, climate and energy, gender, race, crime and policing, and so on.

Stephen Kotkin:

And, as I wrote, Trump is a phenomenon. In addition to the Clinton dynasty and the Bush dynasty, he has now vanquished the Cheney dynasty. And he co-opted the Kennedy dynasty, of course, in what many would regard as a degraded form—although some people would regard the current incarnation

of the Kennedy dynasty as reflecting, in some ways, the trajectory of America.

Stephen Kotkin:

And Trump vanquished the military and national security establishment that served him and came out against his re-election. He vanquished the scientific establishment. Wow.

You know, they made fun of [Soviet leader] Nikita Khrushchev when he denounced Stalin in 1956, in the "secret speech" at the 20th Party Congress. In that speech, Khrushchev condemned the cult of the personality that Stalin had developed. But Khrushchev, he wasn't known for his commanding presence, and behind his back, people said, "It's true, there was a cult—but there was also a personality!"

Interviewer:

Speaking of Stalin: one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you today is that you've spent decades closely studying him and his regime, and few people know more than you do about authoritarianism. Trump's critics often accuse him of being or aspiring to be a strongman, or an autocrat, or even a fascist dictator. What do you think of that critique?

Stephen Kotkin:

Not much. Trump no doubt has a lot of desires. He would no doubt like to have the kind of control over the American political system that Xi Jinping has in China or Putin has in Russia. He's said so. I'm not sure Trump's personality would be conducive to wielding that kind of power and control. And that's not the system that we have. Stalin was effective in his system. But what if you put a personality like Stalin in our system? What do you get? Someone who is supremely skilled at despotism maybe finds himself bereft in a system with innumerable checks and balances and a free press and open society, doesn't know how to manage. You have to consider the larger system, the set of institutions, the political culture, not just the personality, not just the fantasies of the individual person.

Interviewer:

But surely you would agree that Trump represents something different from the kind of leadership that has guided American government in the postwar era, right? The constant overt lying, the demand for loyalty to him above loyalty to the Constitution or the country—and especially the "big lie" about winning the 2020 election and his efforts to undermine the results and stay in office. Those things don't have much precedent in U.S. history or in the U.S. system. And he's threatened things that have been unimaginable in this country for decades: using military force against critics he calls "the enemy within," jailing opponents, purging people who won't pledge loyalty, mass deportations. Should we not worry that some of those things could do permanent damage to American democracy and the U.S. system?

Stephen Kotkin:

I don't like any of that. I don't like it at all. But is it American fascism? OK, you're going to mass deport ten million people. Where is your Gestapo? Sure, you have ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. You have some police forces. But how are you going to round up that many people and forcibly evict them from the country and keep them out? So I don't like the idea of mass deportation—and by the way, the Obama administration conducted a high number of deportations. But this is just nothing at all like the kind of stuff that I study and write about. And yes, it's worrisome to hear rhetoric that is expressly antidemocratic, but some of that rhetoric is about stirring the pot, driving the other side into a frenzy, and whipping up your side, especially in this social media age.

Stephen Kotkin:

When radio was introduced on a mass scale, many elites panicked: "This is the end of democracy, the end of civilisation, what are we going to do? They can just broadcast anything and everything right into the living rooms of people, unfiltered, we cannot control what they say." The establishment couldn't censor

it, and over the radio someone could just say anything and could just make stuff up. And Mussolini was great at radio, and Goebbels was amazing at radio. And lo and behold, we got Franklin Roosevelt, who mastered the medium and was a transformative president; whether one approves or disapproves of what he did, it was significant and enduring.

Stephen Kotkin:

And so we've been through this before, with radio. It was very destabilising, and yet we managed to assimilate it. And then we got the TV version of that story, which was even worse because it was images, not just audio. And again, they could just broadcast anything and everything right into people's living rooms. They could just say anything they wanted to, and the establishment, the self-assigned filters, couldn't censor it. And we got Kennedy, as opposed to his opponent, Richard Nixon, who sweated on TV and was mopping his brow while Kennedy shined and beamed.

Stephen Kotkin:

And now we have social media, which is potentially even more destabilising for an open society. Everyone's their own National Enquirer, and everyone is connected. And everyone can broadcast these previously fringe conspiracy theories that are now mainstream. Not because everybody believes them. I don't know whether more people believe them now than did before. But everybody can see them, hear them, propagate them, forward them.

Stephen Kotkin:

We always disagree on what the truth is. But now we have a problem with the truth regime. The truth regime is how we determine the truth: evidence, argument, proof. But that truth regime has been destabilised. No one has the truth alone, and we should argue about the truth. But we used to have a consensus on how we got to the truth and how we recognised truth. Not anymore. So how are we going to manage this, to assimilate this new technology and media?

Stephen Kotkin:

Strong, successful countries have competent and compassionate leadership and social solidarity and trust. It's been a long time since we had both competence and compassion at the top. And the loss of social solidarity and trust is debilitating for our institutions. We are an open society and must remain so. But how?

Interviewer:

Earlier this year, in trying to sketch out a way forward for the United States, you wrote this in Foreign Affairs: "The government and philanthropists should redirect significant higher education funding to community colleges that meet or exceed performance metrics. States should launch an ambitious rollout of vocational schools and training, whether reintroducing them in existing high schools or opening new self-standing ones in partnership with employers at the ground level. Beyond human capital, the United States needs to spark a housing construction boom by drastically reducing environmental regulations and to eliminate subsidies for builders, letting the market work. The country also needs to institute national service for young people, perhaps with an intergenerational component, to rekindle broad civic consciousness and a sense of everyone being in this together."

Interviewer:

How would you rate the Trump administration's chances of grasping this challenge and taking those kinds of steps?

Stephen Kotkin:

Well, he'll be a lame duck immediately after the inauguration, and second term presidencies generally don't get a lot done. And he has a lot of grievances that he might pursue that have nothing to do with that agenda I was describing. I think the Justice Department is going to be in his cross hairs, potentially the Federal Reserve, maybe the CIA. Trump is passionate about retribution and those he perceives as having wronged

him, gone after him, and some of these grievances are legitimate, even if retribution does not bode well for a successful presidency.

Stephen Kotkin:

But there are some things he'd be well positioned to do that would be significant contributions to American revitalisation. Fund AI-inflected vocational training to reward the people who helped sweep him back into office, are not going to college, yet need pathways forward, opportunities. Invest in community colleges, where a gigantic proportion of American students are but where a lack of resources often thwarts their ambitions.

Stephen Kotkin:

Trump is a builder, and Trump is a deregulator. So he could lift environmental regulations when it comes to housing, which have very little to do with environmental protection and more to do with a not-in-my-backyard blockage. Build housing, which would increase supply and therefore lower rents and real-estate prices. There is an entire package of things that could make for effective policy and effective politics. He'd need people in an administration to implement it all, and he'd need the Senate and the House to pass legislation where necessary. And he'd have to want to do it. But it's there for the taking.

Stephen Kotkin:

Trump's re-election, even before his inauguration, has dealt a blow to American soft power. This is a critical component of our strength, our security, our prosperity. Trump might be unaware of this or indifferent to it. Part of the challenge is not his fault: sometimes foreigners, even our allies and partners, do not understand America as well as they think. What [the novelist] Philip Roth called the "indigenous American berserk"—which was always there but which social media has revealed and to an extent enhanced—frightens many of them. Many, though not all, see Trump as a breakdown, as a turn away from the America they know and hope to see again. So Trump's administration will have some work to do in this regard, as many of his officials did in his first term. There's an opening here: he wants America, and himself, to be perceived as strong.

Stephen Kotkin:

Maybe the biggest weakness of the liberal international order is that the whole world feels the consequences of U.S. elections but has no say in them. We Americans elect what is often called "the leader of the free world." And our allies and friends, to say nothing of our enemies, have to suck it up: the person we choose is now in charge of the U.S.-led international order. Most foreign governments have become adept over the years at managing Washington, the multilayered and federal U.S. political system. And most have experience from Trump's first term. Still, the return of Trump has already affected what they think of America's commitments, political stability, long-term trajectory. I think those who feel confirmed in their pessimism are mistaken, for a host of reasons. But their impressions are a reality that affects U.S. soft power.

Stephen Kotkin:

As a historian, my tendency is to focus less on the cut and thrust of politics of the moment and more on the longer term, the structural directions and the big drivers of change. The deepest structural trend for the U.S. is, in some ways, the gulf that opened up between our commitments and our capabilities. We have been talking about taking on more commitments—whether it's bringing Ukraine into NATO or signing a treaty alliance with Saudi Arabia—even as there are doubts at home and abroad about whether we have the will and the capabilities to meet our current commitments. Whether our defence industrial base is up to the task of defending all our current treaty allies. And doubts about our fiscal situation, which has been very severely eroded and will likely erode still more under Trump 2.0, as it did under Biden and Trump 1.0.

Stephen Kotkin:

Obama tried to enact retrenchment, but he kept getting buffeted by demands for more applications of American power—and we saw the results. Trump also wanted to wind down commitments abroad yet ended up, rightly, shifting to a more confrontational approach vis-à-vis China, and that requires vast new resources that need to come from somewhere. Like Trump, Biden wanted out of Afghanistan, come what may, and found he had to react to the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war with significant additional commitments. How can America manage all the commitments it has? How can it increase its capabilities?

Stephen Kotkin:

So that is at the top of Trump's inbox. His approach, rhetorically, looks night-and-day different from Obama's and Biden's. And he faces the same dilemma, and it's been building, and I'm not sure his critics had answers. Still, he needs an answer. Because America needs an answer. ■

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The New Political Frontier: How Digital Media Transformed the 2024 Election

AURKO CHAKRABARTI

In 1996, there were calls for the UFC to be banned across all fifty states in the U.S. This campaign was led by the Late Republican Senator John McCain who labelled the sport as 'human cockfighting'- it represented a stark contrast in the sport's perception to the general public and the political elite. The change in perception over the next 20 years or cannot be understated as Trump's presidential election victory speech not only lauded the company's CEO but had him address the nation — "I want to thank the Nelk Boys, Adin Ross, Theo Von, Bussin' With the Boys, and last but not least, the mighty and powerful Joe Rogan," said UFC CEO Dana White- a symbolic moment reflecting the growing influence of new media and personality-driven culture on American politics.

From the UFC being shunned and Dana White rebuked to being embraced by the next president of the U.S. shows a marked shift away from standard conventions. The Trump campaign's ability to focus on building connections with athletes, podcasters, digital creators, and social media platforms to deliver a message and re-enforce his brand for young voters showcased how new media has reshaped the political landscape in America.

Social Media and the New Political Ecosystem

Social media played a transformative role in the 2024 elections, offering a platform for political discourse that resonated particularly with younger voters. According to Pew Research, nearly half of adults under 30 cited social media as their primary source of election news. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) became central arenas for conversation, with influencers and independent creators shaping narratives in ways traditional media could not.

The rise of news influencers—independent content creators with significant followings—was a key feature of this shift. In 2024, 37% of adults under 30 reported regularly consuming news from these influencers. Unlike traditional journalists, these creators operated without affiliations to established media outlets, blending news, opinion, and entertainment to engage audiences.

Donald Trump capitalised on this evolving ecosystem. His adoption of social media platforms was reportedly encouraged by his youngest son, Barron Trump, who recognised

AURKO CHAKRABARTI is an Applied Geopolitical Researcher at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA), SGT University. He has a diverse background in media, public policy, and the non-profit sector, focusing on social impact initiatives. As an editor of De/Cypher, Aurko specialises in in-depth research on geopolitics and policy matters.

the appeal of podcasts and YouTube among younger demographics. This strategy allowed Trump to connect with audiences in a casual, conversational format, starkly contrasting with the rehearsed stiffness of traditional media appearances.

To bolster his digital and grassroots efforts, Trump collaborated with organisations like Turning Point USA. Founded by Charlie Kirk, Turning Point Action employed 1,000 staff members for voter outreach in battleground states such as Arizona, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Kirk actively engaged with first-time voters on college campuses, participating in debates and discussions. His YouTube videos garnered millions of views, with viral clips trending across social media platforms and amplifying the campaign's reach.

The rise of right-leaning, male-centric digital spaces, often referred to as the "manosphere," further provided fertile ground for Trump's campaign. Right-wing content thrived in personality-driven environments like Barstool Sports, UFC, and gaming communities, subtly embedding conservative messaging into sports and entertainment content.

Trump also leaned heavily into themes of masculinity, resilience, and cultural defiance, tapping into frustrations over movements like #MeToo and perceptions of societal marginalisation among men. This outreach included appearances on bro-culture podcasts like The Joe Rogan Experience and participation in viral challenges, positioning him as a relatable figure for young men disillusioned with mainstream politics. These efforts paid off, with 35% of men aged 18–24 expressing support for Trump in a Harvard Youth Poll, a five-percentage-point increase from 2020.

This ecosystem appealed to audiences alienated by liberal-leaning Hollywood and traditional news outlets. Figures like Joe Rogan, who endorsed Bernie Sanders in 2020, symbolised this shift. By 2024, Rogan had moved toward supporting Trump, reflecting the changing cultural and political dynamics within these digital spaces. Together, these elements solidified a new political ecosystem, redefining campaigning for the digital age.

The Elon Musk Effect

When Elon Musk completed the acquisition of Twitter in October 2022, he faced widespread ridicule, with critics claiming he had drastically overpaid for the platform. After two years of mockery, however, his purchase of the social media giant appears to have been a masterstroke.

Musk used X (formerly Twitter) to amplify Donald Trump's messaging, restoring Trump's account and relaxing content moderation policies. Critics accused Musk of transforming X into a MAGA propaganda tool, allowing misinformation and conspiracy theories to flourish. From promoting doctored videos of Kamala Harris to reposting memes targeting Democrats, Musk's personal posts reached millions, bolstering Trump's appeal among young men.

This collaboration resonated particularly with younger male voters, a demographic that swung significantly toward the Republican candidate. Musk's alignment with Trump was driven by both shared ideology—rooted in deregulation and opposition to "woke culture"—and their cultivated images as "alpha males" within a fractured cultural landscape.

Musk's support extended beyond social media influence. He contributed an estimated $132 million to Trump's campaign and other Republican causes, solidifying his role as a political kingmaker. This investment is expected to pay massive dividends, with Tesla stock already rising by 56% this year. Moreover, Musk's growing political influence could enable him to access government funds necessary to fulfil his ambitious vision of making human life multi-planetary.

Generative AI and the Rise of Fake Narratives

Generative AI played a significant role in shaping the election narrative, making it easier than ever to create fake content that appeared authentic. One widely circulated example was a fabricated video of a supposed Haitian man claiming to have voted twice in Georgia. The video, which originated in Russia, spread across social media platforms and bolstered false claims of voter fraud in swing states.

The border issue became a key target for disinformation campaigns because there was already apprehension about it. The Democrats accepted that illegal immigration had risen beyond the desired level, which led to their proposed bill to limit illegal immigration at the southern border, but disinformation was used to heighten these fears. Many of these claims were debunked by independent fact-checkers but this was compounded by the fact that Kamala Harris was perceived to be in charge of immigration in her capacity as vice president, earning her the nickname 'border czar'.

Actual statistics contradicted these narratives. Data showed that crime rates among immigrants were significantly lower than those among native-born Americans, and apprehension numbers at the border during the Biden administration were comparable to those under Trump. Nonetheless, the persistence and amplification of false claims on platforms like X eroded the effectiveness of fact-checking and shaped the media's coverage of the election.

Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword

Social media platforms were both a megaphone and a battleground for disinformation during the 2024 election. Under Elon Musk's ownership, X became a particularly potent force in spreading partisan misinformation. Musk's decision to relax content moderation policies and reinstate tens of thousands of banned accounts, including Trump's, turned the platform into an unofficial propaganda tool for the MAGA movement.

Examples of disinformation on X ranged from doctored videos, such as Kamala Harris falsely portrayed as a "diversity hire," to conspiracy theories about undocumented immigrants receiving disaster relief funds. These narratives were amplified by memes, influencers, and even Musk himself, whose posts reached millions of users. The platform's algorithms further magnified these messages, reinforcing biases and fuelling polarisation.

Other platforms, including Facebook and TikTok, also played a role in spreading disinformation. TikTok's unique audience dynamics—where a near-equal mix of left- and right-leaning influencers coexist—offered a slightly more balanced discourse but still allowed for the rapid spread of fake narratives. The proliferation of pink slime websites, designed to mimic local news outlets, added another layer of complexity, particularly in swing states where these sites targeted voters with hyper-localised misinformation.

Economic and Cultural Narratives: The Power of Disinformation

Disinformation also skewed public perceptions of the economy and cultural issues. Despite strong economic indicators—such as low unemployment and robust GDP growth—voters consistently reported negative views about the economy, with inflation dominating their concerns. Trump's campaign capitalised on these perceptions, framing Harris as ineffective on economic policy despite evidence to the contrary.

Cultural issues, particularly around race, gender, and sexuality, were similarly exploited.

Viral narratives like fabricated images of Harris hugging Jeffrey Epstein or unproven accusations against Tim Walz regarding past misconduct dominated discussions, deflecting attention from substantive policy debates. These stories, while false, influenced media coverage and voter sentiment, further polarising an already divided electorate.

Challenges for Democrats in a New Media Era

While Trump's campaign capitalised on new media, the Democratic Party struggled to adapt. Democrats' reliance on traditional media proved to be a critical misstep. Pod Save America host Tommy Vietor criticised the party for treating progressive outlets as an afterthought. This failure to foster a robust, independent media ecosystem on the left left a vacuum that Republicans exploited. Unlike Trump, who actively elevated right-wing influencers and podcasts, Democrats lacked a comparable "direct line of communication" to their base. Kamala Harris's campaign relied on traditional media and policy-driven messaging, missing critical opportunities to engage younger voters on platforms where they were most active.

While left-leaning content creators like Hasan Piker managed to draw significant audiences on platforms like Twitch, the absence of institutional support from the Democratic Party hindered broader engagement. Piker, known for his mix of gaming streams and political commentary, demonstrated that leftist media could compete with the right, but only when allowed to organically build audiences. Democrats struggled with the perception of elitism, failing to connect with voters through relatable, human conversations. This disconnect was evident in the types of election news Americans consumed. While 75% expressed interest in candidates' stances on issues, most news coverage focused on campaign trail events and personal comments. This gap between voter interest and media focus contributed to widespread dissatisfaction with election coverage.

The New Frontier of Political Influence

Trump's impending return to the White House marks a turning point in the use of media in America politics. The performative nature of traditional news outlets with regurgitated talking points has been replaced by more nuanced and unpolished long-form conversations available through podcasts. The influence of traditional media will likely continue to wane unless there is an effort to rebrand using a technologically inclined approach.

While traditional media outlets worked around the clock to inject the public's mind with the idea that Trump was the new Hitler, Trump gave time to various new media outlets, humanising himself to his voters through in the process. Notably, before criminal charges were filed against Trump and he became a renewed staple of traditional news coverage, his approval ratings were low and he was not even viewed as the frontrunner for the Republication Presidential nomination, lagging behind Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis. The overtly negative coverage of Trump may have actually increased his support, fostering an anti-establishment narrative around him.

As the lines between culture, politics, and technology continue to blur, the 2024 election serves as both a case study and a warning. The ability to navigate this new frontier will define the future of political discourse in the U.S. ■

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The Paradox of Political Forecasting: Reflections on 2024

BADRI NARAYAN

In the complex tapestry of Indian democracy, a profound transformation is reshaping the political landscape that challenges conventional wisdom about electoral behaviour and political participation. Through extensive field research across India's diversified regions, I have noticed a significant shift in the nature of political discourse and the pattern of voter behaviour, especially as related to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its transformation. This subtle change has far-reaching implications regarding our understanding of democratic participation and political communication in today's India.

The Changing Face of Political Discourse

Political discourse in India traditionally manifested itself in myriad community spaces, which served as crucibles of democratic discourse. Spaces - village chaupals, communal ponds, tea shops, bus stands, paan dukans, and qasbai addas, that were, at once vital forums for political opinions, had historically operated. In recent years, the character of political discourse in these spaces has experienced an impressive transformation.

Most significantly, BJP enthusiasts, who were once loudly chattering about their political preferences, have transformed into what I would describe as a 'silent voting community.' This, of course, is not so much a shift in communication style but rather symptomatic of a more significant change in the party's voter base and the political engagement within India's polity.

The New BJP Voter: Demographics and Incentives

The past decade has seen a considerable reconfiguration of the BJP's voter base, which has primarily been due to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's widespread developmental and social support programs. The new support base is increasingly coming from traditionally marginalised communities such as Dalits, nomadic tribes, and other economically disadvantaged groups, which have always remained on the periphery of India's political discourse.

BADRI NARAYAN, a social historian and cultural anthropologist is Director, G B Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad. His interests lie in popular culture, social and anthropological history, Dalit and subaltern issues and the relationship between power and culture. A prolific writer who writes in Hindi, and English most recently he has authored 'Republic of Hindutva: How the Sangh Is Reshaping Indian Democracy', Penguin Random House, 2021. Badri Narayan is an eminent Hindi poet. He is the recipient of the Sahitya academy award 2022 for his notable Poetry collection 'Tumdi ke Shabd'.

The beneficiaries' silence in the public sphere should not be taken to reflect political apathy or coercion but rather as a strategic choice, what I would like to call 'strategic silence,' used by communities that have historically employed silence as both a survival mechanism and a form of political expression. Their reticence emanates from a pragmatic interest in protecting the benefits that they have acquired anew and their position within the developmental state framework.

The Psephological Challenge

The shift creates special challenges for electoral analysis and political projection. Methods of psephology calibrated to measure only the louder forms of political support are often incapable of capturing the potential electoral importance of this silenced majority. Political analysts, reared in the culture of surveying political preference through explicit verbal articulation, tend regularly to underestimate their electoral chances when confronted by this new, inexpressive electorate.

The poor and the marginalised, who now form a large chunk of the BJP's support, generally are not forthcoming in publicly stating their political preferences. This reluctance arises from historical experiences of social marginalisation and a practical approach to political participation wherein practical benefits take precedence over ideological expression.

Governance and Anti-Incumbency

Most significantly, it has challenged well-established theories regarding anti-incumbency in Indian politics. Governance by the BJP has shown notable resilience against anti-incumbency factors generally prevalent under the control of states. Factors behind this include the following key elements:

First, pro-poor policies have directly linked the government and its beneficiaries. Second, strict monitoring mechanisms, often personally overseen by Prime Minister Modi, ensure the effective delivery of developmental schemes at the grassroots level. Third, the moral oversight provided by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has helped maintain political accountability and ethical governance standards.

The party's leadership team, Home Minister Amit Shah, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, and others, shows great efficiency in converting even the trend of anti-incumbency into pro-government support. As can be seen from this aspect of the recent state assembly elections conducted in Haryana, the normal theories of anti-incumbency failed to explain correctly what happened in polls.

Vocal Opposition

While the BJP's silent support base remains mute, Congress supporters and other opposition voices have become more vociferous in public spaces. Several factors contribute to this greater visibility. First, an anti-establishment position inherently breeds confidence that often manifests in protest politics. Second, the new induction of left, ultra-left, and centrist voices within the opposition has amplified their presence in public discourse.

These vocal opponents have created what may be termed an 'echo chamber effect,' where like-minded voices reinforce each other's perspectives, creating an impression of broader public support than may actually exist. This phenomenon often leads political analysts to overestimate opposition strength while overlooking the electoral significance of the silent majority.

Democratic Deepening and Social Transformation

The transformation I describe reflects a broader process of democratic deepening in South Asia, particularly in India. Increased participation by previously marginalised groups, especially women, Dalits, and other disadvantaged communities, is a significant development in democratic practice. This trend manifests in consistently increasing voter turnout among these demographics and their growing stake in the democratic process.

This deepening of democracy works on two primary mechanisms. First, there is a steady increase in democratic awareness among hitherto marginalised communities. The state's support system has brought up many beneficiaries who have changed into aware voters, cognisant of their stake (hissedari) in democracy.

The beneficiaries evolved from various social support schemes from government may slowly emerge as an agency of democratic deepening in Indian society. In this process they may acquire capacity to aspire which may slowly transform them in democratic agency in Indian society. It is true that they may show their agency on booth on the day of election but this agency of silent voters may also reflect in their everyday social life while dealing with various kinds of power relation in their everyday life.

Future Implications and Sustainability

While these changes in the political landscape of India are important, their permanence is not assured. Continued electoral success for the BJP would be very much dependent on its ability to continue being responsive to changing public aspirations and needs. Thus far, the party has been amazingly adaptable, taking what can be called '*Punarnava*' - constant reinvention and renewal - to meet emerging challenges.

This adaptive capacity will be crucial as India's democracy continues to evolve. The party's ability to maintain its relationship with beneficiaries while expanding its agenda for development will likely determine its future electoral prospects. This model's success also has important implications for our understanding of democratic participation and governance in developing societies.

Reflections and Way Forward

It reflects a significant evolution of democratic practice by challenging traditional assumptions around political participation and electoral behaviour, marking the transformation of the political public sphere in India. It captures how marginalised groups engage differently with democratic processes and, hence, how benefits-based politics influences their electoral choices more than the 'silent voting community' that has emerged on BJP's side.

That also demands a recalibration of what it means to understand India through an analytical perspective on political behaviour there through electoral analysis. Traditional kinds of electoral analysis need new avenues because these silent majorities need their political preferences expressed better than in public discourse, and more so at the ballot box, to be precise. Understanding these trends and dynamics increasingly becomes important as democracies continue to deepen with that aspect in India. This model's success in building stable governance while extending democratic participation has potential lessons for other developing democracies. However, sustainability will depend on continued responsive governance and effective policy implementation. Balancing development with democratic deepening will remain critical for the country to progress while maintaining political stability and social progress. ■

Can Middle East Peace be Carved Out of the Gaza Rubble?

TONY KLUG

By Special Invitation

So which camp is right: the one that resolutely proclaims there is no alternative to the two-state solution or the one that is equally adamant that the two-state solution is dead? Ironically, both mantras may be right, for the first is about plausibility and the second is about feasibility.

As someone who first advocated a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip alongside Israel over fifty years ago, it still seems to me that this schema is the only plausible framework for resolving the bitter conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The idea has endured and indeed been revived recently as no one has come up with a credible alternative proposal that would satisfy the minimum core aspirations of both peoples for self-determination in a state of their own in the country that each regards as its own. These have always been the indispensable ingredients.

But is the only plausible solution still feasible? This is the heart of the matter. Tragically, Gaza has largely been reduced to rubble and its population has been decimated. But, without underestimating the obstacles, it could be rebuilt once the hostilities eventually come to an end and, within a framework of peace, its remaining inhabitants could potentially thrive. The deeper problems are in the larger West Bank where the unremitting Israeli-settlement programme over the past half century has considerably reduced the space on which the Palestinians may build their future state.

All the settlements are regarded as illegal under international law, although this has not prevented their construction in the past and, in the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms, it is unlikely to prevent their further expansion in the future. Legal instruments are not enough. They need to be buttressed by robust political action. The alternative to advancing a credible political solution is indefinite conflict which, needless to say, will perpetuate the suffering and fear of the people directly affected. But not only them, as what happens in the Middle East rarely stays in the Middle East. The conflict's toxins invariably spill over and infect societal relations in countries around the world, forcing people to take sides.

They also fuel the linked phenomena of antisemitism, Islamophobia and anti-Arab bigotry, all of which have surged in the last year or so. So it's in almost everyone's interest

TONY KLUG is a veteran Middle East analyst and former consultant to the Palestine Strategy Group and Israeli Strategic Forum. Specialising in Israeli-Palestinian relations, his work on conflict resolution is recognised for fostering dialogue and pragmatic solutions to entrenched political challenges.

that a way is found to swiftly wind down the conflict and bring it to an end. So what might a final resolution look like and who is best placed to take the lead in transforming the political climate and forging the vital changes? Here is a sketch of the theoretical possibilities.

To begin with the two-state idea, which was originally conceived as a way of bringing the two peoples closer together on an egalitarian basis, not as a way of separating them, as certain Israeli politicians damagingly misrepresented it in later years. In any case, in the light of the many changes on the ground over the past 57 years, the shape and character of the two-state idea needs an injection of fresh thinking. An apt model today may be the 1993 division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This was a peaceful transition based not on enforced population transfers, but on mutually approved jurisdictions, with open borders and free movement. It was about political sovereignty over agreed demarcated territory, not ethnic purity.

In practice, in the Israel-Palestine case, there may be a supplementary need for equitable land swaps coupled with time-limited compensation for wilful Israeli settlers in the West Bank plus a firm deadline for the withdrawal of the army – the protector of the settlers - from the territory.

The two-state formula could also take the form of a confederation, for which there is growing support in some circles. To be credible, however, the inclusion of Jordan might need to be contemplated from the outset. Otherwise, it would mean the Palestinian state constitutionally affixing itself to a western-style, predominantly Jewish state and commensurately distancing itself from the predominantly Muslim Arab state to its east, with whom Palestinians have close cultural, linguistic, religious and familial ties. Indeed, fellow Palestinians constitute the majority of the Jordanian population. So, on further reflection, a confederation with just Israel would seem an unlikely choice for Palestinians.

With or without Jordan, it is imperative that the first step is Palestinian statehood, for a confederation is a voluntary arrangement between two or more independent states. Given the huge power imbalances, what should be scrupulously avoided is either an Israeli hegemonic state or an Israeli-Jordanian condominium over Palestine masquerading as a confederation.

A template for a future confederation could be Benelux, comprising the sovereign states of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. This might sound over-ambitious, but it is easily forgotten that wars, invasions and annexations marked the common history of these three countries in the past. Once the basic structural relationship is put right, even the strongest emotional attitudes can fade in the course of time, as witness French-German relations in recent years or, maybe more to the point, Israeli-German relations.

It is also worth recalling that during the Oslo years in the 1990s, until it all went dreadfully awry, the political culture was transformed. Hopes for an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel were aroused and co-operative Arab-Jewish projects were fostered and personal relations across the divide began to blossom. Delegations from Northern Ireland and South Africa visited Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers to pick up tips on how to do it. And research institutes noted a global decrease in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents. It has happened once. It can happen again.

Two grass-root works in progress, jointly spearheaded by members of both societies, take into account both peoples' affinity to the whole land. The "A Land for All" initiative proposes that all inhabitants, including Palestinian refugees and Israeli settlers, may live anywhere in the proposed confederation but may only vote in the state of which they are citizens. There would be open borders and Jerusalem would be the shared capital of both states. The "Holy Land Confederation" proposal envisages the future relationship between the two confederated sovereign states

as one of "cohabitation" rather than divorce and calls for close economic cooperation.

The main impediment to these sorts of initiatives is that everywhere the political grain is moving in the opposite direction. Without a profound change of wind, the situation is likely to get worse and worse. But where might the lead come from? Certainly not from Israel or Hamas or Hizbullah. While none of these parties has the capacity to sustain their senseless conflicts for much longer, their current leaderships do not have the capability, imagination or will to end them either.

Another party which may be ruled out, other than in a supportive role, is the United States. Successive US administrations have never properly understood the region's impulses or been honest brokers; and an even more blinkered Trump presidency is exactly what Israeli-Palestinian peace does not need right now. However, the new administration might be more at ease with the region taking charge of its own destiny. Before he leaves office, President Biden could do the world a favour by not vetoing a Security Council move to endorse Palestine as a full UN member. That would be an irreversible step and a worthy legacy.

Where all this leaves us is that right now is the right time for the region to step up and own the problem - an option that was not on the cards in the past when Israel was mostly shunned and isolated. But today Israel has full diplomatic relations with five Arab states, with others, including Saudi Arabia and potentially Qatar, hovering on the brink. The PLO and Israel have recognised each other since the signing of the Oslo Accords.

There are some indications that the region, under Saudi leadership, is alert to the need to take a strong lead. In a burst of activity, Saudi Arabia announced in September 2024 that it had formed a "global alliance" together with a number of Arab, Muslim and European partners, to push for a two-state solution, with the first two meetings due to be held in Riyadh and Brussels.

This was followed two months later by an Extraordinary Arab and Islamic Summit in Riyadh which adopted a 38-clause resolution which called for the launching of a plan, with specific steps and timing, to end the Israeli occupation and establish an independent, sovereign Palestinian state based on the lines of 4 June 1967. The resolution referenced the Arab Peace Initiative, which was unanimously adopted in 2002 and which, in essence, offered Israel full diplomatic relations with all Arab states in exchange for Palestinian statehood.

If the Arab Peace Initiative, as a product, was commendable, its marketing was abysmal. No serious effort was made to alert Israeli public opinion to the content of the initiative or persuade Israelis of the sincerity of its intent. The outcome might have been quite different had it taken a leaf out of former Egyptian President Sadat's book when, in 1977, he turned history on its head by flying at short notice into Israel where he enchanted and captivated the Israeli people.

This arch enemy, who had heretofore been portrayed as a Nazi sympathiser, appealed over the head of the country's newly elected right-wing government direct to Israel's Jewish population. Welcoming them back to the region after an extended and turbulent exile, he assured them of their acceptance, safety and security. But the price was the return of the entire Sinai Peninsula that Israel had captured in the 1967 war, a high price the Israeli people quickly made clear to their government they were prepared to pay. Sadat transformed the mood in Israel. I witnessed its mind-blowing impact at first-hand myself while on a research visit to the country.

Both the troubled Israelis and the fraught Palestinians need to be confident of their secure acceptance in the region if any future peace initiative is to have a chance of success. Targeted sanctions and selective boycotts, while they doubtless have a role, need to be tempered with an aliveness to these imperatives. There appears to be some – although not sufficient – recognition of this in the recent, aforementioned Arab and

Islamic Summit. While its final resolution included such stock provisions as a call to suspend Israel's participation in the UN, a ban on the export of weapons to Israel and a boycott of the products of Israeli settlements, it is noteworthy that these demands could have been harsher, as they often had been in the past. They could, for example, have called for Israel's expulsion rather than suspension from the UN and they could have proposed a blanket ban on all trade with Israel, not just for military equipment and not just with regard to the settlements.

Also worthy of note was the inclusion of clauses that addressed major Israeli concerns, such as the appeal to UN member states to work "at all levels to disclose the fate of the kidnapped, to work to release them immediately, to ensure the provision of their protection, and to demand an independent and transparent investigation into this crime, including the arbitrary execution of some of the kidnapped". Another clause stressed the need "to protect navigation in sea lanes in line with the rules of international law".

Moreover, on the sidelines of the 2024 UN General Assembly, the Jordanian and Saudi foreign ministers affirmed that, provided Israel takes steps toward establishing a Palestinian state, they and other Arab and Muslim countries would guarantee Israel's security. This is all to the good, but who would know? Such assurances need to be widely, repeatedly and effectively trumpeted in Israel, à la Sadat. It is equally important that the Saudis in particular stick to their pledge that the kingdom will not recognise Israel without a Palestinian state.

There is no time to lose. The region needs urgently to decide if it wishes merely to roll with the conflict or finally to resolve it. There are important complementary roles for other players but the prerogative now lies firmly with the region. Any initiative it promotes needs not only to satisfy the minimum core aspirations of both peoples but, crucially, allay their maximum fears. For this, it needs to be considerably more imaginative, creative and brave than it has been to date. ■

The map is only for representation

Bridging Divides: How Ethical Values Shape Democracy and the Economy

NAJEEB H. JUNG

The topic of ethics and communal harmony and its impact on sustainable development is of grave importance in the context of today's world. It influences just not us as individuals but hugely impacts society, the environment around us and the process of development as indeed the economy. An ethical community is not only desirable in its own right, but what Professor Amartya Sen would call its intrinsic value, not only because it is just and fair but also because it is a necessary condition, what would be its instrumental value, for sustainable economic development, reduced poverty and enhanced prosperity.

Since childhood we learn of the criticality of ethics in our life. But what is ethics or an ethical life? Is it morality or a combination of morality and reasoning? There are many aspects to it. The ethics that a Raja must follow—what we call Raj Dharam. Through the ages we have heard of this of kings, and rulers. It implies ethical values to rule. Through history we have examples of aggression by kings that rebooted themselves for change Ashoka after Kalinga and some failed despite efforts, like Marcus Aurellius who lived in the battlefield but would prefer a life of philosophy and poetry.

Then there is the ethics of religious people, an example strongly set by Sufis and followers of the Bhakti movement like Baba Nanak, Bulleh Shah or Kabir. These are poets of the heart Rumi and Bulleh Shah living several centuries apart but sharing the same mystical experiences with belief in the ethics of pure love. They question the reason for their existence—the purpose of life itself.

Rumi asks: "*what can I do my friends, if I do not know?*

I am neither Christian nor Jew, nor Muslim nor Hindu,

What can I do—not of the East, nor of the West, not of the land, nor of the sea,

Not of nature's essence, nor of circling heavens, what can I be?"

And Bulleh Shah:

"*Bulla kii jaana main kaun?*

Not a believer in the mosque am I

Nor a disbeliever with his rites am I

I am not the pure amongst the impure,

Neither Moses nor Pharoah am I

Bulla, kii jaana main kaun?"

NAJEEB H. JUNG is the Chairperson of the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA) at SGT University. A retired IAS officer of the Madhya Pradesh cadre, he has held key positions in the Government of India and international organisations, including Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas and Senior Energy Specialist at the Asian Development Bank. A former Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Millia Islamia and Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, his expertise spans governance, energy policy, and higher education reforms.

These people took ethics in their lives to a different level. They spoke only of love of humankind and of God the final mingling of man's Atma with the ultimate Atma that created this world.

What Adi Shankaracharya says:

"Nirankar Roopam shivoham shivoham

I am not any aspect of the mind like the intellect, the ego or the memory,

I am not the organs of hearing, tasting, smelling or seeing,

I am not the space, nor the earth, nor fire, nor air, I am the form of consciousness and bliss, am Shiva..

Nirankaar Roopam, shivoham shivoham"

This is exactly akin the concept of "*wahdat al wujuud*" in Islam that believes that we are all part of the ultimate being the world is his creation, as are we, indeed parts of the eternal whole.

But then from the esoteric we transcend to the real world. Away from the mystical dimensions that are within realms of possibility but never obtained through greed, avarice and rage that lead to constant conflict all around.

We believed Democracy could be a panacea that too despite a poor start when the jurors in Greece ordered the hemlock for Socrates. And then in 1938 Thomas Mann warned an American audience that democracy must put aside the habit for taking itself for granted. What he meant was that most of times principles and ethics take a back seat when the elected ones get a sense of power or a feeling of insecurity. So much so that ethics, morals, principles can be given a go by.

And, therefore, today we see a challenge to liberal democracy—worldwide. It comes from right wing demagoguery. In 2021 the V-Dem Institute of Gothenburg, Sweden, produced the largest global data set on democracy, covering about 200 countries. The Institute's findings are grim reading.

Autocracies now rule majority of people in 87 countries. This is home to 68% of global population.

Liberal democracies diminished over the past decade from 41 to 32 a population share of just 14%.

About 1/3rd of world population about 2.6 billion, live in nations urging "autocratisation" -just 4% live in regimes that are becoming more democratic. India with 1.4 billion once the world's largest democracy is now described as an electoral autocracy due to shrinking space of media, civil society, and political opposition. Attacks on freedom of expression, right to private assembly, assaults on media, academics, civil institutions are intensifying across the world. In many ways it's becoming increasingly clear that assassins of democracy use the same democratic institutions subtly, legally to throttle it. This is clear in Hungary, Russia, and Turkey in recent years.

Another area where ethics takes a back seat is resurgent nationalism. In the name of democracy resurgent nationalism all around the globe is one of the narrow, divisive, tribalistic ethno-nationalism that rides rough shod over diversities, suspicious of dissident groups and sees minorities as potential 5th columnists. This crude form of majoritarianism endangers civil rights of minorities but is attractive to populists from majority ethnic groups -catholic nationalists in Poland, Hindu nationalists in India, Islamists in Indonesia and Turkey, white evangelicals in the US and Brazil, or Zionists in Israel. And here lies serious concern as we look around the world in democratically elected governments.

Of course, authoritarian leaders have an advantage over their democratic peers in situations that require quick decisions while democracy is excruciatingly slow. However, I would argue that such advantages are transient. By its very construct, a functioning democracy is more deliberative, but electoral processes manage social conflicts better and lend stabilising legitimacy to policy decisions that grow from conditional consent of citizens. Yes, it can often be chaotic and

maddeningly slow, but the fact remains that democracies enrich individual autonomy and freedom, participation and deliberation which may be regarded as an important part of human development itself. On the other hand, abuses that are routine in authoritarian countries make the quality of development poorer.

An ethical community recognises and respects the dignity and agency of an individual's identity, irrespective of one's caste, creed, religion, gender or sexual orientation. These are all its critically important intrinsic values. But I want to extend my argument further: in addition to these intrinsic values, an ethical community also has an instrumental value which enables it to prosper, to more effectively fight the scourges of poverty and be a more fair, just and equitable society.

So let me now come to instances when elected democrats have behaved in a bizarre, obnoxious, illegal and unacceptable manner and all ethics and principles are given a go by. And, in the process, they harm and hurt not only the targeted victims but the society at large making it poorer, more unfair, less just, more unequal: in other words, more diminished.

The United States seems to have forgotten the brazen attack on Capitol Hill in 2021 by Trump supporters and has accepted wild conspiracy theories. The illegal, ruthless and unwarranted bombings of Iraq by the United States and the UK in search of non-existent nuclear arms where drilling bombs were used on innocent civilians; bombs that could drill into the bowels of buildings and homes at temperatures of 3000 degrees incinerating all human life and Gen Colin Powell at the UN when he couldn't move his lips without lying.

The use devastating weaponry and ammunition in the mountains of Tora Bora in Afghanistan in search of the allusive Mulla Omar and Bin Laden.

The unprecedented cruelty unleashed by Benjamin Netanyahu on the women and children of Gaza, and now Lebanon. It's a novel horror in human history to watch a genocidal war on our mobile phones—where men, women and journalists live tweet and put pictures moments before dying.

India has been different. Long before we started understanding our glorious past through William Dalrymple many others have written of our great history. A.L. Basham wrote of *The Wonder That Was India*, even as Romilla Thapar dug deep into understanding our richness.

While Chanakya's Arthshastra became the bible of administrative and governance principles, we had the first Republics of the world in Magadha. Nalanda became the fulcrum of profound education making knowledge spread its wings beyond India's boundaries. The kingdoms in the South— the Chalukyas, Cholas and Rashtrakutas set new bench marks not just in fine administration but in arts, music and architecture. Similar processes unfolded across the dusty plains of North India in an epochal sweep and carried with them beliefs, traditions, rituals, cultures, mythologies, music, food, literary expressions and much else.

The mainstream, with its many tributaries and distributaries, was a celebration of diversities, a river flowing across centuries, meandering, stumbling and bursting through obstructions. India became a fabulous fabric interwoven with humanity, indeed life. And the seeds of expression scattered in the fertile polyglot soil of the Indo-Gangetic plains planted and replanted again and again in varying soils and climes across centuries were to grow into newer and richer strains.

Later the Mughals left an indelible contribution to arts, music and architecture, with incrusted words in gold on the Peacock Throne in Delhi's Diwan-e-Khas: "*agar firdaus e bar rooh e zameen ast, hamiin ast o hamiin ast o hamiin ast* (if there is a paradise here on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here)."

Our stories for freedom from British rule are tales of folklore. If India did produce revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh,

Batukeshwar Dutt, Rajguru, Chandrashekhar Azad, Mangal Pande, Rani Jhansi, Ashfaqullah Khan, Ram Prasad Bismil, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Hasrat Mohani (I could go on and on); then it also had a pacifist like Gandhi or constitutionalists like Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Hundreds went to jail, gave up homes, gave up wearing western clothes to resort to simple hand-woven Khadi. India lived a revolution that was hitherto unknown to the world.

And then on November 26, 1949- 75 years ago we gifted a magnificent constitution to ourselves. Years of debates in the Constituent Assembly by patriots of the highest order, politicians, poets, teachers, men and women—some of whom had spent years in British jails gave us phenomenal Directive Principles of State Policy and guaranteed Fundamental Rights. Despite the horrible partition, the riots, Gandhi's assassination, we rose above all that.

But as Thomas Mann had said in 1938 there are always dangers ahead. Seasoned politicians foresaw this. Writing in 1953/54 under the pseudonym of Chanakya, Nehru describes himself as a Caesar passing by, who might turn dictator with a little twist. While Nehru did not become one, his daughter certainly turned the Constitution on its head. She refused to abdicate power after the High Court declared her election to the Lok Sabha illegal. A so-called Emergency was declared for the whole country, opposition leaders incarcerated, as most of the press crawled to her commands. Everyone crawled. Judges were made Chief Justices superseding ones that upheld the Constitution. We have lived through those 19 months and make no mistake -very similar to Germany many of us applauded the emergency and were in fact happy when dissident voices, particularly those of students or labour unions were suppressed.

47 years since the Emergency have gone by but how much is the change? Despite economic development and progress, we go through the same tribulations as of a backward country. Dalits struggle to find space, as repeated communal riots shake the confidence of Muslims. Sikhs cannot forget 1984, as Christian padris and nuns are harassed at hand of religious bigots.

Even now so many are incarcerated in the Bhima Koregaon case and denied bail for years. Father Stan—82 years old, a man far from any form of violence dies in jail begging for a sipper. Prof Sai Baba is kept in jail for 10 years. He is 90% immobilised. When granted bail, the Supreme Court of India held a hearing on a Saturday and rejected the order of the lower court giving no reason for this rejection. Umar Khalid, a young man stays in jail for over 4 years. He has entered the fifth now. His bail is rejected 11 times judges recuse themselves, judges are on leave etc. His offence is the charge of sedition when his entire speech is on video. Police prepare charge sheets of thousands of pages, making sure no judge can go through it with care.

In India there have been over 2000 custodial deaths between 2021 and 2022. Who is accountable?

Over 154,000 homes have been demolished by bull dozers. Mostly of Muslims.

These are not the defining characteristics of an ethical community. These are not the necessary building blocks of a society which is in harmony with itself. And, as I have stressed so far, these are not helpful in any way for our economic development.

This is the land where Baba Bulleh Shah sang:

"*Holi Khelungi, kah bismillah, naam nabi kii ratan chadhi boond padhi allah allah*".

This is our India. A bouquet of syncretic culture. Where a Muslim, Nazeer Akabarabadi sings peans in praise of Lord Krishna and Ram, where Mian Miir is called upon by Baba Nanak to lay the foundation stone of the Golden Temple.

Where thousands of Hindus and Muslims visit the Golden temple, heads covered in reverence or thousands of Sikhs and Hindus

pray at the dargahs of Sufi saints in hope of wishes being fulfilled.

And so we cannot have Nagas under virtual army rule, or a shattered Manipur waiting for resolution, or Adivasis in Chhattisgarh and the Maharashtra /Andhra border living under the fear of CRPF as foresters evict them from lands to make place for industry and are moved to destitution, or minorities living in fear of violence, lynchings or hate speeches, skilled and patriotic public sector workers demonised for inefficiency, women—urban, rural, rich and poor—crushed by patriarchy.

In the midst of all this, of course there is development. The Sensex booms and the rich grow richer. But is this sustainable if we are faced with continuing attempts to divide us? We have forgotten when G.D. Birla or Jamnalal Bajaj walked hand in hand with Gandhi. Birla supported the independence movement even while building ethical enterprises. Bajaj integrated Gandhian principles into business and the Godrej family remained committed to environmental sustainability long before it became fashionable. How little is known that under Gandhi's influence Birla and Bajaj contributed funds to the Jamia Millia Islamia when this University ran out of funds in the 1920s. Jamnalal Bajaj became the treasurer for the Jamia Millia Islamia. We seem to have forgotten the achievements of the Tata group that built a vast business empire, that symbolised in many ways the genius of India's enterprise in an ethical way. We should bow our heads to Azim Premji who lives even now conducting his business while upkeeping the highest moral standards and is indeed a torch bearer for immense philanthropic initiatives.

Readers, we cannot reach the heights we want to or are capable of with economic inequality at such unprecedented heights as it exists. Environmental degradation threatens our existence. And dare I say corporate influence where money buys power and influences governments—undermines the entire democratic process. It is when corporate money influences elections, when crony capitalism raises its ugly head, when environmental regulations are diluted for profit, when labour rights are compromised, when there is growing power of monopolies then there are bound to be issues that endanger the country.

The stoic philosopher Seneca said: "Life is like a play: its not the length, but the excellence of the acting that matters." So today's business leaders must ask: What excellence are we pursuing?

Our challenges in sustainability and inequality must become opportunities for innovative solutions. Businesses must emphasise ethical practices, develop metrics beyond profit and foster democratic corporate governance.

As the country strives to preserve its democracy and carry on the fight within Parliament and the Courts to preserve and nurture it, business leaders must step forward not just as wealth creators but as ethical stewards of our collective future.

So India stands at critical crossroads. While the Constitution stands for a complete undiluted, uncompromised, secular democracy—an ethical community living in social harmony, political interests are nudging it towards a state of continuing conflict. This must be resisted. We as Indians have to rise above our communities, beyond our castes, beyond our mohallas, streets and families and look at a world that our forefathers dreamt about as they fought for our freedom. ■

The SenseMaker™

Professor Eugene Rogan is a Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History and the Director of the Middle East Centre; Fellow of St Antony's College. He is the author of The Arabs: A History, which has been translated into ten languages and was named one of the best books of 2009 by The Economist, The Financial Times, and The Atlantic Monthly. His most recent book is The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920 (2015). Professor Rogan has extensive experience of working with the media, both nationally and internationally, and including both print and broadcast.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Eugene Rogan, welcome to The SenseMaker.

Eugene Rogan:

Thank you for having me. I'm delighted to be with you.

Amogh Dev Rai:

You have written remarkable books. They have been translated into 18 languages worldwide, and they also have a fan following of their own, which is not just restricted to academicians but also people far and wide. You've written a new cracker of a book, if I may say so, which tells an interesting story and history. But before we begin, how would you like to describe yourself?

Amogh Dev Rai:

Because it is a story that resonates deeply, I'd like to ask: as an American in Oxford, do you see yourself as something like an Englishman in New York? How would you like to describe yourself?

The SenseMaker Interview.

Eugene Rogan:

Thank you. I think you've done a beautiful job framing it. What I would say is that my position complicates my life as a historian of the Middle East. I carry two suitcases worth of baggage. On the one hand, I work in a British university, which comes with the British imperial legacy over the region. On the other, I do so with an American accent, which carries all the Cold War baggage that implies.

Eugene Rogan:

The challenge I've faced all along is how to leverage my years of living in the region and my knowledge of Arabic and Turkish to approach the history of the Arab world using local sources and a localised perspective—despite not being a local myself. This challenge was set out in many ways by the late great Edward Said in his work Orientalism, where he highlighted the imperial and neo-imperial biases that shape how we discuss the histories of others.

Eugene Rogan:

I'm deeply conscious of the fact that as I write Arab history, I do so as an outsider. Yet, I believe I bring value to this perspective. Certainly, my readers in the Arab world have

engaged positively with how I write their history. I see my role as building a bridge between a region I deeply love—I've spent much of my life there—and my own cultural contexts in Europe and America. That is how I situate myself as a historian of the Arab world.

Amogh Dev Rai:

That is a beautiful introduction to the discussion we're about to have. In your book, the role of people from outside the region is indeed very prominent. But before we delve into specific events, we need a sense of the old Ottoman world. You've done a fabulous job of describing it.

Amogh Dev Rai:

There is a cast of characters. The French are involved. The English are involved. The Americans are involved. But above all, the city itself takes centre stage. I've listened to two or three interviews you've given about the book, and the questions have been very interesting and on point. One theme that stands out is your description of the city and its segregation. As a historian of this region, could you tell us more about old Damascus, which plays such a pivotal role in everything that follows? Your narrative takes us back to 1860. I know it's a challenging task, but could you give us a glimpse?

Eugene Rogan:

It's actually a captivating task, and I think it was one of the real pleasures of writing this book. One of the things I most looked forward to was being able to do a deep dive into the history of such a rich and fascinating city as Damascus. And you talk about old Damascus—Damascus was old even at the time that the Hebrew Bible was being written.

Eugene Rogan:

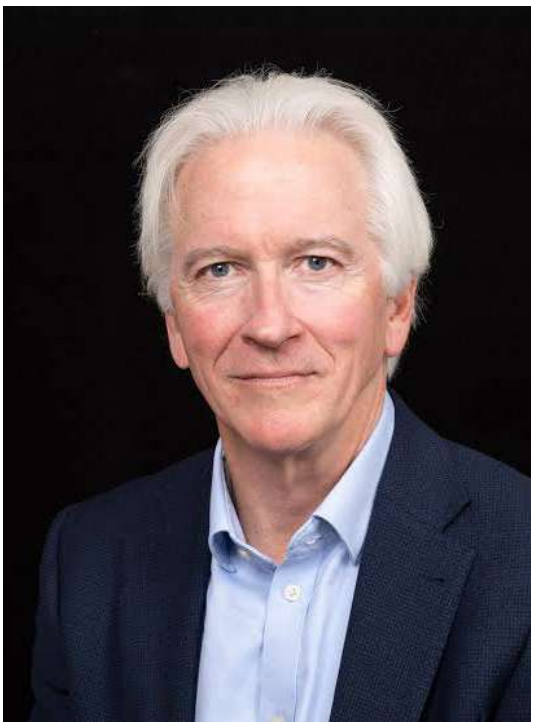
Yeah. This is the city where the Roman soul was blinded by the light and converted to Christianity in the first century. It was the city that the Prophet Muhammad did not wish to enter because he believed it was only right for a human to enter Paradise once he was in the afterlife, and not visit it in his lifetime by going into Damascus.

Eugene Rogan:

So by the time you reach 1868, there's the sheer antiquity of the city of Damascus. The fabric of the city is shaped by ruins going right back to Roman and Byzantine times, and all that history is omnipresent. Mosques, while writing the book, actually treat Damascus almost as one of the characters in the city. And I try to capture the civic pride.

Eugene Rogan:

They were so enamoured of their city. The greatest punishment you could deal a Damascene, found guilty of the worst crimes, was exile—telling them they could never return to their home city again. You know, they'd rather you cut out their tongue or blind their eyes than deprive them of the pleasure of being in their beautiful, and, as they called it in Arabic, mystical city.



Prof. Eugene Rogan

Eugene Rogan:

They called it the fragrant city of Damascus. And I think it's the contrast of the desert and the greenery that makes Damascus stand out for 19th-century observers. It's a city that is fed by rivers that pour into a desert landscape. And so you had this wonderful contrast between the sand that surrounds it and the greenness of the city. This greenness permeates every house and every neighbourhood through fountains and watercourses.

Eugene Rogan:

At night, you're serenaded by the croaking of frogs. And in the daytime, you sit in the shade of fruit trees in beautiful courtyard houses that are 400 or 500 years old. So there was a kind of refined lifestyle of good food, fresh water, and promenades along the riverside of the Barada, with cafes where men and women could mix and mingle. This characterised the beautiful city.

Eugene Rogan:

And you talk about its kind of segregation. It is true that you had Jews and Christians living alongside Muslims. There were quarters like Bab Touma, which were seen as Christian quarters because the mosques gave way to churches, and there were monasteries and convents. But all these quarters were inhabited by people of all faiths, and there was a real mixing and mingling.

Eugene Rogan:

At the same time, a high level of communal self-governance characterised the old Ottoman world. This was known as the millet system, in which Christians more or less governed themselves and collected taxes on behalf of the state under Christian personal status law. The same applied to the Jewish community. So there was a high degree of cohabitation and interaction. But in this city, the Muslims—Sunni Muslims—were certainly the elite, the most privileged citizens. Christians and Jews were respected and protected but were distinctly second-class citizens.

Eugene Rogan:

And all of that begins to change as the pressure of outsiders starts to invert the social hierarchy. And with that inversion came tensions that grew increasingly murderous.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Right. That is an element that keeps coming up and building. We are going to get to that. I know that I'm projecting by getting into the bit about the book, but I think a lot of those are topical announcements that have been made before. When we seriously get into the book, one thing that stands out when making a chronological assessment of all you write about is the Ottoman Empire.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Especially in the time you are writing about, the Ottoman Empire is a big three at the edges. What was really going on? I mean, you were very graphic in detailing how the government in Egypt was not really listening or heeding the control from the Sublime Porte, and it had a domino effect. But what was going on in the bureaucracy at this point in time?

Amogh Dev Rai:

From 1856 onwards, especially with the 1856 reform that was happening—why don't you tell us a little bit about that?

Eugene Rogan:

I find that many in the West have a lazy habit of talking about the Ottoman Empire during this period as being in decline. So there's the "decline and fall" model of discussing Ottoman history. And with that, you overlook the fact that the Ottoman Empire

was still, in the mid-19th century, an empire that spanned three continents and was a very powerful state.

Eugene Rogan:

But it was competing in a neighbourhood in which other countries had a technological and military advantage. The Russians were the closest and most dangerous neighbour, and they had been defeating the Ottomans militarily for over a century. Britain and France were at the forefront of countries whose empires were growing, and they looked towards the Ottoman Empire as geostrategic territory, which put the Ottomans at a disadvantage.

Eugene Rogan:

In the 19th century, the Ottomans were trying to find a formula to defend their territories against both external and internal challenges, while also making the most of their revenue base to pay for the new technologies that gave European powers a decisive advantage in organisation and the conduct of war.

Eugene Rogan:

The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution in Europe had introduced new technologies and ideas that made Europe unusually powerful in the 19th century. This put the Ottoman Empire at a disadvantage. In its own terms, however, the empire was still quite strong and viable, but it faced real challenges. The Ottoman solution in the 19th century was to initiate a series of reforms. On the one hand, they aimed to make their administration fit for purpose—more efficient at raising taxes, applying laws, and controlling their territories.

Eugene Rogan:

On the other hand, they sought to keep the ambitions of Russia or France at arm's length and preserve their territorial integrity. One-way European powers found to intervene in Ottoman affairs was by claiming to protect non-Muslim minority communities. For example, Russia claimed to be the protector of all Orthodox Christian churches, as the successor to the Byzantine Empire. France claimed to be the protector of Catholic churches, including Roman Catholicism and local Catholic churches that accepted the Pope's authority, such as the Armenian Catholics, Greek Catholics, and the Maronite Church.

Eugene Rogan:

The British, for their part, were committed to preserving Ottoman territorial integrity for their imperial interests. They saw the Ottoman Empire as a buffer state to keep Russia out of the Mediterranean and to prevent France from encroaching into South Asia. For Britain, the Ottomans were strategically useful. The British engaged in protection by looking after small communities like the tiny Protestant and Jewish populations, and in Mount Lebanon and Syria, the Druze community. These were not large minority communities like the Orthodox and Catholic populations, so Britain's involvement was less pronounced.

Eugene Rogan:

This politics of intervention and protection of minority communities was very dangerous for the Ottoman Empire, as it gave European powers a regular pretext for intervention. The danger of this became apparent in disputes between Orthodox and Catholics over holy sites in Palestine. Such conflicts, including disputes in Ham and Nazareth, drew the Ottomans into larger conflicts. When the Russians decisively won in 1854, it led to French and British intervention, culminating in what came to be known as the Crimean War.

Eugene Rogan:

At that point, the Ottomans recognised that they had to find a formula to pre-empt European intervention on behalf of minority communities, or they would face an endless cycle of poverty and wars. So they passed a reform measure that, for the very first time, gave legal equality to all Ottoman citizens, regardless of their religion. This sounds to us today, in the 20th century, like a totally reasonable proposition.

Eugene Rogan:

But for an Ottoman Empire, where the Sultan was also the Caliph of Islam, the idea that Muslims, Christians, and Jews would all be on an equal footing before the law wasn't just an affront to their social status—it was the Sultan contradicting the very word of the Quran, the perfect and unedited word of God.

Eugene Rogan:

This made many of the pious Sunni Muslims in the Ottoman Empire resist this change. They saw it not just as a threat to their interests but as subverting the God-given natural order. As a result, the period after 1856 became one of heightened volatility, particularly in the more conservative cities of the Ottoman Empire. For reasons I discuss in the book, Damascus in the mid-19th century was among the most conservative.

Eugene Rogan:

These reforms were therefore very destabilising to the social and political order of Damascus after 1856.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Absolutely. Now we get into the main character in the book. The book is centred around many very interesting people, but I think you would agree with me that Mikhail Mishka is the gentleman who stands out. He publishes the book and is central to the terrible tragedy that happens in 1860. He is the main, sympathetic character and the focus throughout this particular book.

Amogh Dev Rai:

But before we get into the event, tell us a little bit about this remarkable man. His journey, in a very important way, reflects the assimilation you were just referring to. He is the son of an immigrant. He comes to this area, and although technically a Christian—moving from one form of Christianity to another—he should have been treated as a second-class citizen.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Yet, he rises and becomes on par with the most important and notable people in the city of Damascus. Give us an author's view of this remarkable man, who was called the most intelligent man in the massacres, if not the entirety of the Middle East.

Eugene Rogan:

Don't be shocked—he is an incredible eyewitness to history. Forgive me; there's a siren in the background as a fire truck goes by. As you rightly point out, he was seen by his peers as the most intelligent man in all of Syria. Born in Mount Lebanon in 1800, he travelled between Egypt and Syria, held many different professions, and was by all accounts a brilliant man.

Eugene Rogan:

An autodidact, he taught himself several professions and wrote many books. He emerges from the society of 19th-century Syria as a three-dimensional character. We even have a photographic portrait of him, at a time when perhaps one in 10,000 people had their picture taken. Mishka is a wonderful eyewitness, and he first came to my attention as a historian in his retirement.

The SenseMaker Interview.

Eugene Rogan:

The United States was a curiosity but certainly not a power to be taken seriously. The very fact that the United States saw fit to hire a local Syrian to represent them in a provincial capital like Damascus suggested to the Ottomans that this was not a very serious country. For the governor of Damascus, it was clear from the resistance he showed to accepting the accreditation of a native Syrian Christian as vice consul.

Eugene Rogan:

The idea that a Christian could head a diplomatic mission in his city underscored his resistance to the notion that Christians could rise to equal footing with Muslims. He was deeply resistant to this change in the social order, in which Sunnis saw themselves—quite rightly, under the Ottoman system—as the protected community of the Ottoman Sultan. To him, Christians were still second-class citizens.

Eugene Rogan:

He simply didn't want to recognise that a Syrian Christian could hold ambassadorial or high diplomatic standing. He refused to return Mishka's visits, accept his credentials, or allow him to perform his duties. This meant that, immediately after taking up his post in 1859, Mishka began to face serious obstacles in handling some of the important diplomatic issues confronting the young United States of America.

Eugene Rogan:

One issue involved a consignment of wool being blocked by the British, as part of a broader competition over primary resources like wool for industrial use. Another issue arose from a confrontation between Protestant missionaries in the neighbouring town of Zahlé, on the eastern side of Mount Lebanon, where the culprits had fled into the province of Syria.

Eugene Rogan:

The Americans were eager for these individuals to be arrested and brought to justice for the damage done to American missionary interests. Mishka, however, simply couldn't get the governor to meet with him or take these issues seriously, and he was failing in his job. He filed increasingly desperate reports back to Beirut, which made their way to Constantinople (Istanbul). In response, the American ambassador abruptly decided to board a ship, sail to Beirut, and, with very little warning, present himself in Damascus to resolve the tensions.

Eugene Rogan:

The visit of an ambassador from Constantinople was sufficient to make an impression on the recalcitrant governor of Damascus, Ahmed Pasha. He grudgingly accepted Mishka's role in the city. In this way, the issue was resolved in a grudging manner, but tensions persisted. I think this is a good place to begin understanding the breakdown of social order in Damascus, particularly in the dynamic between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority at that time.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Absolutely. After that, the problems were resolved to a certain extent, but not fully. Protocol dictated that the governor, the judge, and the treasurer were required to visit the vice consul or any high-ranking diplomat after the diplomat had called on them. This, however, didn't happen with Mikhail Mishka.

Amogh Dev Rai:

He was told by the judge, "I really want to call on you, but perhaps some other time." While reading your book, a question that kept coming up for me was about the acknowledgments you give to the state archives of the Ottoman Empire. Unlike the equivalent Mughal

Empire in India, which was well-documented but not clerical in its approach, the Ottoman Empire seemed to have a robust and well-devised system for collecting and centralising inputs and information from different parts of the empire.

Amogh Dev Rai:

This complex bureaucracy is evident in the documents. From 1856 to the entry of Ahmed Pasha in Damascus after the events of 1860, one gets the sense of a social contract between the people of Damascus and their rulers. This also extended to the relationship between important bureaucrats like Ahmed Pasha—being a governor of such a significant city—and his superiors in the hierarchy.

Amogh Dev Rai:

So how was it that the Ottomans just did not see this break happening?

Eugene Rogan:

Well, I think the tensions between the governor of Damascus, Ahmed Pasha, and his higher-ups in Istanbul or Constantinople reflect elite resistance to reforms. We mentioned the 1856 reforms, which were not just challenging the social hierarchy but also appeared to contradict elements of the Quran that clearly distinguish between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Eugene Rogan:

This created resistance from many conservative elites, not just within the religious establishment but also among the elites in cities. For instance, the Governing Council of Damascus included many conservative Muslim functionaries who strongly opposed these changes. Even at the highest levels of government, there were officials who believed the reforms were wrongly inspired and resisted their implementation. I think this is where Ahmed Pasha's resistance becomes significant.

Eugene Rogan:

It's extraordinary because, as you noted, there's a detailed bureaucratic trail left by these characters in the Ottoman archives, which are incredibly rich and remain one of my most important sources. Yet, in going through the reports, I found only one from Ahmed Pasha dating to the actual period of the massacres.

Eugene Rogan:

When you read how he described the breakdown in order, it seems as though the governor himself was detached from reality. It was almost as if, pardon my frivolity, the man was on drugs—he simply didn't appear to grasp the scale or nature of the violence unfolding on his watch.

Eugene Rogan:

Many, including Mishka, viewed the violence as something Ahmed Pasha actively aided and provoked rather than prevented. His role remains ambiguous, and there's nothing in his writings to suggest he was genuinely trying to uphold order in his city or province. It seemed as if he was almost willing to allow chaos to demonstrate that the reforms were responsible for the unrest and that the situation was beyond his control.

Eugene Rogan:

But here, I'm left interpreting between the lines. He never explicitly said that. What we do know is that, at the end of these events, he was arrested by the authorities, put on trial, and ultimately executed for his failings as governor, particularly for not preventing the violence in Damascus.

Amogh Dev Rai:

The violence of 1860 was deeply tied to the nature of the city itself. The reason I began this conversation with the city is that, while

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there was segregation, there was also a clear line of religious demarcation emerging. There were many religious groups, even within the Muslim community, that were active at the time.

Amogh Dev Rai:

I'd like you to shed some light on the role of specific learned Muslim scholars in resisting or supporting the 1856 reforms and how their actions contributed to the tense situation in 1859. It feels like a precursor to events similar to what John Reed described in Ten Days That Shook the World. In this case, we're talking about eight days that shook the Ottoman Empire.

Amogh Dev Rai:

If I were to read a newspaper today, it feels like I could just change the date, and many of the same dynamics still persist. So, while some things have changed, much remains the same. What role did the religious authorities play in this, and how do we hold them accountable?

Eugene Rogan:

It's a very difficult question to answer, because the most critical sources about the role of the Muslim religious elites in Damascus during these events come either from European consuls or highly biased accounts. The European consuls, in the aftermath of the events, emerge as very bloody-minded individuals. They clearly wanted to see a lot of capital punishment, believing that the violence done against Christians required equal violence done against Muslims to even the score.

Eugene Rogan:

I reproduce some of the absolutely ridiculous plans put forward by British and French consular officials, recommended to the Ottomans as their way of solving the crisis in Damascus. These plans were hardly balanced or wise. One example is the British minister recommending vacating all Muslims from the Muslim quarters of Jerusalem and handing their houses over to the surviving Christians of Damascus.

Eugene Rogan:

This, they argued, would punish Islam and compensate Christians for their suffering while restoring Jerusalem to Christendom—a situation that hadn't existed since the Crusades. Frankly, only a European potentate in the 19th century could have thought this was a good solution. Certainly, no one in the rest of the world would have believed that reverting to the medieval violence of the Crusades was a reasonable outcome.

Eugene Rogan:

The French, for their part, proposed taking hostages and executing them if they didn't yield all their wealth to compensate Christians for the violence they had endured. The Europeans were themselves very bloody-minded and took particular offense at what they perceived to be the role of key members of the religious establishment in Damascus.

Eugene Rogan:

They accused these figures of aiding, abetting, and encouraging violence during the 1860 massacres. However, the truth is that the Ottoman authorities convened a tribunal and pressured Damascene notables as much as they could to provide evidence against the leading religious scholars of the city. Despite this, they couldn't find anyone willing to testify that the imams or the mufti were directly responsible, as the Europeans claimed.

Eugene Rogan:

So, I have a hard time fully accepting the position of the European consuls in accusing these religious figures of active responsibility. However, there is circumstantial evidence suggesting that the Ottoman authorities

themselves suspected their involvement. Christian eyewitnesses also accused some leading religious figures, including the mufti, of responsibility.

Eugene Rogan:

At the same time, it's important to acknowledge that many Muslims intervened to protect their Christian neighbours. The most notable example is Emir Abd al-Qadir, who came to Damascus as a refugee from the French conquest of Algeria, where he had led the resistance. He emerged as one of the notables of Damascus and a leading Islamic scholar.

Eugene Rogan:

Appalled by the violence, he rallied over 1,200 Algerian veterans, who were still with him in Damascus, in exile, on his payroll, and armed by him and the French authorities. This force effectively intervened to protect Christians, moving them to safe houses and ultimately to the safety of the citadel. Approximately 85% of Christians in Damascus survived these events due to the intervention of Muslim notables like Abd al-Qadir.

Eugene Rogan:

So, it's a mixed picture. I can't simply say it was Islam versus Christianity. There were certainly Muslims in the mob responsible for the killings, and undoubtedly some Muslim leaders encouraged the violence. However, many Muslim figures also played critical roles in saving lives, which complicates any neat or tidy division of the city. Muslims were both part of the tensions that gave rise to the massacre and instrumental in mitigating the destruction.

Eugene Rogan:

They were part of the solution that rescued so many Christians from massacre.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Absolutely. I absolutely agree with you. The reason I wanted to delve into this in detail is because the tension hangs heavy in the book as we approach the events of 1860. But when the violence erupts, it happens suddenly—like most tragic events in history, the wars and conflicts that began then seemed to start out of nowhere.

Amogh Dev Rai:

For those of us who have read the book—and for those who are listening and may grab a copy—why don't you tell us a little about how the events of 1860 began? What was it that the instigators wanted?

Amogh Dev Rai:

Because it doesn't seem clear at any point that they had a concrete set of demands, apart from wanting to get rid of every Christian—or more broadly, every non-Muslim person—but specifically targeting Christians.

Eugene Rogan:

You know, I'm particularly interested in the comparative perspective here—how this compares to mixed communities in other regions, for instance, in South Asia, which has also seen times of great tension and violence between communities. I think there's an interesting comparison to be made when circumstances lead one community to perceive another as an existential threat.

Eugene Rogan:

As you'll recall from the book, I refer to such moments where a community is defined as an existential threat as giving rise to what I call a "genocidal moment." This isn't to say that genocide hangs over these communities continuously throughout history, but rather that a specific intersection of circumstances creates a perception that the target community—in this case, the Damascene

Christian community—poses an existential threat to the Muslim majority.

Eugene Rogan:

In these moments, the call isn't just for the extermination of the Christians but for the complete erasure of their presence in the city. It wasn't enough to kill Christians; they sought to destroy their churches, monasteries, houses, workshops, and shops in the markets. Even after the killing ended, they continued burning the houses of the Christian quarters for days, as if to ensure that Christians could never return to Damascus.

Eugene Rogan:

It was a specific moment of madness that stands as an exception in Damascus's history. Such an event had never happened before and would never happen again.

Eugene Rogan:

Your question is about what led to this perception that the Christian minority posed such a threat to the Muslim majority. In the early chapters of the book, I point to several factors. First, changing patterns of trade actively disadvantaged the livelihoods of the Muslim majority, while the primary beneficiaries were Christian households. These Christians increasingly became agents of European trading companies, growing richer and more prosperous, seemingly at the expense of their Muslim neighbours.

Eugene Rogan:

Second, the arrival of European and American consuls in Damascus in the 1840s introduced a new diplomatic presence that extended privileges and legal rights not only to the diplomats but also to the local Christians they employed as clerks and guards. These individuals came under the same extraterritorial privileges as Europeans, effectively gaining an elevated legal and social status.

Eugene Rogan:

These privileges extended to their families and relatives, creating a new group of minorities who began exercising European-like rights. This shift in power dynamics made these groups more assertive, demanding, and, in some cases, arrogant, which created significant tensions with the Muslim majority.

Eugene Rogan:

Finally, I think there's a third factor that also played a role, albeit for very different reasons…

Eugene Rogan:

You have tensions emerging between the Maronite Christians and the Druze community. The Druze, being a distinct religion that originated from Shiite Islam in the 12th century and evolved through the 16th and 17th centuries, had by then become a clearly defined religious community of its own. These two communities, the Maronite Christians and the Druze, had established a kind of social and political order that had allowed them to live in close harmony.

Eugene Rogan:

At every level of the hierarchy, there was a balance between the two. At the very top, among the princes of Mount Lebanon, there were both Druze and Maronite families. At the feudal level of sheikhs, there was an equal division between Druze and Maronite families. Even among the 85% of the population, comprising farmers and artisans, there was a similar balance. Religion served as a dividing principle, but it was more about the social hierarchy than sectarian conflict.

Eugene Rogan:

This balance was disrupted in the 19th century by a series of changes. The Egyptian occupation, led by an ambitious Egyptian

governor, played a significant role in pitting Maronites against Druze, fostering sectarian tensions in communities that had never previously experienced such divisions. For various reasons, the Druze began to perceive the Maronites as an existential threat.

Eugene Rogan:

The Druze came to believe that the Maronites were attempting to push them out of their ancestral homeland in Mount Lebanon entirely. Being a smaller community than the Christians of Mount Lebanon, the Druze decided that in order to protect their land and livelihoods from what they saw as a Christian threat, they would have to resort to violence. They resolved to shock and surprise their enemies, refusing to lose even a single engagement, and pursued the extermination of their Christian adversaries—particularly the men of fighting age—to preserve their position in Lebanon.

Eugene Rogan:

In the summer of 1860, just 50 km from Damascus, the Druze attacked the Christians of Mount Lebanon, perceiving them as an existential threat and pursuing extermination as their solution. This conflict excited the angry and resentful Muslims of Damascus, who observed the violence in Lebanon. When the town of Zahle, a Christian stronghold, fell to the Druze in June 1860, shopkeepers in Damascus hung lanterns in celebration through the streets. The authorities even had to order them to take the lanterns down due to the inappropriate excitement.

Eugene Rogan:

If not for the violence in Lebanon, which set the example of extermination as a solution to the "Christian problem," it is possible that the massacre in Damascus might never have occurred. However, the convergence of these events created an acceptance of violence and massacres.

Eugene Rogan:

Tensions reached a boiling point when a group of youths drew Christian crosses on the streets of Damascus, forcing Christians to defile their religious symbol by walking over them. The governor's response—arresting the youths and parading them through the streets in manacles while making them sweep away the chalk crosses—outraged the already volatile Muslim public. This provoked a massacre, and the violence began.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And so, the moment of madness unfolded. One of the principal consolations of this tragic event, as you describe it, is that figures from earlier in the book—be it Mishka or Emir Abd al-Qadir—played crucial roles in helping others. For instance, the European consulates and diplomatic agents were largely protected.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Mishka himself was taken to a safe place but later sought refuge with another noble Muslim friend who kept him hidden for a month, during which he reunited with his wife and family. The process of reconciliation began around this time.

Amogh Dev Rai:

But this brings me back to what you just mentioned about the economic changes. I'd like to understand this better—how these shifts contributed to the tensions and eventual outbreak of violence.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Hajj travels used to be very important movers and shakers in the market of Damascus. It was a significant source of wealth and prestige for Damascus and its traders. Records from a few years before 1860 indicate that the numbers were declining.

Amogh Dev Rai:

So what I wanted to understand is whether, at some point, this could be seen as a kind of Luddite revolution. I know I'm standing on one leg with this argument, but could it be that there was this perception that if you could just remove certain groups or people from the equation, Damascus could reclaim its central role in the market?

Amogh Dev Rai:

You've mentioned the role of steamships and illustrated the number of them operating at the ports under different flags. This economic argument resonates, and while I agree with you that the violence was an overreaction, I still don't quite see how it would have changed anything. What was the thinking behind it? I understand you might not have a definitive answer, but I'd like you to reflect on this because it's an argument that comes up in many contexts, even in modern conflicts.

Eugene Rogan:

That's such an interesting question. Let me take you back to early 19th-century Damascus. What made Damascus a conservative city, as opposed to its neighbours like Beirut, was that it wasn't open to the Mediterranean world. It lacked the cosmopolitanism we associate with Ottoman port cities—places where you had Armenians, Greeks, Maltese, Italians, and people from across the Mediterranean and Eurasian worlds mixing languages and cultures.

Eugene Rogan:

Instead, Damascus was a "port city of the desert." The vehicles that brought trade to Damascus were not ships but camels. There are these wonderful descriptions of caravans coming from Baghdad and the Hejaz, from Mecca and Medina—two, three, or even five thousand camels long. When these caravans arrived, it was a huge event in Damascus.

Eugene Rogan:

Camels, however, were not efficient for transporting low-value commodities. You wouldn't ship wheat by camel over 2,000 miles. Instead, only high-value goods like silks, precious metals, spices, and coffee—items with enough markup to justify the cost of camel transport—were carried. This made the markets of Damascus unique, a veritable treasure trove of luxury goods.

Eugene Rogan:

Additionally, local production of fabrics was a significant part of Damascus's economy. Fine fabrics—cottons, blends of cotton and silk, silk and wool, and pure woollens—were intricately woven and highly sought after. Many in the Ottoman Empire and the broader Asian world preferred Damascene weavings over industrial products from Europe.

Eugene Rogan:

This created a kind of protected market focused on overland trade routes coming primarily from Anatolia, Baghdad, Persia, and Egypt. However, with the advent of steamship traffic, everything changed. Steamships introduced a high volume of regular and predictable shipments from European markets to the eastern Mediterranean.

Eugene Rogan:

These ships began unloading large quantities of cheap, industrially manufactured products—woollens and cottons—that significantly undercut local production.

Eugene Rogan:

The sheer volume of goods being produced began to displace what traditional weaving could accomplish. Lancashire mills were able to churn out bolts of cloth with a level of efficiency that the local weavers could hardly match. As a result, trade began to shift

due to changes in industrial technology and transport.

Eugene Rogan:

Many in Damascus believed that if they could stop the flow of goods coming from the Mediterranean through Beirut to Damascus—products that they associated with Christians and that undermined the wealth of Muslims—they could restore the kind of desert-oriented caravan trade of the past. They thought this would return the market to its natural trade relations, its natural economy, and its natural order.

Eugene Rogan:

It was madness. You couldn't turn the clock back. But I think that nostalgia drove this mindset. Nostalgia is powerful, and it can lead to economic self-harm. I'm sitting in post-Brexit Britain, where many who voted to leave the European Union imagined they could return to a Britain of the 1930s and 1940s.

Eugene Rogan:

So, these movements were driven by irrational nostalgia. It's not such a remote phenomenon, even for us in the 21st century.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Absolutely, it's not. There are so many movements in Middle Eastern history that I think can be traced back to this specific event.

Amogh Dev Rai:

After the massacre, you explore the concept of genocide in the book. The term hadn't been invented yet, but you call it a "genocidal moment," which I think encapsulates the weight of what occurred beautifully. We also see the governor stripped of his rank, forced to leave, and later tried and executed, as you mentioned earlier.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Following this, we have an interesting figure enter the scene—one of the most important enforcers of the 1856 reform, Fuad Pasha. He is sent to Damascus and famously refuses to wear his uniform because he finds the tragedy that occurred to be both anti-Ottoman and, to a certain extent, anti-Islam. Tell us about this moment of reconciliation and what lessons we might take from it today.

Amogh Dev Rai:

I'm going to do something inexcusable—asking you, as a historian, to reflect on the present moment. But is there hope for reconciliation of the kind we saw post-1860 today? Do we have the necessary elements, like the fuelled passions and the cast of characters present in Damascus at that time, to facilitate such a process?

Eugene Rogan:

At the time of writing the book, the Gaza war had not happened, and I wasn't thinking specifically about Israel-Palestine or the tensions brewing there since 1948 in the conflict between Zionism and Palestinian Arab nationalism. However, I do think there are lessons—not just for Israel-Palestine but for any regional conflict.

Eugene Rogan:

Genocidal movements are not confined to the Middle East. In just the past 25 years, we've seen examples in Myanmar with the Rohingya, in Darfur, and during the breakup of Yugoslavia. These are all instances of extermination movements that could be characterised as genocidal. The example of Damascus provides hope that there is a pathway back from the brink of madness—not just towards reconstruction but also reconciliation.

Eugene Rogan:

But reconciliation requires certain elements. First, there must be a return to a new sense of

law and order. The violence and lawlessness of the massacre itself must be addressed as a first-order priority. Establishing law and order and holding people accountable for their actions is essential.

Eugene Rogan:

Second, there must be a sense of justice for those who have suffered deeply traumatic events. Without these steps, reconciliation becomes almost impossible.

Eugene Rogan:

It is essential to ensure that those responsible for wrongdoing are held accountable. However, the process of justice must not be dragged out in a quixotic attempt to achieve total justice. The aim should be to deliver enough justice to deter wrongdoers from repeating their actions and to reassure victims that their suffering has been acknowledged.

Eugene Rogan:

Alongside justice, there must be a concerted effort to provide people with basic necessities—a dignified roof over their heads and the means to resume their economic activities. This allows them to return to a normal life, caring for their families and meeting their needs. These are fundamental requirements for restoring stability.

Eugene Rogan:

People need a stake in society—something that gives them a reason to preserve the order being re-established. Achieving this requires compromise. Total justice is unattainable; you cannot fully compensate for losses or bring back the dead. However, the process must offer the survivors, and especially their children, the prospect of a better future.

Eugene Rogan:

This focus on creating hope for the next generation is crucial for encouraging people to turn the page on past injustices and look forward. Reconciliation is not a quick fix; in Damascus, it took over 20 years to achieve. The events of 1860 were a deeply divisive trauma, but under the Ottoman Empire, the city rebuilt and reconciled so successfully that there would never again be sectarian violence in Damascus.

Eugene Rogan:

This offers hope. It demonstrates that with wise and effective guidance, any society can achieve positive reconciliation, even after profound divisions.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Thank you. That gives us a lot of hope. It also brings me to my last question. One of the key takeaways from the book is the reconstruction of Damascus after the riots, fire, and violence. You mention that the first three things built were the armoury, the police station, and the courthouse.

Amogh Dev Rai:

These institutions became the centre of the rebuilding process. Following this, there was significant reconstruction, with funds flowing in, which not only reduced sectarian tensions to pre-19th-century levels but also led to a careful regulation of the foreign consular system.

Amogh Dev Rai:

I noticed that after 1860, not every Christian could automatically become a foreign consular officer. This number was regulated because, if unchecked, it could lead to Christians seeking to extend consular protections to everyone they knew. Do you think that by 1914, the Ottoman Empire had developed a strong administrative hold over regulating its internal affairs?

Amogh Dev Rai:

Can the events of 1860 be seen as a

triumph of Ottoman bureaucracy, contrary to the narrative that the Empire was in a long period of decay? I'm not saying there weren't issues, but it seems the Ottomans demonstrated remarkable capacity to fix such a situation. Fuad Pasha, for instance, used capital punishment sparingly as a modifier, not as extensively as the Europeans would have preferred.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Was this also a broader apology for the Empire itself, showing that it was more adept at managing internal squabbles than it is often credited for?

Eugene Rogan:

I think that's a fair point. In many ways, the Ottoman reforms were a success in transforming an empire with significant structural challenges into a state that was still viable. More than a failure of governance, what truly undermined the Ottoman Empire was the rise of nationalism among minority communities, particularly in the Balkans.

Eugene Rogan:

The tensions with the Armenians, for instance, stemmed from the perception that Armenians were becoming increasingly nationalised, forming nationalist parties, and seeking to carve out territory from Ottoman Anatolia to create an independent Armenian state—often with Russian support.

Eugene Rogan:

It's important to clarify that this is not a justification for the genocide that followed, but rather an attempt to understand how even the Armenian community came to be perceived as a threat to the empire's integrity. Nationalism was the defining challenge, and the Ottomans were deeply concerned about preventing its emergence in the Arab provinces.

Eugene Rogan:

They recognised that by implementing reforms and investing in provinces like Damascus, as they did successfully, they could create a viable and enduring Ottoman state. This state would have been centred around the Muslim majority of Arabs, Kurds, and Turks, encompassing Asia Minor and the Arab provinces.

Eugene Rogan:

I believe such a state could have been viable had the Ottomans remained neutral in the First World War. The collapse of the empire wasn't an inevitability. It's an intriguing counterfactual to imagine how the 20th-century Middle East might have unfolded if the Ottomans had avoided the war and emerged intact as a Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab state, bolstered by oil revenues and other resources. The Middle East might have looked very different.

Eugene Rogan:

However, fears of further fragmentation through nationalist forces and concerns about European powers carving up their empire drove the Ottomans to take sides in the First World War. That decision proved fatal. Despite this, the experience of reform and its implementation suggests that the Ottomans could have adapted to survive into the 20th century. They would, of course, have faced challenges in statecraft, just as they did in the 19th century, but survival was possible.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Thank you. That's definitely something to reflect on, and it carries a message of hope throughout. I'm so grateful that you took the time out of your busy schedule for this conversation. I'm going to ask you to do something that authors typically dislike, but I think it's important.

Amogh Dev Rai:

How would you paraphrase the book for an interested reader?

Eugene Rogan:

First, let me thank you for the great honour of inviting me onto your programme and giving me the opportunity to address your listeners. It's been wonderful to be with you.

Eugene Rogan:

I see the book as, on one level, a study of a fascinating city experiencing tremendous pressures of change as it engages with the modern age of the 19th century. On another level, it's a history of what divides societies to the point of rupture and explores the pathway back through such ruptures.

Eugene Rogan:

It's also a study of genocidal movements, which have been a recurring part of human history across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Finally, I think it's simply a compelling story, enriched by strong narrative voices.

Eugene Rogan:

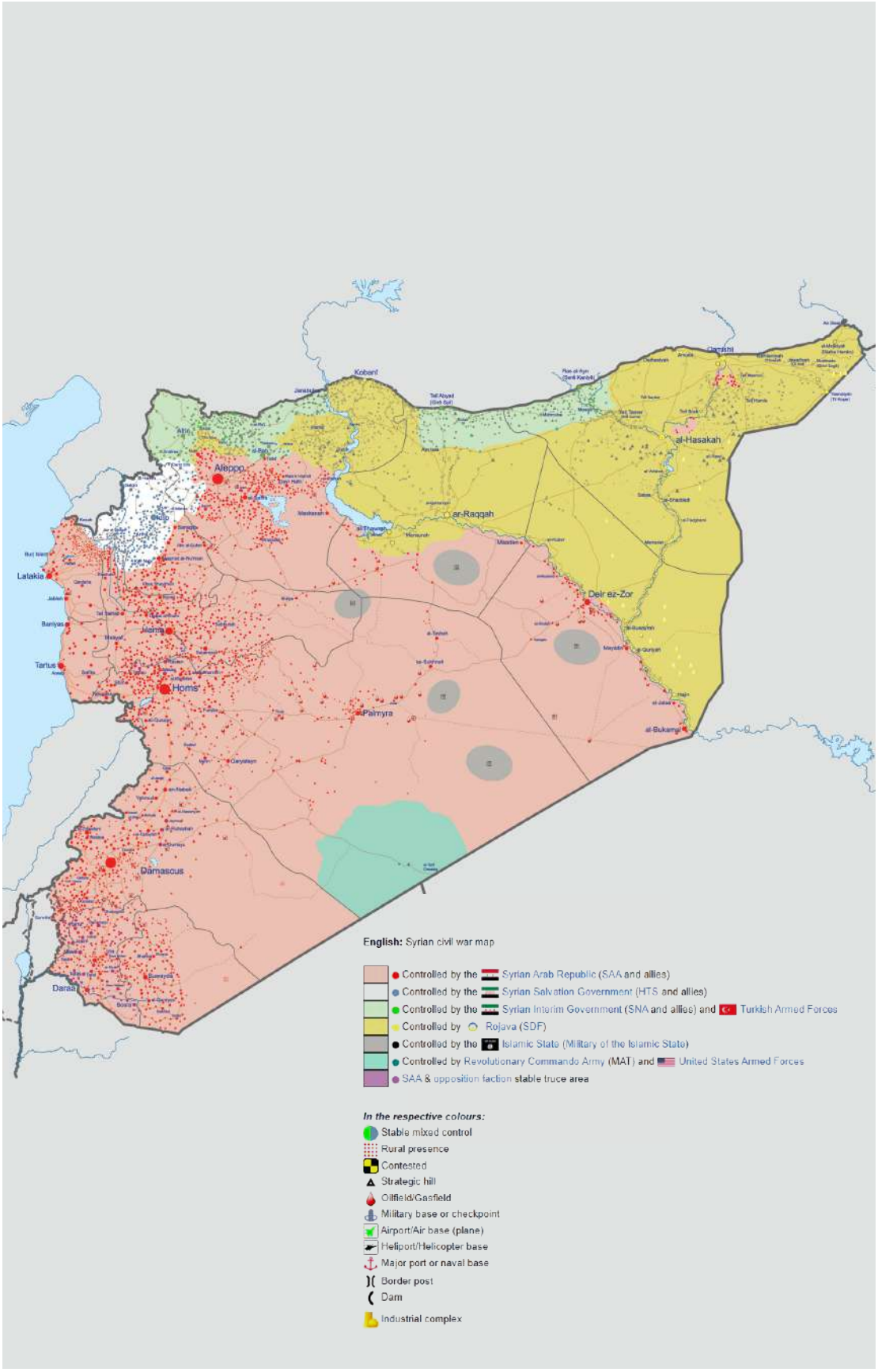
What makes this book stand out among my other works is the wealth of narrative records left behind—not just by Mishka and Fuad Pasha, but also by Muslim and Christian notables of Damascus, and survivors of the violence. These sources allow us to weave a narrative with a strong cast of characters, creating a time machine of sorts that brings this fascinating moment in history vividly to life.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Thank you. As a reader who loved the book, I couldn't have put it better myself—but then, you're the author. Thank you so much for doing this. If you ever come to India and travel to Jaipur via Delhi, please let us know. I'd love to have a one-on-one conversation.

Eugene Rogan:

Thank you very much for having me. ■


Kobani
Qamishli
al-Hasakah
Aleppo
ar-Raqqah
Latakia
Deir ez-Zor
Hama
Tartus
Homs
Palmyra
al-Bukamal
Damascus
Daraa
English: Syrian civil war map
Controlled by the Syrian Arab Republic (SAA and allies)
Controlled by the Syrian Salvation Government (HTS and allies)
Controlled by the Syrian Interim Government (SNA and allies) and Turkish Armed Forces
Controlled by Rojava (SDF)
Controlled by the Islamic State (Military of the Islamic State)
Controlled by Revolutionary Commando Army (MAT) and United States Armed Forces
SAA & opposition faction stable truce area
In the respective colours:
Stable mixed control
Rural presence
Contested
Strategic hill
Oilfield/Gasfield
Military base or checkpoint
Airport/Air base (plane)
Heliport/Helicopter base
Major port or naval base
Border post
Dam
Industrial complex

spotlight.

ANATOMY OF COLLAPSE: THIRTEEN DAYS THAT COULD CHANGE SYRIA

AMOGH DEV RAI

The sudden collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 marks a watershed moment in the politics of the Middle East: it ends more than five decades of Assad family rule and fundamentally reshapes Syria's political landscape. The quick advance of opposition forces, including the capture of Damascus and Assad's flight from the country, shattered long-held assumptions about the durability of authoritarian regimes in the region and created new strategic imperatives for regional and global powers.

The speed with which Assad's regime fell—major cities dropping to opposition forces in days—underlines both the structural weaknesses of his regime that had been living with them for a long time and the need for external support that underpinned his rule. For years, Russian airpower and Iranian-backed ground forces, notably Hezbollah, had propped up Assad's rule. When these props gave way because of Russia's fixation on Ukraine and the escalation of Iran's preoccupation with Israel, the wobbling Syrian regime came undone.

This collapse challenges conventional wisdom about the nature of authoritarian stability in the Middle East. Assad's regime, so seemingly resilient, proved incredibly brittle when its external supporters were distracted by other conflicts. The rapid collapse of government forces, marked by mass retreats and the abandonment of defensive positions, revealed how thoroughly the Syrian military had been hollowed out by years of corruption and factional interests. The much-talked-about support for the Syrian regime was also laid bare as another puppet theatre that marked the security conversation in the area.

The New Power in Syria

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), led by Ahmed al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani), stepped into the vacuum. The group's evolution from being an al-Qaeda affiliate to its current position as the dominant opposition force represents one of the most remarkable transformations in modern Middle Eastern politics. HTS now faces the challenge of transitioning from an insurgent

AMOGH DEV RAI is the Founding Research Director at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA), SGT University, and the Managing Editor of De/Cypher. An economist by training, his research interests include China and health outcomes.

force to a governing authority in the country, which has had a skeletal government for a long time.

HTS will look out for minorities, continue diplomatic relations with foreign governments, and implement civilian administrations with full diversity to reflect an international legitimacy goal. Yet HTS still has an uphill battle because most countries in the world to recognise HTS as a terrorist group, and for it to be accepted as an established legitimate power, it will need the help of arch-rival Iran and the litmus test of moderation, which will make other countries to take it seriously.

Regional Recalibration

The fall of Assad regime has forced regional powers to reassess their positions rapidly. Türkiye, which has long supported various opposition groups while focusing primarily on containing Kurdish autonomy along its border, now has to navigate a new landscape where HTS's expanded control could either stabilise or further destabilise its southern frontier.

The Assad regime had been an essential component of Tehran's "axis of resistance," allowing for the provision of support to Hezbollah and giving strategic depth against Israel. The loss of this ally could thus undermine Iran's regional position when it is under increasing pressure on multiple fronts.

The Russian position in the Middle East has been eroded sharply. Moscow intervention in Syria in 2015 placed it at a prime brokerage position in the region as well as to have gained reliability as a military partner. Needless to say, the Russian distraction in Ukraine will mean that the gains in Africa will also be open to re-negotiation by regional and supra-national powers.

The priority for the Syrian new power structure is building stable governance within a country utterly devastated by more than ten years of civil war. The figures are shocking: hundreds of thousands killed, millions displaced, and structures devastated. HTS must demonstrate that it can transform its military victory into political stability.

Several Critical Challenges Loom Ahead

First, the new leadership has to establish basic security and services in areas long accustomed to state authority, even if that authority was corrupt and inefficient. This means maintaining public order, ensuring the continuation of essential services, and preventing revenge killings or sectarian violence.

Second, its economy requires an urgent intervention. Years of war, international sanctions, and corruption have left it in shambles. A new government must attend to immediate humanitarian needs yet embark on the enormous task of reorganisation and reconstruction.

Third, the new authorities must manage Syria's complex sectarian and ethnic makeup. Assad's regime, despite its brutality, maintained a degree of stability through a complex system of patronage and fear. HTS must now demonstrate it can protect minorities and manage diverse communities without resorting to Assad-style repression.

International Implications

The international community is now presented with difficult choices about how to engage with Syria's new reality. Western nations must find a balance between the desire to support Syria's reconstruction efforts and concerns over HTS's background and intentions. A terrorist designation complicates the provision of aid and diplomatic engagement.

The Role of International Institutions

The United Nations and other international organisations need to change too. Peace

frameworks developed before, such as UN Security Council Resolution 2254, were based on assumptions of regime stability that no longer hold. New approaches are needed to consider the current power balance and promote stability and reconciliation.

Conclusion

The end of the Assad dynasty represents both an opportunity and a challenge for Syria and the broader Middle East. While the removal of a brutal dictatorship opens possibilities for positive change, the risks of continued instability and violence remain high.

In these critical first days, the international response will determine whether Syria steps toward stability or descends further into chaos. The question will be how to support the civilian population of Syria as political inclusion and moderation flow from the new authorities.

The rapid collapse of the Assad regime shows that a stable authoritarian system may come crashing down very quickly indeed if its key support structures give way. For Syrian people, who have suffered through more than a decade of brutal war, hope must be that this dramatic shift does not plunge them deeper into chaos but into the promise of reconstruction and reconciliation.

The task before HTS is enormous, and the alternative—a return to civil war or the birth of a new dictatorship—is catastrophic for both Syria and the region. The international community must devise ways to constructively engage with Syria's new reality while promoting stability, human rights, and genuine political reform.

But will it? ■

UAE's Growing Footprint in Africa

OSCAR RICKETT

On the runway of a remote and dusty airbase in Sudan a cargo plane stood abandoned.

It was August 2023. The war in Sudan had been raging since 15 April, when the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, launched an attack on Sudanese army positions across the capital Khartoum.

The RSF had been part of the army, part of the state since 2013, when Sudan's longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir turned the notorious Janjaweed militias that had killed hundreds of thousands of people in Darfur into a paramilitary.

Back then Dagalo, known as Hemeti, had been Bashir's "protection". But after a democratic revolution took hold in December 2018, Hemeti and Sudanese army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan had been moved, just a few months later, to remove Bashir from power.

But having enacted a military coup together in October 2021, the rivalry between Burhan and Hemeti grew, with their different sources of power and wealth leading to an inevitable collision.

That white Beechcroft cargo plane, sitting on the runway at Hamrat al-Sheikh in North Kordofan state, told a story about one of those main sources of power and wealth, and about a network that spreads from Sudan to Libya, Chad, Uganda and over the Red Sea to the United Arab Emirates.

It is there that the main patron of Hemeti and the RSF can be found. The UAE has fuelled the war in Sudan, supplying arms and much more to the paramilitary through a regional web that has included Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar, the Wagner Group and the now compromised government of Chad.

The UAE's interest in Sudan is longstanding, just as its ruling elite's relationship with Hemeti and his brothers is. The Dagalo family controls gold mines in Darfur, the vast western region of Sudan that serves as the RSF's powerbase, and from there the gold is taken to the UAE, where it is washed through the markets of Dubai.

The UAE is now the leading recipient of illicit gold smuggled out of the African continent, receiving over 2,500 tonnes of it – with an estimated value of $115bn – between 2012 and 2022.

US sanctions imposed a couple of months after Sudan's war began targeted two Dagalo family companies connected to the UAE: Al Junaid, a gold trading firm headed by Abdul Rahim Dagalo, Hemeti's brother and deputy; and Tradive, which is based in the Emirates and is controlled by one of Hemeti's younger brothers, Algoney Hamdan Dagalo.

OSCAR RICKETT is a journalist and editor with over 15 years of experience, contributing to The Guardian, Middle East Eye, Observer, Vice, and openDemocracy. He has also worked on documentaries for Channel 4, BBC, and ITN. His investigative reporting focuses on geopolitical issues and human rights.

While the UAE's involvement in Sudan's war – which it continues to deny, however half-heartedly – is now the subject of United Nations reports, its ever-growing entrenchment in other African countries is less hotly discussed.

This brings us to Uganda. In control of the East African country since 1986, President Yoweri Museveni was described to me by a British intelligence analyst as "buyable", a man who has seen the value in letting the UAE use his country as a "Lilypad" for sending weapons and other supplies to the RSF in Sudan.

This business is conducted, as I have written before, with the help of the cargo planes of Bar Aviation, a company owned by the Israeli Barak Orland, a close associate of Museveni's son, army general Muhoozi Kainerugaba. Several sources, including Ugandan human rights lawyer Nicholas Opiyo, described Orland as an arms dealer.

Kainerugaba, who is being groomed to succeed his father, is known for his erratic behaviour, once tweeting that it would take two weeks for him and his men to conquer Kenya – a comment Museveni then had to apologise for. The army general has posted pictures of him and Orland together on social media and has thanked him publicly for his work as vice president of Uganda's Federation of Motorsport Clubs.

The UAE is using Uganda as a staging post for supplies heading to Sudan. But it is also embedding itself in Uganda for many of the same reasons it's embedded in Sudan.

Uganda is not, like Sudan, a Muslim country and an icon of the wider Islamic world. But it is in a key position in East Africa and it has, in Museveni, a man who is instantly familiar to any state run by a royal dynasty.

Crown prince of Abu Dhabi since 2004, Mohammed bin Zayed, the shrewd Emirati ruler known as MBZ, is a fierce opponent of democratic forces – particularly ones aligned with political Islam – in what he sees as the UAE's region. The UAE has backed anti-democratic and anti-Islamist forces in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Tunisia and Sudan, among other places.

But as China and western powers pull back from Africa, the UAE is looking to spread its influence across the continent, while also securing its post-oil and gas future, as well as buying up vast amounts of arable land to feed its population, which is confined to a small slice of desert in the Arabian Peninsula.

Over the past decade, the UAE has invested over US$60 billion in Africa, dwarfing the $25bn provided by its larger neighbour Saudi Arabia.

Even more astonishing is what's coming next. In 2022 and 2023, the UAE pledged $97bn in new African investments across renewable energy, ports, mining, real estate, communications, agriculture and manufacturing — three times more than China, according to fDi Markets, an FT-owned company tracking cross-border greenfield projects.

While analysts do not believe all – or even most – of these projects will materialise, the UAE has consistently been one of the four biggest external investors in Africa over the last decade.

The strategy of the Gulf state, which owes its vast wealth and regional significance to oil, now echoes the words of Ghana's founding president Kwame Nkrumah: "We face neither east nor west, we face forwards."

Like Nkrumah, Emirati leaders can cut a deal with Washington one day, while helping Moscow evade its economic sanctions the next. Unlike Nkrumah, the UAE's ruling elite has trillions of dollars in sovereign wealth funds and its disposal and has faces no immediate coup threat. At home, any form of resistance is rendered comatose by a life of luxury – not to mention a powerful security state. Abroad, movements seeking to overthrow autocratic rule often face opposition armed by the UAE.

There is a contradiction at the heart of the UAE's investment plans in Africa, one that is typical – perhaps even definitive – of the way

global capitalism operates right now. Abu Dhabi is planning for a post-oil future. Just 16.8% of the UAE's gross domestic product came from oil and gas in 2019, down from over 40% in 1980. This is a strategy that African oil producers, including Uganda, want to replicate.

But while on the public stage, the UAE talks up a game worthy of the best greenwashing oil companies, privately its rulers fend off any serious efforts to cut fossil fuel subsidies, which the IMF has estimated at $7 trillion a year. This has gone down well in Uganda and across Africa. It was also beautifully exemplified by the UAE's hosting of COP28, a greenwashing performance of epic proportions that acted more like a trade fair intended to bring energy companies together.

A key Uganda-UAE fossil fuel project has been the oil refinery at Kabaale, in the Hoima District of western Uganda. The Ugandan government's partner on the project has been Alpha MBM, the investment vehicle of Sheikh Mohammed Bin Maktoum Bin Juma Al Maktoum, a member of Dubai's ruling family.

In June, Museveni conferred a heroes medal on al-Maktoum for his "exceptional contribution to Uganda's socio-economic transformation". Speaking to journalists after arriving in Uganda on a private jet, the prince, who has invested $4bn in Uganda, said the East African country had "become my second home and the people of Uganda are my second family".

"We want to build an oil refinery in Uganda that will help the country to benefit from her oil wealth," he said. "We are also working to revive the Uganda air cargo, the first aircraft has arrived today… others will be arriving soon. There are different opportunities here in Uganda, and we are looking for other projects."

Al-Maktoum's investments in Uganda are described by the Nile Post as "diverse and far-reaching". Alongside the oil refinery and air cargo, there is a fruit processing hub in Bukalasa, a logistics hub at Entebbe airport and a gold refinery and freezone complex.

At the end of November, though, it was announced that the Uganda government would fund the oil refinery project through government equity, though Alpha MBM remains a partner in the project.

Museveni is now 80, though he shows no signs of giving up and the plan is still for his son to succeed him. In need of investment, countries across Africa will continue to look to the Gulf, where oil and gas have made countries that were for much of history peripheral to the events of the world, richer than god. And where riches go, power follows. ■

madness in method:

Joe Adam George Delves in on Trudeau's Alienating Foreign Policy

Given the recent and very public diplomatic fallout between India and Canada, De/Cypher reached out to Canadian Security Expert Joe Adam George to gain a better understanding of the current situation.

The Evolution of Canada-India Relations

George began by tracing the evolution of India-Canada relations, highlighting the historical camaraderie and the turning points that led to the current tensions.

"Traditionally, India and Canada have enjoyed a cooperative relationship, especially in the early years of India's independence when Canada contributed significantly to its development," he explained. "The supply of nuclear reactors in the 1950s and '60s underlined this trust, albeit it strained after India's 1974 nuclear tests using Canadian-supplied technology, creating long-standing tensions."

He emphasised the 1985 Air India bombing as a pivotal moment. "Planned on Canadian soil by Khalistani extremists, it was not just a tragedy for India but a failure of Canadian intelligence."

George noted that although Indo-Canadian relations improved in the early 1990s and 2000s, it arguably experienced its best run during the Harper-Modi years. "Prime Minister Stephen Harper understood India's concerns and prioritised economic and strategic collaboration. Modi's initial outreach, particularly his visit to Canada in 2015, reinforced this goodwill."

However, he pointed to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's tenure as a source of renewed discord. "Trudeau's 2018 India visit was a disaster," he stated. "From inviting a convicted Khalistani terrorist to dinner to the theatrics of his cultural displays, it signalled to India that Trudeau wasn't serious. This distrust deepened with his comments during the farmers' protests and perceived coddling of Khalistani extremists in Canada. The breaking point came when Trudeau publicly accused India of assassinating Hardeep Singh Nijjar—a matter that should have been addressed diplomatically behind closed doors."

George was critical of Prime Minister Trudeau's handling of the situation. "Grandstanding on such a sensitive issue has caused irreparable damage. This isn't just about India-Canada ties; it's about Canada's global credibility. Who would trust a partner that airs such allegations publicly without proof?"

JOE ADAM GEORGE is a National Security Analyst with the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, Canada's leading policy think tank, and the Canada Research Lead on Islamist Threats with the Middle East Forum, a U.S. policy think tank. Joe Adam George previously served as an Outreach Adviser and Cultural Press Secretary to the leader of the Conservative Party, Pierre Poilievre. He has been published in multiple media outlets and is an authoratative voice on South Asia and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) based in Canada

Electoral Calculations: Domestic Politics Over Diplomacy

George argued that domestic political challenges have reshaped Canada's foreign policy under the Trudeau government, shifting priorities from strategic interests to electoral calculations.

"Canada's foreign policy is often dictated by short-term political gains rather than long-term national interests," he said, attributing this to the government's declining popularity and overt reliance on voter blocs like the Sikh diaspora in key ridings.

He criticised this pandering for compromising national security, citing the Khalistan issue. "By refusing to confront a fringe group of extremist elements within the Sikh community, the Trudeau government has signalled that vote-bank politics outweighs terrorism threats or foreign policy coherence," he remarked, adding that political appeasement has damaged Canada's image as a nation of law and order.

George linked these policies to broader societal divisions. "Appeasement risks exacerbating communal fault lines, as seen in violent clashes between Hindu and Sikh communities. Trudeau's vision of a 'post-national state' may sound progressive. However, it's a recipe for cultural balkanisation and Canadian identity dilution, allowing identity politics to flourish at the expense of social cohesion," he explained.

Beyond the Khalistan movement, George criticised the government's weak stance on extremism and foreign interference, which he said fosters lawlessness and erodes public trust. "This isn't just an India diplomacy issue—it's a Canadian issue," he warned.

While acknowledging these challenges predate Trudeau, George said identity politics has peaked under his leadership, leading to visible societal and diplomatic crises. Reflecting on a recent Ipsos poll where "only 28% of Canadians want to see Trudeau re-elected," he expressed optimism for significant policy reforms to be implemented should the Pierre Poilievre-led Conservative Party overwhelmingly win the 2025 federal election as widely anticipated. "Even a 5% improvement would feel significant given how bad things are," George concluded, emphasising Canadians' desperation for change.

Multiculturalism at a Crossroads: Integration vs. Fragmentation

George critiqued Canada's multiculturalism policies, highlighting that while multiculturalism could be beneficial to a certain degree, its excesses under Trudeau have undermined national unity and identity. "Multiculturalism, when done in a measured manner, for example, through sustainable immigration policies, fosters inclusivity and strengthens the social fabric," he explained. "But treating it as a political tool rather than a unifying principle leads to fragmentation."

He pointed to Trudeau's "post-national state" vision as a key issue. "The idea of no mainstream Canadian identity may sound progressive, but in practice, it divides the country across multiple ideological fault lines. Multiculturalism as a policy must prioritise integration, not just coexistence, to be effective," he said.

George criticised the government's wilful blindness attitude, which he argued has allowed extremist groups like Khalistani elements to thrive. "This isn't about the broader, mostly peace-loving Sikh community—it's about failing to distinguish between cultural expression and extremism, jeopardising national security," he stated. He linked this failure to real-world consequences, such as violent community clashes and the targeting of religious institutions. "These incidents are a consequence of policies that

prioritise appeasement over unity."

He stressed the broader societal risks. "When governments refuse to confront extremism, it breeds resentment among other communities, further dividing the nation. Trudeau's post-national multiculturalism is pulling us apart," he warned.

George called for replacing Canada's ineffective multiculturalism policy with a healthy dose of patriotism and education of Canadian history to newcomers to encourage integration and adoption of shared values. "It's not about abandoning diversity but creating a cohesive society where all backgrounds feel part of the same national project," he proposed. He emphasised the government's role in fostering unity, concluding, "Canada thrives on its differences, but only when united by shared values. Without this foundation, we risk losing what makes us unique."

Missteps in Diplomacy: Foreign Interference Allegations

George offered a sharp critique of the Trudeau government's handling of foreign interference allegations, particularly regarding India and the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar. "The way this crisis has unfolded is nothing short of a diplomatic debacle," he remarked. "Sensitive allegations require finesse, not public posturing. Unfortunately, going public without hard evidence only escalated tensions."

He contrasted Canada's approach with the United States. "The U.S. engaged in backchannel diplomacy, discreetly sharing evidence while maintaining a working relationship with India. Conversely, Canada jumped the gun with bold accusations and no concrete proof, undermining trust and issue resolution."

George highlighted the broader consequences of this misstep. "Accusing a major ally like India of state-sponsored assassination isn't just a bilateral issue—it damages Canada's credibility globally. Other nations are now questioning our ability to conduct diplomacy tactfully without annoying long-term, ideological allies."

He criticised the public nature of Trudeau's dealing with New Delhi. "Diplomacy isn't about theatrics; it's about solutions. Public accusations leave no room for compromise. A private, collaborative approach could have preserved the relationship while addressing concerns. Instead, we've entrenched both sides in a standoff."

George also linked the public stance to domestic politics. "This wasn't just about addressing the allegations—it was about appeasing certain voter bases. But diplomacy is about finding solutions, not scoring political points. Performative diplomacy only worsens the situation."

When discussing alternatives, George outlined practical steps. "First, we should have provided irrefutable evidence to New Delhi and discussed measures to resolve the issue in a manner that is satisfactory to both parties. Second, we should have used backchannels and trusted intermediaries, including allies like the U.S. or U.K., to facilitate dialogue. This approach could have prevented the current impasse."

He stressed the importance of trust-building. "To get India to cooperate, we must engage in good faith, focusing on shared priorities like trade, energy, and security. Letting one incident define the relationship was a strategic error."

George noted that the fallout extended beyond India. "Other nations are watching and asking, 'If this is how Canada treats an ally, what happens to us?' This mishandling has implications for our broader diplomatic relationships, especially in Asia, where nuance is key."

Furthermore, Trudeau's unserious image and multiple gaffes on the global stage make it easier for India to ignore him. Reports that the U.S. President-elect Donald Trump had

mocked him during his recent trip to Florida prove that world leaders do not take him seriously. Hence, it is no surprise that New Delhi is in no hurry to resolve the impasse and would rather wait to engage with a Poilievre government, that is expected to be far more competent, to improve ties.

George emphasised the broader lessons Canada must take from this episode. "Diplomacy requires tact, professionalism, mutual respect, discretion, and compromise. If Canada wants to reclaim its global standing, it must fundamentally rethink how it conducts diplomacy. A strategic, good faith approach fosters stronger, long-term relationships."

Rebuilding Trust: A Path Forward

While the current diplomatic impasse between Canada and India poses significant challenges, it is far from insurmountable, George explained. "Diplomatic relationships are like any other partnership. They have highs and lows, but resilience comes from addressing challenges together. Canada and India share deep historical, cultural, and economic ties, which offer a solid foundation for rebuilding."

He identified shared priorities as key to reconciliation. "Canada must recognise India as a rising global power and critical partner in trade and technology, while India would immensely benefit from collaborating with Canada in key areas such as energy, defence, and regional security to counter the growing China threat," George stated. Trade, particularly amidst shifting global dynamics, is ripe for collaboration. "Finalising trade agreements and investing in areas like technology, energy, and infrastructure will strengthen economic ties and open channels for dialogue on sensitive issues."

To rebuild trust, George emphasised the need for humility and discretion. "Canada must address perceptions that it acted impulsively with recent allegations. Backchannel diplomacy—quiet, constructive discussions—can help both sides save face and find common ground. Public posturing has done enough harm; it's time to repair the relationship behind the scenes."

George highlighted the importance of addressing mutual security concerns through balanced and transparent cooperation. "Both nations have legitimate concerns—India about separatist movements and extremism on Canadian soil, and Canada about foreign interference that undermines its democratic institutions," he stated. However, he noted that two wrongs don't make a right. "India's grievances about Canada's handling of the Khalistan movement are justified. Nonetheless, that doesn't give New Delhi the right to conduct illicit activities that contravene a nation's sovereignty, especially when that nation is an ally. Violating sovereignty or committing crimes abroad, even in pursuit of perceived justice, is uncalled for."

He proposed collaborative measures like joint task forces on counterterrorism and intelligence-sharing agreements to foster trust. "By focusing on cooperative solutions that address both nations' concerns, Canada and India can build a foundation for stronger ties."

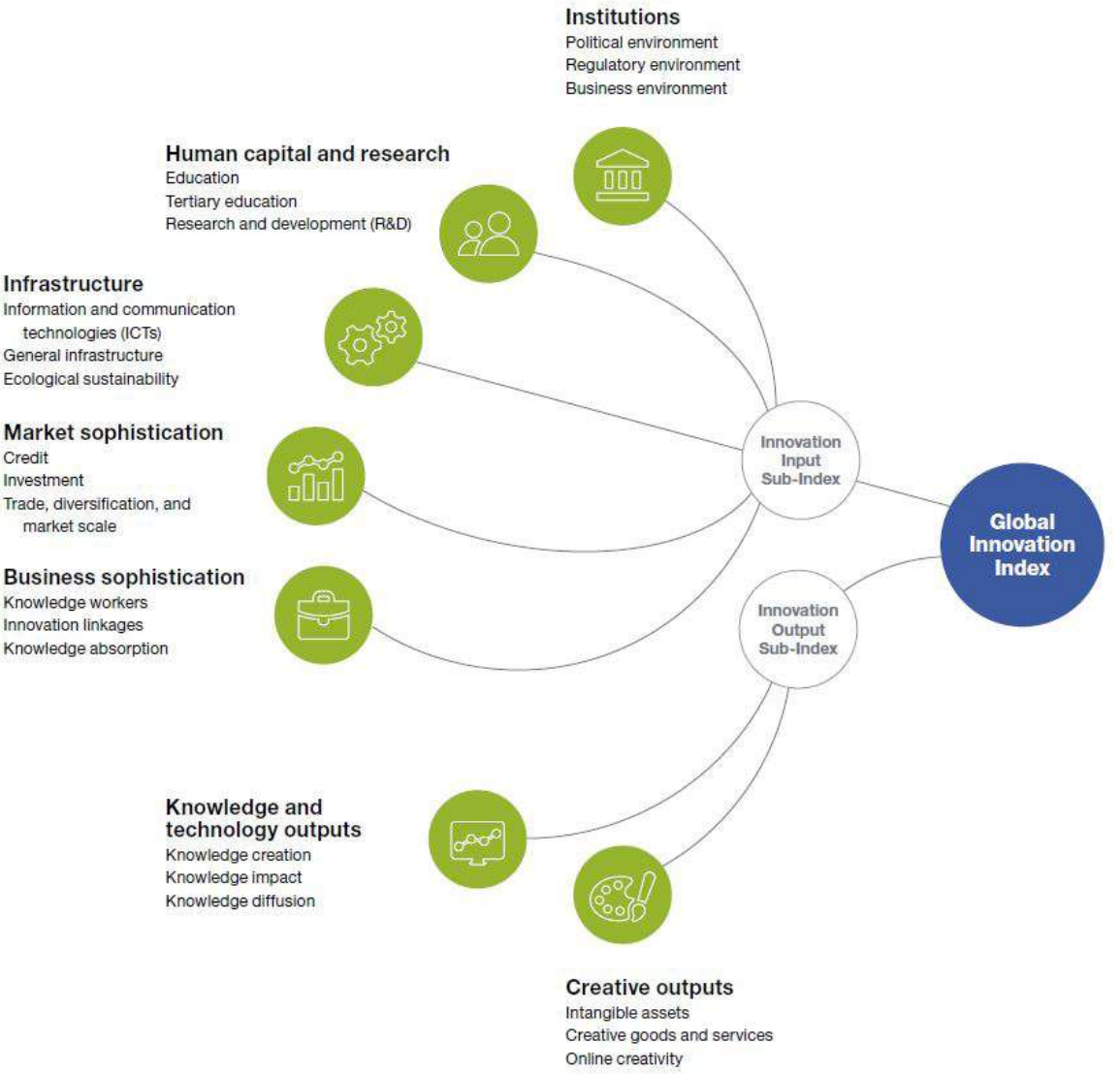
George also highlighted the importance of the Indian diaspora as a bridge between the two nations. "Empowering diaspora communities to play a positive role through cultural exchanges, academic collaborations, and community-led dialogues can foster mutual understanding. At the same time, Canada must ensure its domestic policies remain independent of foreign interference while reassuring India that its concerns are taken seriously."

On India's side, George urged New Delhi to maintain restraint and strategic diplomacy. "India is generally adept at navigating complex diplomatic challenges, even those involving sworn enemies like Pakistan. Maintaining stable relations with Canada is in its interest,

given the opportunities in trade, technology, and energy."

He warned of the broader geopolitical implications of their strained ties. "This rift only benefits adversaries like China. Whether countering influence in the Indo-Pacific or tackling global issues like climate change, Canada and India are stronger together."

George concluded with optimism for the future. "Handled wisely, this could translate into a long-lasting, fruitful partnership. Leadership on both sides must rise above domestic politics to prioritise long-term benefits for their people and the world at large." ■



The Global Innovation Index captures the diverse aspects of innovation, with 80 indicators across 7 pillars
Source: World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

Innovating for the Future: Insights from the Global Innovation Index 2024

SHIVANI SINGH

In a rapidly evolving world, innovation has long been the driving force behind technological advancements and societal shifts. The Global Innovation Index (GII) 2024, an annual report published by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), provides analysis of global innovation ecosystems. It serves as a vital tool for academics, policymakers, and businesses seeking to understand and promote innovation by highlights leading nations and emerging players while addressing the ongoing challenges that continue to shape the field by examining 133 economies across the globe.

First introduced in 2007 by a British magazine and a business school, the GII initially focused on traditional measures like research and development (R&D) spending and patent filings. Over time, however, the index has evolved to include social innovations, creative industries, and new business models. Since 2011, after WIPO took over its publication, the GII has become an invaluable tool for assessing how different countries contribute to global innovation and aligning national strategies with broader development goals.

The GII evaluates innovation using a broad range of metrics. These are grouped into seven key pillars: Innovation Inputs, which include institutions, human capital, infrastructure, market sophistication, and business sophistication, and Innovation Outputs, which focus on knowledge and technology outputs, as well as creative outputs. These pillars offer a detailed view of how economies foster, sustain, and translate innovation into real-world results.

However, the GII has faced criticism, particularly for its heavy reliance on traditional indicators that tend to favor high-income, developed nations. It often overlooks innovative approaches in lower-income regions, such as open-source collaboration and grassroots innovations. Additionally, the focus on R&D spending misses the important role of entrepreneurs, who take research and transform it into practical, market-ready solutions.

For the GII to remain relevant in the future, it must adapt to the changing landscape by incorporating indicators that capture open innovation, commercialisation of research and cross-sector collaborations.

SHIVANI SINGH is the Program Coordinator for Law & Critical Emerging Technologies at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA), SGT University. Her expertise includes project management, legal research, and intellectual property law. She has authored numerous articles on innovation and emerging technologies and presented papers on patents and public health.

Source: World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

Global Leaders: Sustaining Innovation Dominance

For the year 2024, Switzerland, for the 14th consecutive year, holds the top position, reaffirming its excellence in Knowledge and Technology Outputs, intellectual property (IP) payments, and research collaborations. It also ranks in the top 5 of all the other GII pillars, with the exception of Infrastructure (7th). Its robust ecosystem, characterised by seamless university-industry R&D partnerships and high volumes of PCT patent applications, underscores the importance of a holistic innovation strategy.

Sweden ranked second, excels in Infrastructure and Business Sophistication while leading globally in IP receipts and researcher. The United States, securing third place, showcases dominance in quality of its universities, the impact of its scientific publications (H-index), software spending and IP receipts. The valuation of unicorn companies further solidifies its role as a leader in technological growth.

Singapore emerges as a standout fourth-place performer, excelling in Global corporate R&D investors, Unicorn valuation and Intangible asset intensity but lags in creative outputs, ranked 19th, suggesting an opportunity for enhanced cultural and artistic innovation. Similarly, the Republic of Korea (6th) and China (11th) demonstrate how focused policies, and strategic investments can position nations as powerhouses of industrial and technological advancement.

The Rise of Emerging Innovators

While high-income nations dominate the rankings, emerging economies are rapidly making their mark. Vietnam (44th) and Indonesia (54th) exemplify this trend, leveraging strengths in high-tech exports, labor productivity, and policy stability. China's ascent, particularly among upper-middle-income economies, is driven by high-tech exports and robust industrial design sectors, underscoring the potential of middle-income countries to challenge traditional leaders.

Singapore's innovation ecosystem reflects the benefits of proactive government policies, vibrant entrepreneurship, and ICT-focused investments. Likewise, the Republic of Korea demonstrates the transformative impact of advanced manufacturing capabilities and technological expertise on global rankings.

Regional Perspectives: Uneven Progress Across the Globe

The regional breakdown of the GII 2024 highlights striking disparities in innovation performance.

Europe: Hosting seven of the top 10 economies, Europe remains a dominant force in innovation. Switzerland and Sweden lead the region, with Germany (9th) and France (12th) showcasing robust public-private R&D collaborations. Luxembourg's entry into the top 20 reflects the growing role of niche economies leveraging financial and technological innovation.

Asia and Oceania: With seven economies in the global top 25 namely Singapore (4th), the Republic of Korea (6th), China (11th), Japan (13th), Hong Kong, China (18th), Australia (23rd) and New Zealand (25th), the region cements its status as a hub of dynamic innovation. Singapore, Korea, and Japan lead high-income economies, while Vietnam (44th) and Indonesia (54th) spearhead progress among lower-middle-income nations. India (39th), exemplifies innovation-driven growth through its thriving ICT sector and venture capital ecosystem.

Latin America and the Caribbean: This region presents a mixed picture. Brazil (50th) leads, followed by Chile (51st) and Mexico (56th). While creative goods exports and high-tech manufacturing show promise, the region risks falling behind due to inadequate innovation outputs.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Mauritius (55th) leads, excelling in market sophistication and venture capital. However, systemic inefficiencies in larger economies, such as South Africa (69th) and Nigeria (113th), hinder their ability to capitalise on innovation inputs.

Top 10 Countries in Asia as ranked by the Global Innovation Index 2024, The visualisation continues below

Source: World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

Overperformers vs. Underperformers: Lessons from the Index

The GII 2024 underscores the disparity between overperforming and underperforming economies. Overperformers like Vietnam, India, and China achieve remarkable innovation outputs despite resource constraints. Vietnam's strength lies in high-tech exports and creative goods production, while India leverages its ICT sector and digital economy to maintain its leadership among lower-middle-income economies. China's dominance in high-tech exports, industrial designs, and R&D intensity demonstrates the potential of focused investments.

Conversely, underperformers such as Nigeria and South Africa face systemic barriers, including inconsistent policy frameworks and limited infrastructure. Addressing these challenges through improved governance, cross-sector collaboration, and resource allocation is essential to unlock their potential.

The Transformative Role of Social Entrepreneurship

The Global Innovation Index 2024 highlights the growing role of social entrepreneurship in addressing social and environmental issues. By merging financial sustainability with mission-driven goals, social enterprises are solving problems often overlooked by traditional markets and governments.

Their hybrid models not only address local challenges but also offer scalable solutions to systemic gaps. This theme reflects a global trend where social enterprises are becoming key players in fostering societal and economic resilience through innovative solutions.

In Asia, social enterprises are making significant strides across various sectors, including housing, healthcare, education, and environmental sustainability. For example, India's Bandhu uses artificial intelligence to connect migrant workers with affordable housing, helping over 60,000 workers secure housing through local "champions," often women. Similarly, iKure offers primary healthcare in rural India via a hub-and-spoke model, reaching 3 million people across 6,400 villages.

In Southeast Asia, social enterprises are addressing climate resilience and urban-rural inequalities with scalable, sustainable solutions adaptable to local contexts. Social enterprises excel in community engagement, ensuring their solutions are locally relevant and sustainable. Eco Femme, for instance, produces organic reusable menstrual pads and educates women about menstrual health, distributing 1.4 million pads to 90,000 women and preventing millions of disposable pads from ending up in landfills. Similarly, the Community Design Agency in South Asia works on participatory design to improve public housing, benefiting over 25,000 people. These grassroots innovations tackle both social and environmental challenges at a community level.

However, the dual objectives of financial viability and social impact often present unique challenges for social enterprises. Securing funding remains one of the most significant hurdles, especially in regions with limited infrastructure and resources. Many enterprises rely on grants, self-funding, or niche impact investments because traditional funding mechanisms, like loans or equity investments, are often not suitable. In South Korea, 60% of social enterprises receive government grants, but in countries like Indonesia and Pakistan, that figure drops to less than 10%. In India and Sri Lanka, about 40% of social enterprises rely on debt financing. While blended financing models—combining public, private, and philanthropic capital—are emerging as potential solutions, challenges such as small ticket sizes and high transaction costs still hinder growth. In India, for example, the impact investing space is still developing, and social enterprises like Bandhu are innovating to secure funding for projects such as their AI-driven housing platform.

Supportive policies are also vital to the success of social enterprises. Legal frameworks like Benefit Corporations in the U.S. and Community Interest Corporations in the U.K. have formalised the dual mission of social enterprises, easing their access to funding and partnerships. South Korea's Social Enterprise Promotion Act provides a robust legal structure that supports social enterprises in their growth. In India, social entrepreneurship continues to flourish despite infrastructural challenges, demonstrating the importance of both policy and innovation in fostering sustainable solutions. However, the global adoption of such frameworks remains inconsistent. Policymakers worldwide need to collaborate with social entrepreneurs to develop adaptable, accountable systems that address local needs while supporting broader global objectives.

At the core of these efforts is innovation. From Eco Femme's reusable menstrual pads to Thaki, which refurbishes devices for refugee education, social enterprises are driving change through grassroots ingenuity. These ventures demonstrate how innovation can have a transformative impact on both social and environmental challenges. To fully realise this potential, standardised metrics for measuring social impact and more cross-sector collaboration will be essential. By combining innovation with collaboration, social enterprises can continue to thrive and remain a vital part of solving global challenges.

Challenges Strategic Implications

The current economic instability has cast a long shadow over global innovation investments, leaving many regions grappling with the consequences. In 2023, corporate R&D growth slowed to just 6.1%, a noticeable dip from 7.5% in the previous year. On top of that, venture capital (VC) funding worldwide dropped by 40%. Latin America took the hardest hit, with VC investments plunging by a staggering 67%. North America and Europe also saw sharp declines of 40%, and Asia-Pacific dropped by 38%. Even Africa, which experienced the smallest decrease at 30%, felt the weight of reduced investments. For low- and middle-income countries, these setbacks are particularly devastating, as they already face significant challenges in maintaining their innovation momentum.

Asia, which has long been seen as a rising innovation powerhouse, was no exception to this downturn. The number of VC deals in Asia fell by 20% in 2023, dropping from around 9,600 in 2022 to just 7,700. The total value of VC investments in the region also dropped by 38%. The decline was largely driven by tighter monetary policies and broader economic factors. However, despite the slowdown, Asia's long-term potential is still undeniable. Over the past 25 years, Asia's share of global VC investments has grown from just 3% in 1997 to 28% in 2023, signaling the region's growing importance in the global innovation landscape. That said, not all sectors are moving at the same pace. While fields like computing power and genomics have made impressive strides, other areas, particularly green technologies, are facing slower progress. Cost reductions in solar and wind energy, have slowed significantly, now averaging just 3.9% and 3.5% annually. The energy efficiency of supercomputers has also declined compared to historical rates. This is worrying, especially in the context of urgent global sustainability goals.

The divide between high-income economies and other regions is also growing. While wealthy countries continue to dominate global innovation rankings, regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia are struggling to catch up. For example, Africa's fixed broadband penetration is a mere 0.8 per 100 inhabitants, compared to Europe's 36 per 100. Similarly, the digital divide is stark when it comes to 5G access, with many developing regions still lacking the infrastructure needed to deploy these advanced technologies. These disparities, combined with data gaps in developing regions, make it difficult to create effective policies that can help close the innovation gap.

However, Asia continues to lead in several key technological areas. The region is a major player in robotics, with China, Japan, and South Korea controlling a significant portion of the global market, particularly in industries like electronics and automotive manufacturing. In the renewable energy sector, Asia is making notable progress in solar and wind energy. Even though the rate of cost reduction in solar power has slowed, Asia's solar photovoltaic systems remain 29% cheaper than fossil fuels, giving the region a distinct edge in renewable energy deployment. Asia has also made substantial advances in battery technology, with lithium-ion battery prices falling to USD 139/kWh in 2023, largely driven by China's manufacturing capabilities and the rise of lithium iron phosphate cells.

Asia's progress in 5G deployment is also notable, though there's still room for improvement. By 2023, 42% of Asia's population had access to 5G networks. While this is an improvement since the technology's rollout in 2019, it still lags behind Europe (68%) and the Americas (59%). South Korea, Japan, and China have been leading the charge, but other parts of Asia, especially developing economies, are gradually catching up.

In the electric vehicle (EV) market, Asia has seen explosive growth. China, in particular,

dominates the global EV market, accounting for 95% of global EV sales. This strong position is bolstered by China's collaboration with Europe and the US. In countries like India, Thailand, and Indonesia, EV sales have tripled since 2021, fueled by government incentives, subsidies, and the emergence of local manufacturers like Tata Motors.

Despite these advancements, significant disparities still exist within Asia itself. High-income countries like Japan and South Korea lead in fields like robotics and cancer treatment, while lower-middle-income countries face considerable challenges. Access to critical healthcare technologies, such as linear accelerators (LINACs) for cancer treatment, is severely limited in many parts of Asia. While wealthier nations have met their basic healthcare needs, others continue to struggle with even the most fundamental healthcare infrastructure. Similarly, while sanitation has improved in countries like India and China, only 65% of the global population is expected to have access to safe sanitation by 2030, far below the UN's target.

Innovation gaps are a global challenge that requires building more equitable innovation ecosystems requires a long-term commitment to investing in research, education, and infrastructure. Policymakers must prioritise funding for initiatives that support startups and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs), especially in emerging markets. A focus on public-private partnerships and international financing can scale up green technology development and sustainable financing. The future of innovation depends on balancing progress with sustainability and inclusivity to face tomorrow's challenges.

Strategic Implementation and Future Outlook

To overcome these challenges and build more equitable innovative ecosystems, sustained investments in research, education, and infrastructure are essential. Policymakers must prioritise funding initiatives that empower startups and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly in emerging markets where innovation has the potential to drive transformative growth.

Advancing green technology development is equally critical in addressing climate change. Strategic public-private partnerships and international financing should focus on scaling renewable energy, enhancing battery storage, and fostering sustainable manufacturing practices. Collaborative approaches can accelerate the adoption of clean technologies, making them accessible and impactful on a global scale.

Bridging regional disparities requires a concerted effort to expand access to essential technologies and infrastructure. Investments in broadband connectivity, 5G networks, and reliable energy systems are vital to empower underserved communities. Policymakers and the private sector must work together to deliver affordable, inclusive solutions that close the digital and energy divides. Additionally, improved data collection and standardisation are necessary to enable evidence-based interventions and facilitate meaningful global benchmarking.

Innovation will remain dynamic but uneven. High-income economies like Switzerland, Sweden, and the United States are expected to maintain their leadership, while middle-income countries such as China, India, and Vietnam are increasingly asserting their presence through strategic investments in R&D, high-tech exports, and creative industries. Key sectors like artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and clean energy will dominate, with advances in computing power transforming industries and breakthroughs in genomics and precision medicine revolutionising healthcare. Key sectors like artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and clean energy will dominate, with advances in computing power transforming industries and breakthroughs in genomics and precision medicine revolutionising healthcare. However,

achieving ambitious climate goals, including net-zero targets, hinges on accelerated progress in green technologies.

Geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainties pose risks to global collaboration, underscoring the need for diversified funding, resilient ecosystems, and strengthened international partnerships. By adopting these strategies, the global innovation ecosystem can transition into a more inclusive and sustainable framework, fostering equitable growth, resilience, and a brighter future for all.

2024 GII: Science and Technology Cluster

The 2024 Global Innovation Index (GII) Science & Technology (S&T) report highlights the world's leading innovation clusters, showcasing Asia's growing dominance alongside traditional hubs in North America and Europe. This year, Asia boasts 26 clusters in the top 100, reflecting its rising influence in global innovation.

Japan's Tokyo–Yokohama cluster leads the rankings, contributing nearly 7% of global PCT applications. China's Shenzhen–Hong Kong–Guangzhou secures second place, powered by Huawei and top research institutions. Together, these two clusters account for 20% of global PCT filings, cementing Asia's technological leadership. Beijing (3rd) and Shanghai–Suzhou (5th) also maintain strong positions, while Nanchang and Kunming debut in the top 100. Hefei and Zhengzhou emerged as the fastest-growing clusters.

South Korea's Daejeon stands out for innovation intensity, ranking 7th, driven by key players like LG Chem. Beijing climbed to 11th, while Tokyo–Yokohama improved to 15th. India made notable gains, with Bengaluru (56th), Delhi (63rd), Chennai (82nd), and Mumbai (84th) joining the top 100. Newcomers include Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur (93rd) and Egypt's Cairo (99th), marking North Africa's debut.

The top 10 clusters, led by Tokyo–Yokohama and Shenzhen–Hong Kong–Guangzhou, contributed 65% of global PCT filings, focusing on fields like computer technology and pharmaceuticals.

Overall, Asian clusters dominate the GII's top 100, with a combined presence that underscores the region's growing role as a global leader in science, technology, and innovation.

IP Trends in a nutshell: World Intellectual Property Indicators

The global intellectual property (IP) landscape in 2023 reflected significant shifts, driven by economic dynamics, technological advances, and regional strategies. Key developments in patents, trademarks, industrial designs, and geographical indications (GIs) showcased the interplay between innovation growth and regional priorities.

Patents

Global patent filings reached a record 3.55 million in 2023, a 2.7% increase over 2022, marking a continued recovery post-COVID-19. Asia, led by China, dominated with 68.7% of filings. China's National Intellectual Property Administration (CNIPA) handled 1.68 million applications, contributing nearly half of the global total. Resident filings grew by 4.9%, signaling strong local innovation, while non-resident filings declined by 2.2%. India's 17.2% growth in patent filings, where resident applications surpassed non-residents for the first time, highlighted the success of domestic initiatives like Make in India.

Sectors such as computer technology, electrical machinery, and medical technology

were the primary drivers of patent growth, underscoring the technological pivot in innovation.

Trademarks

In 2023, global trademark filings declined by 1.3% to 11.6 million, marking a second consecutive year of decrease after a decade-long growth streak, driven largely by a 4.4% drop in filings in China, the largest filing office. Non-resident filings made up 15.8% of global filings, with sectors like technology, health, and clothing leading demand. Trademark registrations also fell by 18.7%, yet active trademarks grew by 6.4%, reaching 88.2 million globally. India ranked fourth with 520,862 filings (up 4.1%), driven by resident applications and strong activity in health (21.9%), agriculture (15.3%), and clothing (12.8%).

Industrial Designs

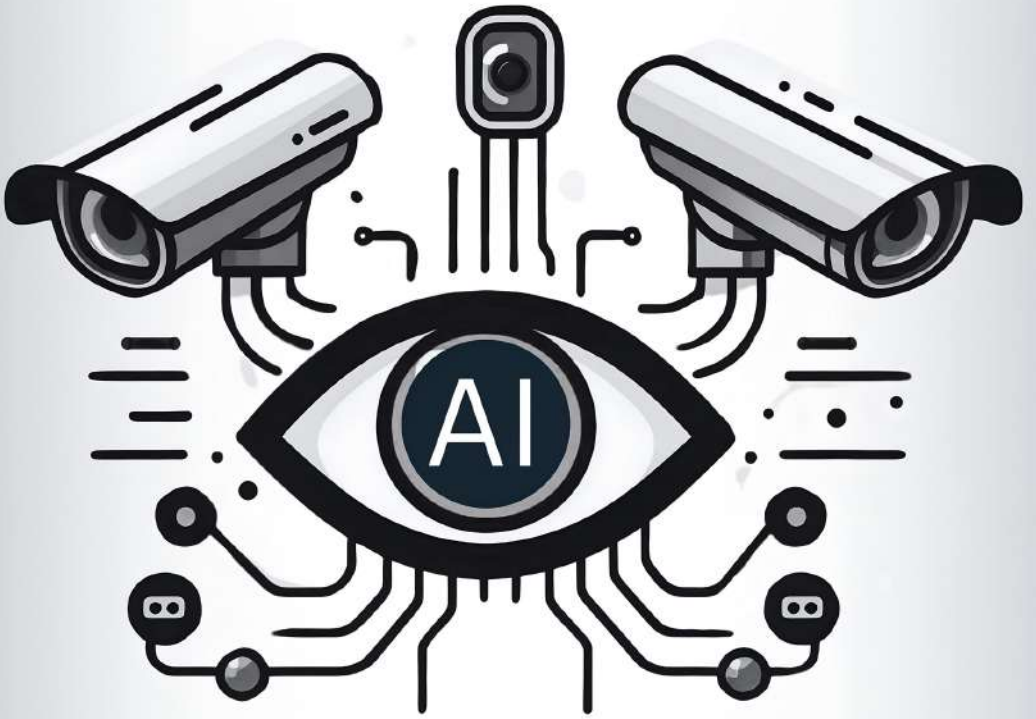
In 2023, global industrial design applications reached a record 1.19 million, up 4% from 2022, with Asia dominating 69% of filings, driven by China's significant contributions, followed by Europe (23.5%) and smaller shares from other regions. Key sectors included textiles, furniture, and tools, representing over 63% of filings. Resident applications formed 82% globally, with China's 97.3% share leading, while non-resident filings grew notably in the US, UK, and EUIPO via the Hague System. India showed remarkable growth with a 24.9% rise in resident filings and a 294.1% surge in non-resident filings, reflecting its growing design industry and appeal to foreign applicants. Despite high filing activity, global design registrations fell by 7% due to rejections or slow processing, with significant disparities in processing speeds across IP offices.

Plant Variety

In 2023, global plant variety applications reached 29,070, marking a 6.6% increase and continuing an eight-year growth trend, driven largely by China, which accounted for 55.7% of filings. Asia emerged as the dominant region, capturing 62.1% of applications, reflecting a strong focus on agricultural innovation. While Europe remains significant, its share has declined, and regions like North America and Oceania have seen decreases in filings. Plant variety titles issued globally surged by 41.8%, led by China's backlog-clearing efforts and the UK's post-Brexit adjustments. With 195,610 active titles worldwide by year-end, the data underscores the rising strategic importance of plant variety protection.

Geographical Indications

As of 2023, global Geographical Indications (GIs) totaled approximately 58,600, dominated by upper-middle-income economies (52.2%) and led by Europe (52.5%) and Asia (39.5%), with China holding the highest number (9,785). Wines and spirits accounted for 48.1% of GIs, driven by Europe, while agricultural products and foodstuffs comprised 44.8%, led by China. Handicrafts, significant in Asia and India, represented 4.2%, reflecting cultural and artisanal heritage. ■


AI

Big Brother Takes Root in South Asia: Rise of AI Surveillance

SEJAL SHARMA

Picture this: It is the year 2035 and the sun is shining brightly on New Delhi. Cameras on lampposts, trees and traffic signals are catching jaywalkers mid-step and reckless drivers even before their engines cool. The cameras are so high-tech that the cloud of pollution in the city doesn't deter them from zeroing in on lawbreakers. Accidents are down, discipline is up. In the last decade, India has expanded its nationwide surveillance systems under initiatives like Smart Cities and Digital India. There is no longer a challan system or potbellied traffic cops standing on the curbside eyeing every vehicle passing by like a delicious meal. The AI-operated systems automatically impose penalties, ranging from suspensions of digital services like Aadhaar-linked benefits to subtle forms of social ostracisation. It is a new society. It is also a fearful society.

While this scenario might look like something picked out of a George Orwell book, it can very much become our reality in the not-so-distant future.

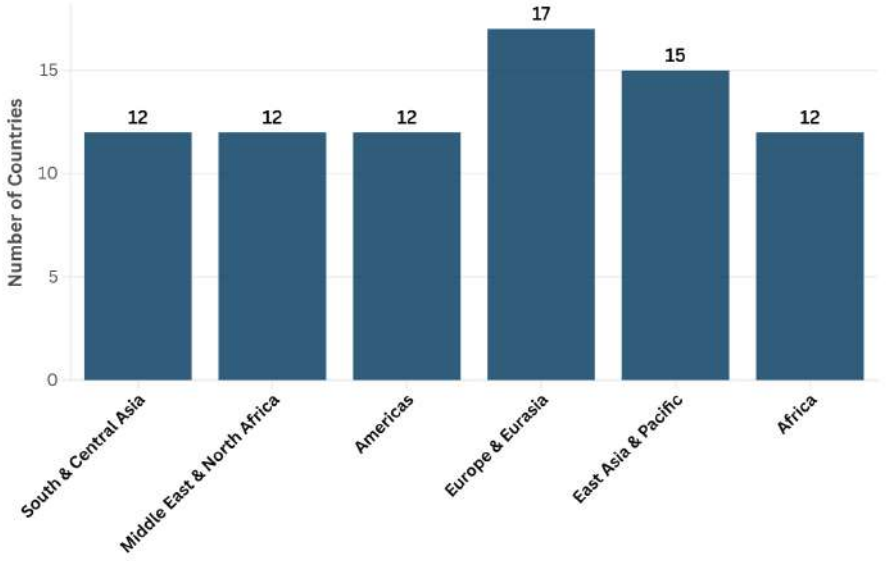
Adopted from the French word surveiller, which means 'to watch over,' the meaning of Surveillance has turned on its head owing to technological advancements. That is not to say that the governments didn't spy on their citizens in the 20th century. It's just that the methods of supervision have become more sophisticated.

In Asia, surveillance has deep historical roots. For instance, during the Cultural Revolution in China, state monitoring was pervasive, but basic, relying on human informants and community policing. Similarly, during the Emergency period in India (1975–1977), the government employed basic surveillance methods to silence opposition and enforce strict laws.

It was in the late 1990s that the advent of digital technology revolutionised surveillance systems. However, it wasn't until the 2010s, with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, that surveillance underwent its most dramatic transformation. Traditional CCTV cameras merely recorded events, but AI enhances these systems with capabilities like real-time facial recognition technology (FRT), behavioural analysis, and predictive policing.

SEJAL SHARMA is a technology reporter at The Secretariat, specialising in AI, emerging technologies, and their societal impacts. A graduate of the Asian College of Journalism, she has worked with outlets like Interesting Engineering and Hashtag Our Stories. She also holds certifications in digital marketing and creative writing.

Number of Countries by Region Adopting Artificial Intelligence Surveillance Technology



Source: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

That means these AI equipped cameras can identify individuals in crowded spaces, detect suspicious body language, and predict crimes based on historical data. We're talking about tracking sound, communications, data, and even the details of our personal experiences. The proactiveness with which these systems operate today has made cities safer, with authorities able to prevent crimes before they occur, rather than merely responding after.

But let's not kid ourselves. The more 'helpful' these systems get, the more they start creeping into our lives, keeping tabs on everything we do. It's become so ordinary to monitor people in physical spaces—and their digital lives in the virtual world—that it's almost as if we're all living under constant observation, whether we realise it or not. While we're busy patting ourselves on the back for safer cities, there's a much darker reality lurking behind those shiny screens: who's really watching us, and what are they doing with all this power?

China: A Surveillance State

Nowhere is the impact of AI-driven and traditional surveillance more visible than in China. Over the past decade, the country has built an unparalleled surveillance network. It's a blend of cutting-edge technology with authoritarian governance. The Great Wall Nation has about 700 million CCTV cameras to keep a watchful eye on its citizens. Anyone remember 'Telescreens' from Orwell's book '1984', where the citizens of a fictional country named Oceania had to keep their television screens switched on at all times so that the government could see what they were doing?

China, while not as extreme as Orwell's Oceania, has something similar by weaving surveillance into everyday life. Its ambitious Sharp Eyes project is emblematic of this. "Sharp Eyes" comes from a quote by the founder of the People's Republic of China—Mao Zedong, "The people have sharp eyes," referring to how citizens vigilantly monitored

each other to ensure adherence to communist values. The Sharp Eyes initiative, launched in 2015, aimed to create an omnipresent monitoring system where every corner is covered, every moment recorded, and every person visible.

This system in China can be seen as a modern version of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Bentham's design was a circular prison with a central watchtower, where guards could observe prisoners without the inmates knowing when or if they were being watched. This uncertainty forced prisoners to self-regulate their behaviour, as they assumed they were always under observation.

Today, in cities like Beijing and Shenzhen, facial recognition systems identify individuals within seconds, helping authorities catch fugitives, track public movement, and even enforce lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. In cities like Chongqing, with around 2.6 million cameras, residents live under the gaze of AI-powered cameras capable of identifying individuals and scrutinising their moves.

Surveillance also feeds into the controversial Social Credit System, where citizens' actions—whether paying bills on time or criticising the government—contribute to scores that affect everything from job prospects to travel permissions. While these measures ensure public safety and discipline, critics warn of a dystopian reality where personal freedom is a casualty of state control.

One of the most significant moments in China's surveillance history occurred in 2017, when its government launched an extensive surveillance network in Xinjiang, home to a large Uyghur Muslim population. This system included cameras, mandatory biometric scans, and apps that tracked citizens' movements and communications, marking a stark escalation in state surveillance under the guise of counter-terrorism.

This system allowed authorities to monitor not only physical spaces but also their behaviour on an unprecedented scale. The surveillance was so deep that it extended to checkpoints, where residents were required to provide biometric data such as DNA and iris scans. To the world, it became a chilling example of how AI and technology can be weaponised to suppress dissent and exert authoritarian control.

In countries with authoritarian regimes, surveillance has long been used as a tool for maintaining control, suppressing dissent, and enforcing state ideology. Sure, the West may have started the trend with early AI security tools, with the US refusing to remain soft post 9/11, but China took it further. It did so by not only being the leader in AI surveillance but also in exporting this surveillance technology world over. China sells extensive digital surveillance packages to governments under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure project.

This export of technology has significant geopolitical implications. On the one hand, it helps spread technological advancements. On the other, it risks exporting authoritarian practices, as governments adopt these tools to tighten control over their own populations.

For example, Chinese company Huawei's Safe City system installed in Lahore uses 8,000 cameras, facial recognition, licence plate tracking, and apps for security staff, all powered by AI to analyse data and monitor the city. While it's sold as a crime-fighting tool, there are concerns it could be used for political control. Countries like Zimbabwe and Uganda have used similar systems to spy on political opponents and control certain groups, raising worries about how such technology could be misused.

Shifting focus to the south—India, with its democratic framework and rapid technological growth, presents a unique case.

India's Surveillance Sprint

India, while not as advanced as China, is rapidly expanding its surveillance capabilities.

With its ambitious Smart Cities Mission, AI-driven technologies are becoming integral to how crime is managed and monitored. Under the Smart Cities Mission, over 83,000 CCTV surveillance cameras have been installed in 100 Smart Cities in India, said a government press release. These cities also boast of systems that aid in "automatic number plate recognition."

Cities like Pune are now equipped with AI-enabled cameras that assist the police in overseeing traffic, detecting crimes, and even assisting in investigations to solve crimes. Airports like the one in Hyderabad have also introduced AI-powered boarding systems, promising efficiency. But in turn, this has raised questions about data privacy and retention.

The case of activist SQ Masood against Hyderabad police in 2022 offers an example of unchecked FRT use in India. Telangana, identified in 2020 as the most surveilled place in India, witnessed numerous FRT projects with little public awareness or consent. Masood filed a petition after police stopped him, removed his mask, and took his photo without explanation or consent. His legal challenge highlighted concerns about privacy and potential misuse, urging the need for safeguards as FRT becomes increasingly pervasive in public spaces.

The Ministry of Railways too are venturing into the realm of high-tech surveillance. There will be a roll out of AI and facial recognition-enabled CCTV cameras inside trains across the nation. Their purpose? To curb crime. To achieve this, the system will employ face-cropping tools and matching servers, capturing facial data from all passengers, including children.

The cameras, stationed at every entry and exit point, will slice out faces from the live feed and whisk them away to a central server, where the data will be stored in real-time. As we race toward an age of digital efficiency, one might wonder: what price do we pay for convenience?

One of the gravest risks lies in data security. With AI systems collecting vast amounts of sensitive information, breaches can have devastating consequences. Unlike Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or even China's tightly controlled data systems, India's surveillance expansion operates in a legal grey area. The country lacks comprehensive data protection laws, leaving its surveillance ecosystem vulnerable to misuse. The Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act has been in limbo since it was passed into law over a year ago. For many, this legal vacuum undermines trust in the system, turning a potentially beneficial tool into a source of concern.

Where India has historically been wary of Chinese technology, particularly in the context of security concerns and ongoing territorial disputes, Pakistan on the other hand has been more open to Chinese technology.

Under the Lens: Rest of Asia

Pakistan has procured technology for its telecommunications and surveillance needs, particularly from Chinese company Huawei, as per the AI Global Surveillance (AIGS) Index. Under this index, most Asian countries like Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Laos, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have one thing in common—that they use Huawei technology for AI surveillance.

Singapore is often described as a unique blend of democracy and authoritarianism, governed by a single party since independence. In terms of surveillance, the country offers a more measured approach, blending technological innovation with governance under its Smart Nation initiative. The city-state uses smart lampposts equipped with AI-driven cameras and sensors to monitor crowd density, manage traffic, and even detect air quality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore's TraceTogether app was lauded

for its effectiveness in contact tracing, though concerns arose over the government's access to user data.

South Korea and Japan, known for their strong privacy regulations, have cautiously integrated AI surveillance. In Seoul, AI-enabled cameras monitor public spaces, capable of detecting sudden falls or aggressive movements to alert authorities. Japan, too, has used facial recognition for security at events like the Tokyo Olympics, though strict data protection measures ensured collected information was not misused. These countries exemplify how surveillance can be balanced with privacy safeguards, but even their systems are not immune to criticism.

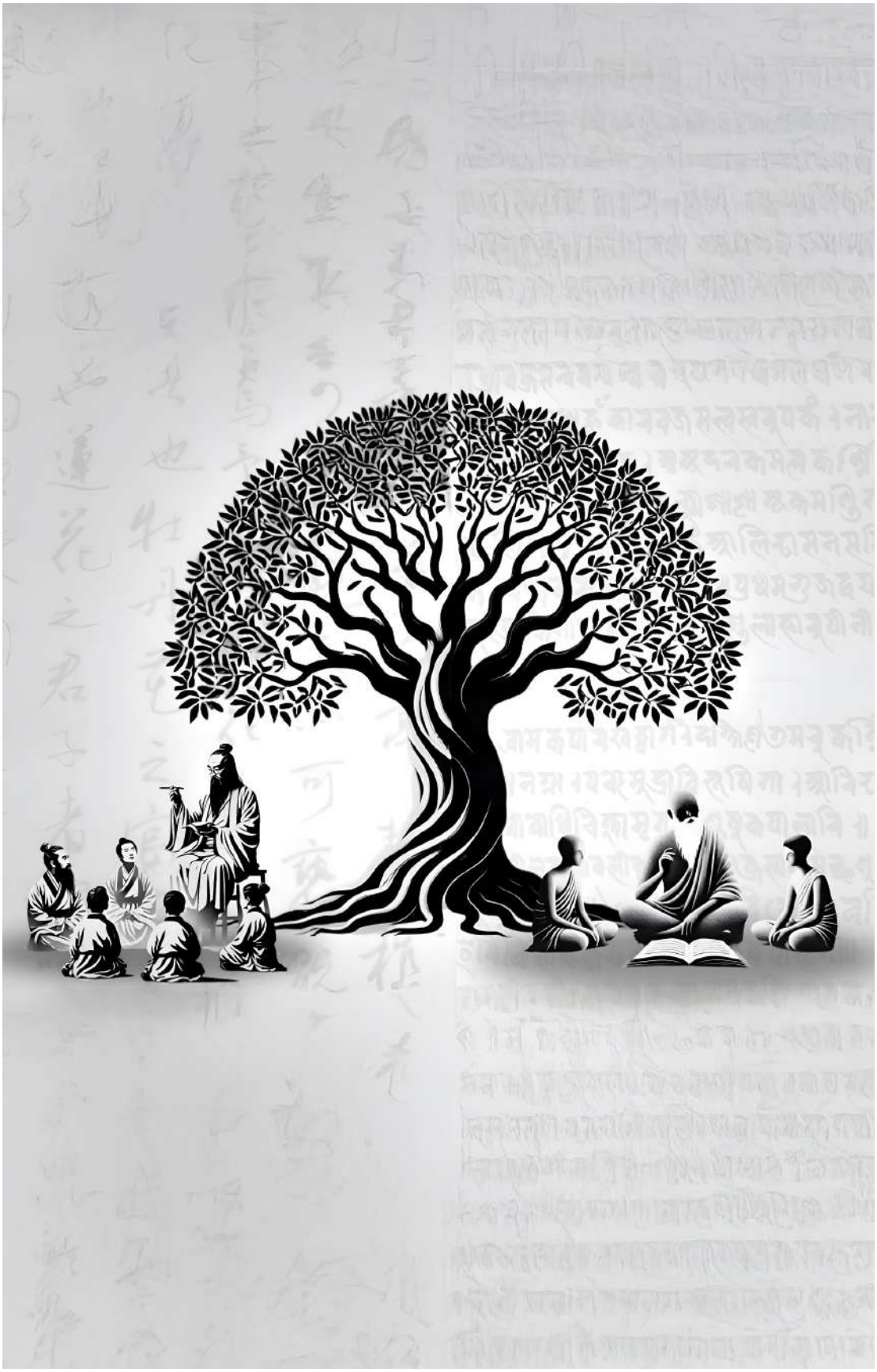
A Look to the Future

AI surveillance continues to expand across Asia, with promises of safer cities and smarter governance. Its future will likely be defined by three key trends: greater integration of IoT devices, citizen awareness, and regulatory frameworks. Smart city projects, like in India, will continue to expand, creating interconnected systems that monitor everything from traffic patterns to environmental conditions.

At the same time, advocacy for privacy rights is growing, with citizens and watchdog organisations demanding stricter regulations and greater transparency. It is true. The darker side of this technology cannot simply be ignored. Mass surveillance often operates in opaque ways, leaving citizens unaware of what data is collected or how it is used. The constant presence of cameras creates a chilling effect, where individuals self-censor their behaviour for fear of being watched.

There is another pitfall to technology advancing at a rapid velocity, that it is readily available for people to use at a personal level. Take the example of two Harvard students who hacked Meta Ray-Ban Smart Glasses and installed facial recognition software. By merely looking at someone's face, the glasses were able to bring up their name, address, age, biography and any other information available on online databases. However, the students told 404 Media that they carried out the experiment "to raise awareness of what is possible with this technology" and that they won't make it open-sourced.

Unchecked surveillance is not just about who watches but how much power the watcher wields. From spy gadgets like pen cameras to open-source AI models that allow users to create apps to analyse behaviour in real time, we have come a long way in terms of surveillance technology. And as we stand in awe of this leap, it's crucial to confront its implications. The line between safety and spying grows thinner with every advancement, and more so with the many capabilities of AI in the picture. Although surveillance may offer safety, without transparency and ethical governance, it risks creating a world where privacy is a privilege and not a fundamental right. Ultimately, the success of this technology lies in trust, ensuring that the tools we create must serve us—not control us.■



Pedagogies of Powers: Comparing India and China's Education Systems

AMIT K. SUMAN

The global trend toward standardised testing and performance-driven education has led many nations to emphasise academic achievement through examination-focused systems. China's education model is a prominent example of this approach, consistently producing students who excel in international assessments. However, critics contend that while China's examination-centric framework fosters academic rigor, it often does so at the expense of creativity, critical thinking, and emotional well-being. The high-stakes nature of the gaokao, China's intensely competitive college entrance exam, underscores these challenges, as students face immense pressure to perform, often prioritising rote learning over holistic development.

India's indigenous education system provides a valuable alternative, deeply rooted in community-centric values, ethical principles, and practical learning. Historically, this approach embraced a holistic model, intertwining moral instruction, intellectual growth, and skill development within culturally meaningful frameworks. Traditional institutions such as pathshalas, madrasas, and gurukuls prioritised the cultivation of both the mind and character, encouraging students to harmonise knowledge with real-world applications and social responsibilities. This integrated framework not only nurtured individual growth but also strengthened societal cohesion by aligning education with the cultural and economic needs of communities. These indigenous practices resonate strongly with Gandhian educational philosophy, which emphasises self-reliance, empathy, and ethical development as fundamental pillars of learning. Gandhi envisioned education as a means to nurture well-rounded individuals who contribute meaningfully to society, integrating intellectual growth with practical skills and moral values. His approach underscores the importance of connecting education with real-life experiences and community welfare, aligning closely with the principles of India's traditional learning systems.

Community-Centric Learning

The foundation of India's indigenous education system lies in its community-centric approach, where learning extended beyond formal institutions and seamlessly blended with everyday life. Pathshalas,

AMIT K. SUMAN is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi, and an Associate Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in London. His research focuses on education history, indigenous knowledge systems, and colonial interventions in South Asia. His work has been featured in Paedagogica Historica and Indian Historical Review.

madrasas, and Gurukuls prioritised moral development, practical skills, and social responsibility, fostering a holistic model that nurtured ethical values and cultural relevance while addressing the practical needs of society. In these settings, students were inspired to engage with community elders, spiritual leaders, and local artisans, gaining insights into the interconnectedness of knowledge, culture, and the environment. This approach cultivated a deep understanding of societal and ecological interdependence, embedding learning within the lived experiences of the community. This approach nurtured a strong sense of belonging and instilled respect for community values, equipping students to grow into responsible, ethical individuals committed to the well-being of their society.

Unlike standardised education systems, indigenous education was inherently flexible and adaptive, designed to meet the unique needs of diverse communities. Teachers customised their lessons to align with each student's abilities and the local context, emphasising practical skills and moral values that were directly relevant to the community's cultural and economic environment. Learning in the indigenous system was experiential, with a strong focus on hands-on practices and moral guidance. Students engaged directly with their surroundings, acquiring practical skills that were essential to their communities. For instance, in agrarian societies, children learned farming techniques, environmental care, and local customs from a young age, gaining knowledge that contributed to both individual and collective well-being. This approach ensured that education was not just academic but deeply intertwined with the values and needs of the community. Indigenous education played a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage by teaching in local languages, allowing students to maintain a strong connection to their traditions. This approach not only facilitated the transmission of knowledge but also nurtured a deep sense of cultural identity. By engaging with their native languages, students were able to understand and appreciate their history, customs, and values, ensuring that these traditions remained alive and relevant for future generations.

This flexibility stands in stark contrast to the rigidity of the Chinese education system, where Mandarin is the mandatory medium of instruction. The emphasis on a monolingual approach in China often leads to the marginalisation of regional dialects, limiting cultural representation and diminishing students' connection to their local heritage. As a result, students may find themselves distanced from the rich diversity of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which can affect their sense of identity and belonging. India's indigenous education system, by embracing linguistic diversity, not only strengthens cultural identity but also enhances cognitive development. Allowing students to learn in their native languages helps them better grasp complex concepts and fosters a deeper connection to their heritage. This approach encourages intellectual engagement and emotional resonance, supporting both the preservation of local cultures and the holistic development of students.

Oral Traditions and Experiential Learning

Oral traditions played a vital role in India's indigenous education system, facilitating the dynamic and interactive transfer of knowledge across generations. Through folktales, epics, and parables, students learned ethical principles, social values, and life lessons in an engaging and memorable way. Storytelling became a powerful educational tool, allowing complex ideas to be conveyed in a relatable format while fostering critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of cultural continuity. This method not only preserved history and tradition but also encouraged students to reflect on their roles within the community. These narratives were rich with historical and mythological figures

who exemplified virtues such as courage, compassion, and humility, offering students moral role models to emulate. Stories from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata provided not only entertainment but also valuable lessons on ethics, responsibility, and the complexities of human behaviour. Through these tales, students learned the importance of making ethical decisions in both personal and social contexts, while also understanding the consequences of their actions. This method of teaching instilled a strong sense of morality, integrity, and respect for societal values.

The experiential nature of indigenous learning enabled students to acquire knowledge through active participation and direct engagement with their environment. By observing and taking part in daily activities such as crafting, farming, and other traditional practices, students not only developed practical skills but also gained a deeper understanding of the values of hard work, self-sufficiency, and resourcefulness. This hands-on approach to learning emphasised the connection between knowledge and action, preparing students to contribute meaningfully to their communities while fostering a sense of responsibility and independence. This approach aligns closely with Gandhian educational philosophy, particularly his concept of Nai Talim (Basic Education), which advocates for an integrated model of learning that combines academic and vocational training. Gandhi believed that education should develop not only the intellect (head) but also moral values (heart) and practical skills (hands). This holistic approach sought to nurture well-rounded individuals who were not just academically proficient but also socially responsible, skilled in craftsmanship, and rooted in ethical principles. By emphasising practical learning alongside intellectual development, Nai Talim aimed to prepare students for a life of self-reliance and service to their communities. According to Gandhi, true education goes beyond academic learning; it fosters self-reliance and social responsibility. He believed that education should nurture not only intellectual abilities but also moral character, ensuring that students develop into compassionate and ethical individuals. Gandhi's vision was to cultivate a sense of duty towards society, encouraging students to contribute positively to their communities. Through Nai Talim or Basic Education, he sought to create an education system that empowered individuals with practical skills, ethical values, and a deep sense of social commitment, enabling them to lead meaningful, service-oriented lives.

Nai Talim emphasised the dignity of labour and the development of practical skills, advocating for an education system that nurtured students intellectually, physically, and morally. Gandhi's model stands in stark contrast to China's examination-centric approach, which prioritises intellectual achievement while often neglecting ethical development and emotional well-being. By integrating experiential learning and vocational training, the Indian indigenous education system promotes a holistic approach that equips students with not only academic knowledge but also life skills. This approach prepares them to contribute meaningfully to society, fostering responsible, well-rounded individuals capable of addressing both personal and community needs.

Gandhian Values: Ethical Development and Self-Reliance

Gandhian philosophy, a fundamental pillar of India's indigenous education system, promotes a model of learning that integrates intellectual, emotional, and moral growth. Gandhi's concept of Nai Talim emphasises the significance of character-building, ethical conduct, and communal responsibility, viewing education not just to acquire knowledge but as a process to shape a well-rounded individual. This approach fosters a deep sense of social awareness and personal integrity, aligning intellectual development

with the values of compassion, self-reliance, and moral responsibility. Gandhi believed that education should nurture personal integrity and self-reliance, empowering students with skills that contribute to both individual development and the welfare of the community. His philosophy advocates for an educational system that honours each student's unique abilities, fostering curiosity, moral reflection, and a deep sense of service to society. Through this approach, Gandhi envisioned education as a tool for holistic development, encouraging students to engage in meaningful, socially responsible actions while cultivating their own intellectual and ethical growth.

Gandhi's approach stands in stark contrast to the Chinese model, which emphasises academic excellence through rigorous, high-stakes examinations. While the Chinese system fosters intense competition and academic achievement, it often places considerable pressure on students, prioritising intellectual success over emotional well-being and personal development. In contrast, Gandhi's educational philosophy seeks to cultivate balanced individuals who are intellectually, morally, and emotionally mature. His emphasis on self-reliance, ethical conduct, and community responsibility encourages students to grow not just in academic knowledge but also in their capacity for empathy, social engagement, and personal integrity. By integrating vocational training, community involvement, and ethical teachings into the curriculum, Gandhian values align seamlessly with India's indigenous education model, which emphasises a holistic approach to learning. Gandhi believed that education should be a transformative journey of self-discovery and social awareness, encouraging students to develop not only intellectual skills but also moral integrity and social responsibility. This philosophy challenges rigid, performance-oriented education systems, such as the examination-driven models, which often prioritise test scores over the development of character, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. Gandhi's vision advocates for an education that nurtures the whole person, fostering both individual growth and a deep sense of community engagement.

Examination Pressure and Psychological Impact

China's education system is predominantly structured around high-stakes examinations, with the gaokao being the most crucial test determining students' academic and career prospects. This examination-focused model fosters a highly competitive environment, where students are pressured to prioritise test performance above all else. As a result, many students experience significant psychological stress, including anxiety and burnout. Studies have highlighted the toll this system takes on students' mental health, as they face overwhelming societal and familial expectations to excel and secure top scores, often at the expense of their well-being. The emphasis on standardised testing in China's education system restricts opportunities for creative exploration and personal growth. Students are primarily trained to meet rigid academic benchmarks, leaving little room for fostering critical thinking, innovation, or ethical awareness. This narrow focus on performance often sidelines the development of holistic skills, such as problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility, which are essential for well-rounded personal and intellectual development. As a result, students may excel in exams but struggle to cultivate the broader competencies needed for navigating complex real-world challenges.

This examination-driven structure stands in stark contrast to India's indigenous education model, which emphasises practical knowledge, moral development, and emotional resilience. While the Chinese system prioritises academic performance, often at the expense of students' mental health, India's approach fosters a more

balanced growth that nurtures intellectual curiosity alongside emotional well-being. In India's traditional framework, education was not just about acquiring knowledge, but about developing character, fostering social responsibility, and preparing students for life beyond exams. As such, India's system seeks to promote personal development alongside academic achievement, creating more well-rounded individuals. The Indian model's focus on community-based learning and ethical values offers a more holistic approach, fostering students' psychological well-being. By prioritising personal growth and moral development alongside academic learning, it allows students to engage with education in a less pressurised environment, free from the constraints of high stakes testing. This approach encourages curiosity, emotional resilience, and a deeper connection to the community, providing a more balanced educational experience that nurtures both the mind and the character.

Ideological Control and Limited Intellectual Autonomy

The Chinese education system is also distinctive for its alignment with state ideology, where academic instruction often incorporates elements of political indoctrination. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, education has been utilised as a tool to foster ideologically loyal citizens, promoting values rooted in Marxist and socialist principles. This integration of political education ensures that students not only acquire academic knowledge but also internalise state-approved narratives and ideologies, reinforcing the country's political framework and shaping societal norms. This state-centric approach restricts intellectual autonomy, as students are primarily exposed to perspectives that uphold state-sanctioned ideologies. Educational content, particularly in subjects like history and social studies, is often curated to align with political objectives, limiting students' access to diverse viewpoints. This selective approach to knowledge discourages critical thinking and intellectual inquiry, as students are taught to accept predetermined narratives rather than engage with the complexities of various issues or explore alternative perspectives. Consequently, the focus is placed on conformity rather than fostering independent, analytical, and critical thought.

In contrast, India's indigenous education model fosters intellectual independence and ethical exploration, encouraging students to engage with diverse perspectives and develop their own judgments. Rooted in Gandhian values, the model emphasises critical thinking, moral inquiry, and the development of independent ethical frameworks. This approach not only nurtures intellectual autonomy but also promotes the idea that education should be a process of self-discovery, where students are encouraged to question, reflect, and form values that align with both personal integrity and societal well-being. It enables students to engage deeply with the world around them, cultivating a sense of responsibility, empathy, and moral clarity. This approach aligns with democratic values, empowering students to actively participate in civic life and make informed, independent decisions. By emphasising ethical development and intellectual freedom, India's indigenous education system prepares students for responsible citizenship in a pluralistic society. It encourages critical thinking, fosters respect for diverse viewpoints, and nurtures an understanding of social responsibility. This model offers a viable alternative to education systems that prioritise ideological conformity, providing students with the tools to navigate

a complex world while upholding values of justice, equality, and personal integrity.

Cultural Relevance and Inclusivity

The Indian indigenous education system's respect for linguistic diversity and cultural identity makes it highly relevant in a multicultural society. By promoting mother-tongue instruction, this model not only supports cognitive development but also nurtures cultural awareness. It enables students to relate learning to their everyday experiences, fostering a deeper connection to their heritage while simultaneously enhancing their academic abilities. This approach recognises the importance of language in shaping thought, identity, and community, ensuring that education remains grounded in the cultural and social contexts of the learners. This inclusivity aligns with democratic principles, ensuring that education is accessible and meaningful for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. By valuing linguistic diversity, India's indigenous education system fosters a sense of belonging and cultural pride among all students. In contrast, China's monolingual policy, which mandates Mandarin as the sole language of instruction, often marginalises regional dialects and suppresses cultural expression. This top-down approach can create a disconnect among ethnic minorities, limiting their cultural representation and making it harder for them to fully engage with the educational process.

India's indigenous education system places a high value on each community's cultural heritage, offering a personalised educational experience that nurtures a deep sense of belonging. This system promotes national unity through its celebration of diversity, recognising that education plays a key role in preserving cultural identities while fostering social cohesion. By accommodating the unique needs and traditions of different communities, the Indian model demonstrates adaptability, ensuring that education remains both relevant and inclusive. It reflects a broader vision of education that not only builds academic skills but also strengthens the fabric of a diverse society.

NEP 2020: Integrating Indigenous Values with Global Competitiveness

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant step toward revitalising India's indigenous education values, integrating Gandhian principles, cultural inclusivity, and experiential learning into the formal education system. By prioritising mother-tongue instruction in early education, NEP 2020 aligns closely with the indigenous model's emphasis on accessibility and cultural relevance, ensuring that students connect learning with their linguistic and cultural roots. This approach not only promotes cognitive development but also strengthens cultural identity, reflecting the policy's commitment to providing an inclusive and contextually rich educational experience for all learners. This policy shift highlights the cognitive advantages of learning in a familiar language, which supports students' cognitive and emotional development during their formative years. By fostering an environment where children can engage with content in their mother tongue, NEP 2020 helps enhance comprehension, critical thinking, and emotional connection to the material. This approach also reduces the cognitive load of learning in a second language, allowing students to grasp complex concepts more effectively and with greater ease. Ultimately, this shift reinforces the importance of culturally relevant education in nurturing well-rounded, confident learners.

By fostering a balance between academic learning and practical skills, the NEP echoes Nai Talim's emphasis on self-reliance, moral integrity, and community engagement. This

shift encourages students to participate in meaningful, hands-on activities that not only enhance their intellectual and physical development but also nurture their ethical growth. In line with Gandhian principles, the policy advocates for an education that prepares students to contribute positively to society by developing a sense of responsibility, empathy, and social awareness. Through this integrated approach, the NEP seeks to cultivate well-rounded individuals capable of addressing both personal and societal challenges. Through the integration of indigenous values, NEP 2020 establishes a holistic educational framework that addresses the diverse needs of Indian society. By prioritising inclusivity, cultural relevance, and practical skills, it fosters a model of learning that is not only rooted in India's rich traditions but also future-oriented. This comprehensive approach aims to equip students with the intellectual, ethical, and practical tools needed to navigate a rapidly changing world, ensuring that education remains adaptable and relevant to the challenges of the 21st century.

A unique feature of NEP 2020 is its strong commitment to cultural preservation, which emphasises the integration of indigenous knowledge, traditional arts, and ethical education into the curriculum. By advocating for mother-tongue instruction in early education, the policy not only supports cognitive development but also strengthens cultural ties, ensuring that students retain a deep sense of pride in their heritage. This approach helps foster a strong connection to local traditions while also promoting a more inclusive and culturally resonant education system. The policy's inclusion of indigenous knowledge and ethical learning reflects the view that education should serve not only economic and technical objectives but also social and cultural goals. This approach reinforces the indigenous principle that education must contribute to both individual growth and communal well-being, fostering a well-rounded development that nurtures students' intellectual, moral, and cultural identities. By integrating these values, NEP 2020 strives to create an education system that is as rooted in social responsibility and cultural preservation as it is in academic achievement. NEP 2020 promotes a broad-based curriculum that encourages students to explore multiple fields of study, inspired by the interdisciplinary learning practices of India's ancient centres of knowledge like Nalanda and Takshashila. By integrating various disciplines, this flexible approach nurtures intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and adaptability—skills that are essential in the modern workforce. It not only prepares students for diverse career paths but also cultivates a holistic understanding of the world, equipping them to navigate complex, interconnected challenges. NEP's integration of vocational and skill-based education from early grades reflects the core principles of the indigenous model, which emphasises hands-on learning. By equipping students with practical skills from a young age, the policy prepares them for economic resilience and personal empowerment. This approach ensures that education is not only academically enriching but also relevant to real-world needs, fostering a workforce capable of adapting to a rapidly changing economy while maintaining a sense of self-reliance and social responsibility. NEP 2020 offers pathways for both academic and vocational pursuits, thereby accommodating diverse career aspirations and making education more accessible and relevant. Recognising the global shift towards digitalisation, the policy integrates digital literacy and STEM education as core components. This inclusion equips students with essential skills in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, ensuring they are prepared for the technology-driven industries of the future. By emphasising digital proficiency, NEP 2020 helps India's workforce remain competitive in emerging sectors like software development, data science, and artificial intelligence, thus aligning with global trends while fostering innovation. This emphasis on technology reflects India's long-standing openness to new knowledge and its education

system's adaptability and forward-thinking nature. As the Fourth Industrial Revolution reshapes global economies, NEP 2020's focus on digital literacy equips students with the skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly tech-driven world. By fostering a workforce adept in digital tools and technologies, NEP enhances India's capacity to meet both domestic and global demands for skilled professionals, ensuring the country remains competitive in emerging industries while nurturing innovation and growth.

NEP 2020 also aims to position India as a global education hub, promoting collaborations with foreign institutions and attracting international students to the country. This initiative draws on India's rich legacy of intellectual openness, exemplified by ancient learning centres like Nalanda and Takshashila, which welcomed scholars from diverse backgrounds. By fostering academic exchanges, collaborative research, and cross-cultural learning, NEP 2020 not only enriches the Indian educational landscape but also strengthens India's presence in the global academic community. These efforts support India's vision of becoming a competitive destination for international education, creating a vibrant, multicultural learning environment that benefits both domestic and international students.

India's indigenous education system, rooted in community support, ethical values, and practical knowledge, offers a compelling alternative to China's examination-driven, ideologically centralised model. Promoting linguistic diversity, intellectual autonomy, and cultural inclusivity, India's model fosters well-rounded individuals prepared for success in an interconnected world. NEP 2020 builds upon these foundational values, modernising the education system while honouring cultural heritage. By emphasising multidisciplinary learning, digital literacy, and international engagement, NEP 2020 positions India as a leader in inclusive, adaptable education. Enhanced by NEP 2020, India's indigenous education exemplifies a holistic approach that values cultural heritage, cognitive flexibility, and ethical grounding. This system balances traditional values with global competencies, producing graduates who are not only skilled and knowledgeable but also culturally grounded and globally prepared to thrive in diverse international contexts.

Indian cities like Bengaluru, Varanasi, Allahabad, Delhi, Hyderabad, and Kota have emerged as prominent hubs of education and knowledge dissemination. Kota, for instance, has seen significant economic growth driven by its thriving coaching industry, attracting students from across the country. At the same time, there has been a surge in the number of Indian students studying abroad, particularly in countries like the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where Indian students now form a substantial portion of the international student population. This trend is largely fuelled by India's strong reputation for producing highly skilled graduates in fields like engineering, computer science, medicine, and business.

When compared to Chinese graduates, Indian students often have better employment prospects abroad, particularly in countries that value advanced technical expertise and strong communication skills. For example, Indian professionals have found considerable success in Silicon Valley, with many rising to high-level positions at companies like Google, Microsoft, and Adobe. Sundar Pichai (CEO of Alphabet) and Satya Nadella (CEO of Microsoft) are prime examples of this trend, both having received their foundational education in India before excelling on the global stage. Indian-trained doctors and healthcare professionals are similarly well-regarded in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Middle East, where their clinical expertise is in high demand. In contrast to China, where language and cultural barriers can present challenges, Indian graduates benefit from their proficiency in English, adaptability, and familiarity with global workplace environments. This linguistic advantage has translated into

greater success in high-skill industries, with a strong demand for Indian talent in sectors such as information technology, finance, engineering, and healthcare. ■

The Many Imagined Histories of Yuval Noah Harari

JEFF RICH

The thing about history is that the meaning of historical events is often revealed only in hindsight.

Yuval Noah Harari

Yuval Noah Harari may be the world's most famous historian. He is controversial, charismatic, and successful. His writing has real power. Many rely on his foresight. But his tautological comment that history is only revealed in hindsight shows why many people doubt his insights.

There is a reason for that. It has been a while since Harari really wrote history. Instead, he has speculated about the future and advocated controversial positions. Sapiens established his fame. But since its publication, Harari has used that fame not to be a student of the past, but to speak like a prophet of the future. His most recent book, Nexus, continues his speculation on the future of artificial intelligence.

But should you heed the prophecies of a historian if his histories are unreliable?

Harari's Histories

Harari's original training as a historian was in early modern European history. He wrote a PhD on a minor figure from this history and wrote specialised works on military history in the early modern and medieval period.

But his ambition to write history on a grander scale was ignited when he read Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs, and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years (1997). Diamond came to history late, after decades of scientific work in many fields including evolutionary biology. This scientific perspective on history inspired Harari. He read Guns, Germs and Steel in 2004 and had an epiphany. Diamond's discipline-spanning text showed Harari how to write books of universal scope that reached a popular audience, beyond the academy. At the same time, he discovered meditation and has since practiced meditation as an integral part of his life. These two discoveries led to Harari's personal transformation from dry historian to charismatic guru. He too set out to write a history of everybody for the last 13,000 years. It was called Sapiens.

Sapiens: a brief history of humankind was published in Hebrew in 2011 and translated

JEFF RICH is a historian, writer and former government official. He completed his PhD in history at Australian National University. He was a career public servant in Australia for 33 years. Since 2022 he has commented on world history and international affairs at the Burning Archive substack (https://jeffrich.substack.com) and YouTube channel.

into English in 2014. It has sold over 45 million in 65 languages. It is a big history of the human mind. I will explore its themes of the development of a global civilisation, and human dominance of the planet, in more detail after reviewing his other works.

In some ways, Sapiens recycled the traditional historiography of Western civilisation. But Harari's next book began to leave history behind. Homo Deus, A Brief History of Tomorrow (2015) explicitly claimed to know the future. This book explored the possibilities and limitations of humanity, beyond traditional goals of survival and basic well-being. Its discussion of a new human agenda revived old dreams of achieving immortality, happiness and near-divinity. Harari speculated that data, or Big Data, would reshape decision making and the possibilities of cognition. He predicted that artificial intelligence and biotechnology would revolutionise human life. This revolution would create new forms of inequality and ethical challenges.

In 21 lessons for the 21st century (2018) Harari examined contemporary issues and future challenges, such as identity, politics, and technology. He returned to his themes of automation and artificial intelligence, and their impact on the economy. But in the wake of the 2016 political upheavals in the USA and Britain, Harari focused on the political and social challenges of responding to nationalism, globalism, and populism. He joined a chorus worried about the rise of authoritarianism and linked it to the impact of technological change. He discussed how individuals and societies would define life purposes when artificial intelligence and other technologies displaced people from meaningful jobs.

His most recent book, Nexus: a brief history of information networks from the Stone Age to AI (2024) returns to the topics of artificial intelligence, misinformation and existential crisis. It explores how artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and data are reshaping human identity, politics, and economics. It presents ready-made stories of witch-hunts, Stalinism, Nazism and the Bible in a new story about relationship between information and truth, bureaucracy and mythology, wisdom and power. Harari claims algorithms might understand us better than we understand ourselves, and traditional notions of free will, privacy, and even humanity have broken down. Inequality and totalitarianism threaten. He calls for a reevaluation of ethical frameworks to respond to these challenges.

In addition to his books, Harari has become a prestigious speaker, including at the World Economic Forum. His talks focus on current political issues and future 'existential risks,' but with few signs of historical scholarship or caution. He defends the Western liberal rules-based order and Western civilisation against the West's adversaries. For example, in his inaugural lecture on his appointment to the Centre for Existential Risk at Oxford University, he spoke little of history and much about the conflict in Ukraine. His public appearances have gained many followers. But many readers are skeptical of his objectivity and scholarship. Harari is both lionised and demonised. The noise that surrounds his public persona can detract from careful assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of his histories.

Assessing Sapiens as History

That careful assessment should focus on Sapiens. I noted above that Sapiens is a reworking of conventional themes of the historiography of Western civilisation. Sapiens is a chronicle that captures the development of what Harari sees as global Western civilisation.

Harari divides the entire history of homo sapiens into three historical phases, marked by the rising power of this species. The first phase was the cognitive revolution about 70,000 years ago. The second was the agricultural revolution, about 12,000 years ago, and the third was the scientific revolution about 500 years ago.

Each revolution enabled homo sapiens to create imagined realities – Harari uses the term 'myths' - that facilitated social cooperation among large numbers of people. These innovations of social behaviour gave rise to the development of human civilisation, nations, corporations, religions, and the great stories and legends. It is also a story of the integration of the world into a single world civilisation, and in making this claim Harari departs from many of the best contemporary historians of the world.

The first revolution or the cognitive revolution was sparked by the evolution of human brains in ways that allowed human ancestors to invent new ways of thinking and communicating. Harari reflected his interest in evolutionary biology, inspired by Jared Diamond. However, the fields of evolutionary biology, cultural anthropology, and archaeology are vast and deep. There is a huge debate and considerable uncertainty about what exactly happened 70,000 years ago. Harari's account should be treated with caution, not as the foundation of a guru's speculations on the future.

The second transition was the agricultural revolution, in which the forager was replaced by the farmer. People discovered plants and controlled seeds. They herded and tamed food animals. These new roles of farming, cultivation and herding led the human mind to create new imagined realities, new myths of society, and new ways of organising their lives. Through the evolution of feedback loops between culture, society and the human brain, history changed. Social hierarchies, priestly castes, human rights, currencies, social order, cultural icons and many other 'myths' came into being.

The idea that the 'agricultural revolution' launched the rise of Western civilisation from the Fertile Crescent to North America is a common trope. Through the work of the Australian archaeologist, Vere Gordon Childe, in the early twentieth century the Agricultural Revolution became central to defining 'civilisation'. The idea spread through popular science books, like Guns, Germs and Steel, and integrated into popular culture, including computer games, such as the Civilisation franchise. However, decades of scholarly work by historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists since 1942 have changed conceptions of the development of agriculture in human societies across the world and over time. In Sapiens, Harari returned to Childe's simplified model and presented an old idea in new clothing.

The same judgment can be made of Harari's third transition, the Scientific Revolution. The Scientific Revolution sparked, according to Harari, the discovery of ignorance. Humans – especially European humans – realised that belief systems were not complete and total. They came to accept the limits of knowledge and acquired the discipline to test those limits through the scientific method. The scientific practice of falsifying hypotheses became, in Harari's account, the greatest discovery that human knowledge had ever obtained. It changed human minds, and made human culture open to change, more tolerant and liberal.

Sapiens tells a classic story of European Enlightenment. His traditional account of Europe's Scientific Revolution shows little sign of the vast historical, cultural, scientific literature that has accumulated to tell a different story. It does not explore how non-Western societies had "scientific revolutions" of their own at different times and in different ways. Again, Sapiens recycles a dated history of 'Western civilisation' as the history of the human species, if in the updated language of cognitive science.

Throughout Sapiens Harari presents a materialistic understanding of humanity. Humans are animals for Harari. Their history arises from the biological reality of their brains. Old patterns of Western history are rewritten as an account of the physical adaptation of the human brain. Sapiens is a history of the mind of the human species, through the evolution of our brains, and out struggle with its physical and biological

constraints.

At the end of the book, this story reaches its climax. Harari proposes that the human species, the human brain, and human cognition are now transcending the limits imposed on other living things. Homo sapiens is beginning to break the laws of natural selection. We bend them with the laws of intelligent design. Humans are, he writes in his afterword, "the animal that became a God." It is the old myth of transcendence.

Can You Rely on Harari's Histories?

Harari's books are ambitious and have inspired millions around the world to explore this big history of humanity. They have convinced many of his foresight. But can you rely on his histories?

Harari is a brilliant storyteller. He stresses the fact that humans are storytellers, and his books are outstanding examples of narrative art. Sapiens has a beautiful story structure of transformation. First, the hero's story begins when the human mind is born in the cognitive revolution. When human society advanced during the agricultural revolution, the hero encountered many challenges and struggles. Then in the scientific revolution the human mind slayed the monster of ignorance. Now, 70,000 years ago after the adventure of the human mind began, the hero of the story is about to leap beyond its limits, and, with the assistance of AI, become a God. It is a well-crafted archetypal story, and no wonder people have connected with it.

Harari also has charisma. His stage presence and use of metaphor have made him a loved guest for many talk shows, interviews, conferences and media appearances. He presents his mesmerising stories with charm and in ways that engage and interest people.

Harari chose an important field. He aspired to write big history, and the public hungered for a deep cognitive history of the human species. He helps to make sense of how we live within biological limitations, and how our biological history interacts with our culture and the way our minds work. His success is driven by his readers' curiosity about a profound engaging subject.

Despite his success, Harari's work has weaknesses that invite criticism. Some criticisms are personal attacks that are rooted in conspiracy theories and prejudices. But this white noise should not prevent us from exposing the weaknesses of Harari's history. Harari fans sometimes respond to scholarly criticism with reciprocal personal attacks. Critiques are dismissed as the petty jibes of writers who are jealous of his commercial success. Harari's status as a prophet of the future requires serious attention to the flaws of his history. None of us have any facts about the future. We ought to be scrupulous about the past.

The first major weakness of Harari's history is his reductionist view. He assumes humans are animals and he reduces many events in history to questions of evolutionary biology. Despite claiming that ideas or myths are powerful, Harari tends to reduce ideas and all human responses to the world to biological responses. For example, in Sapiens, he wrote

Nobody is ever made happy by winning the lottery, buying a house, getting a promotion, or even finding true love. People are made happy by one thing and one thing only. Pleasant sensations in their bodies. A person who just won the lottery or found new love and jumps from joy. It's not really reacting to the money or the lover she is reacting to various hormones coursing through her bloodstream, and to the storm of electric signals flashing between different parts of her brain.

Such a reductionist view undercuts the arguments Harari presents in his own book about the power of myths and stories. It unravels his own history of the human mind and its 'imagined realities.' There are clearly subtle relations between culture and biology, and between ideas and brains. We cannot reduce the connections between minds and

brains to one thing and one thing only, the pleasant sensations in our bodies.

Second, despite his charisma and broad appeal, Harari projects a haughtiness in his public presentations of issues that many people find objectionable. Sapiens has an admirable audacity. But writing a simplified story of 70,000 years of human history requires startling intellectual confidence. It leads to a visionary's disdain for the subtle byways and forgotten paths of human history. Many people have objected to Harari's views on AI and intelligent design. They sense Harari is most comfortable with the movers and shakers of world history, and despises the lower classes of people, whose lives are made redundant and meaningless by the gifted human animals who may one day become gods.

The third problem is linked to Harari's talent as a storyteller. He does tell great stories, but the grand stories are more driven from his own world view. They do not retell a true encounter with detailed real history. The reader senses the book is written to support Harari's ideas and aims for the world, rather than to explore and to recreate the actual experiences of the very different people he might discover in history. The detailed, empirical, complicated evidence that careful, modest historians have accumulated about the cognitive, agricultural and scientific revolutions do not make the cut. They would spoil Harari's grand story of an animal who becomes a God.

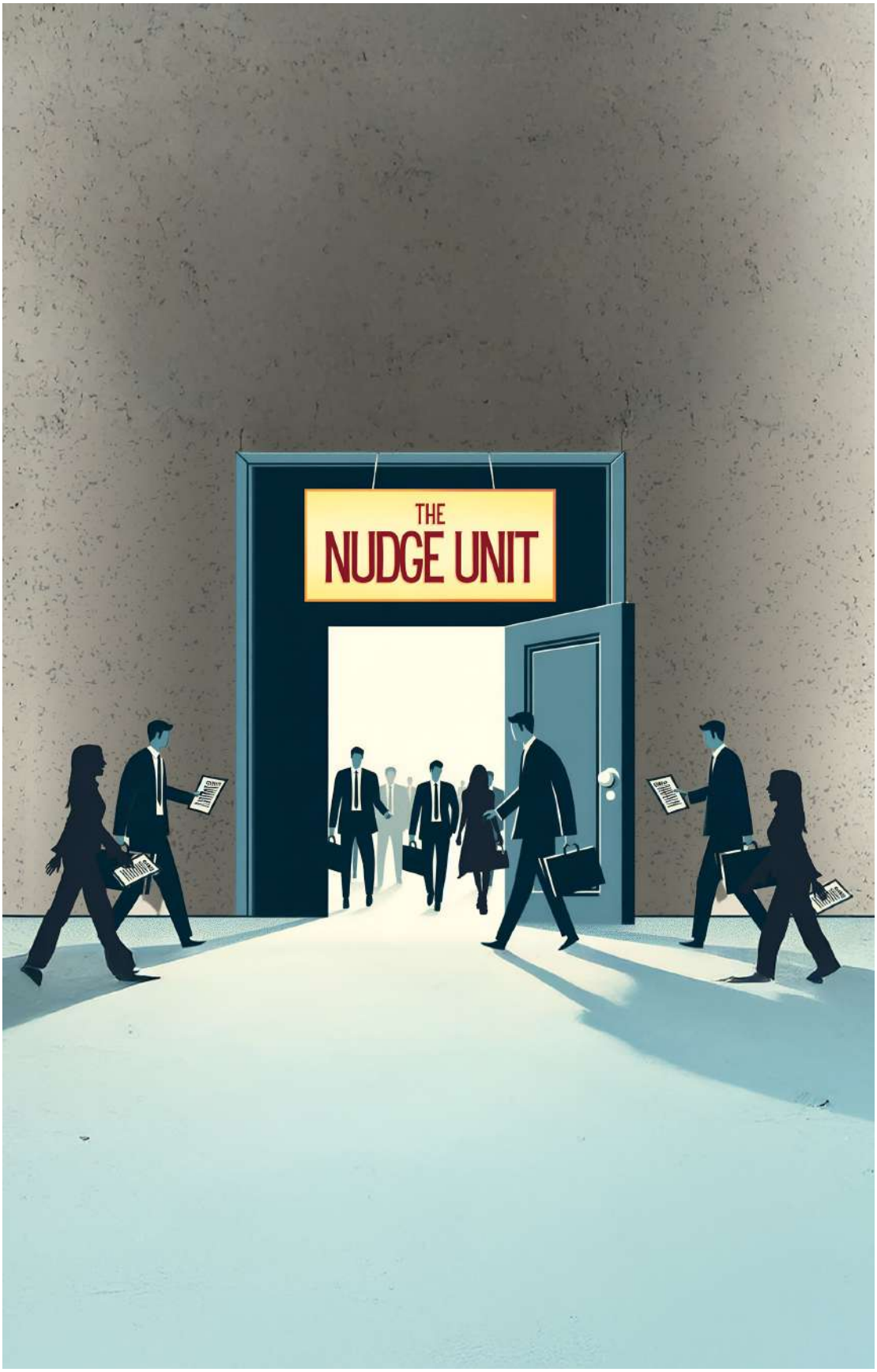
Real history is in the details. It hides in the unique paths that emerge from the chaos of events. Compelling simple narratives provide unreliable tourist maps for this real history. Harari's histories do not emerge from an encounter with the real substance of history. They do not inspire empathy with the real people of history or today.

But for readers interested in the big issues that Harari raises, there are, in fact, better historians of the deep history of human cognition. One such historian is Felipe Fernández-Armesto, one of the world's leading historians of the world. In a series of books, including Civilisations, Ideas, Truth, and One Foot in the River, he explored the detailed issues of the entanglement of biology and culture, with more exactness and empathy than did Harari. Together with other scholars, he has opened up a field of Deep History that explores the complex stories of the human body, brain, energy and ecosystems, language, food, kinship, migration, and other social systems in ways that incorporate real evidence and cutting-edge social and evolutionary theory. Readers who want to understand how human genes, brains, and material culture intertwine over human history would do better to shelve Harari, and read Felipe Fernández-Armesto.

Historian or Futurist?

Harari is a futurist, not a historian. Even Sapiens, his most famous book about history, belongs to the jaded Western tradition of speculative, philosophical history. It is a schema that imprisons history in grand narrative. The curious, idiosyncratic, real material of history rarely appears. Unsurprisingly, Harari has never truly returned to history after launching his spectacular career from the platform of Sapiens. He has forged on with his speculations about the future, and practiced his pseudoscientific, speculative history. He does not seek empathetic understanding of the many puzzling stories of human history. He does not help us see the reality of the present, that emerged from that complex past. He turns both history and the present into fables, and not the study of particular and intricate places, times, cultures, and peoples.

If the deep themes of the evolution of culture and biology over human history intrigue you, then seek out better histories than those written by Yuval Noah Harari. ■


THE
NUDGE UNIT

The Rise of the Psychological State in Asia: Nudging 4.6 Billion People

FARHEEN YOUSUF

In the UK, a simple letter improved tax compliance. "You're one of the few people in your area who hasn't paid," it read, and suddenly the cheques started rolling in. It wasn't a threat, nor a penalty—just a nudge. Inspired by this experiment, in 2015, President Obama signed an executive order that created a behavioural science unit within the oval office. Introduced by the UK's Behavioural Insights Team which employs principles of behavioural economics—subtle tweaks designed to encourage individuals to make better decisions, such as saving for retirement or ensuring timely tax payments. The US adopted a similar approach with much optimism and flair, citing cost-effectiveness as its reason. 9 years later, the unit has quietly vanished, and the behavioural economics research that supported its efforts is now caught in controversy. Research utilised by the Obama administration, including work from well-known figures like Dan Ariely, has been revealed to be fabricated. But while the Anglo-American region seems to reassess the promise of nudges, Asia is taking them up with gusto. Countries like Singapore, India, and even Pakistan are placing bets on behavioural insights to solve deeply entrenched problems.

Currently there are over 600 behavioural public policy (BPP) bodies operating globally in 2024, of which 322 are government bodies. Since the introduction of Thaler and Sunstein's Nudge in 2008, nudge units have mushroomed across the world. Nudge units first became well-known following the founding of the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) in 2010. The prevalence of these nudge units, as noted by Prof. John notes in his 2019 paper, have been concentrated for the most part in Anglo-American and Western European nations. However, there is a growing trend within Asia. In addition, Prof. John observes that the adoption of nudge unit within governments is in liberal or centrist democracies where stable political systems, effective governance, and high public trust provide a fertile ground for behavioural policies. However, adoption in Asian regions sees more diversity in political systems, from democratic regimes of India to authoritarian regimes of Pakistan. To understand this growth, we need to first understand their origin.

Origin and the Rise of Nudge Unit:

The failure of the traditional and efficient economic models post the 2008 financial

FARHEEN YOUSUF is a Policy & Trust Analyst at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA), SGT University. She has previously worked with state governments, nonprofits, and startups, specialising in behavioural economics and political economy.

crisis was a major catalyst for the establishment of nudge unit. The subsequent economic austerity forced governments to seek low-cost policy interventions. The appeal of nudges provides a low-cost alternative to traditional interventions such as taxes or regulations. The emphasis on cost-effectiveness and efficiency had resonated with the conservative political agenda of the times. The policy makers, who aimed for quantifiable results without significant budgetary expenditure, found nudges quite appealing because of their convergence of interests with fiscal conservatism. Nudge originated and gained acceptance in part thanks to political champions as well. Advisor to Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom Rohan Silva suggested nudging as a creative and pragmatic approach fit for the Conservative Party's constrained yet efficient perspective. The middle ground appeal of nudging was helping people to make better decisions for themselves rather than enforcing forceful demand or control. Their philosophical flexibility and political appeal derived from this conception helped them to be pushed across party boundaries. The crisis left a void in which rival systems fought for supremacy. One strong competitor is behavioural economics, which presents a convincing critique of rationality and offers reasonably priced remedies. Policymakers started to view behavioural observations as a tool not only to explain the crisis but also to create fresh ideas for government.

Apart from the early success of UK's Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), publishing of popular books like "Nudge" in 2008 greatly helped to increase knowledge and public debate on behavioural economics and its possible influence in public policy. Even if it was rapidly embraced, the idea of nudging was not without controversy. Critics raised moral questions, arguing that even minor behavioural change by the government could be considered pervasive. Others questioned their ability to address the policy challenges, pointing out that while nudges could be helpful in some situations, they generally fell short of systematic needs. Still, the early BIT rhetoric supported the growth of analogous institutions worldwide. Endorsements of international organisations as the World Bank, UN, and OECD who encouraged the use of behavioural insights in policy. This further facilitated the spread of nudge units globally.

Adoption in Asia:

Country of Operation	Government Nudge Unit	Year of Establishment
Singapore	BIT: Behavioural Insights Team	2012
Japan	Behavioural Sciences Team (BEST)	2017
India	Behavioural Insights Unit of India (BIU)	2019
Pakistan	Mind Lab Behavioural Insights Unit	2022
Malaysia	Malaysia Productivity Corporation (MPC), Behavioural Insights Unit	2022
Brunei	Behavioural Insights Unit, Set up by WHO	2022

Asia is greatly divided on the adoption of behavioural insights, from completely formalised nudge units in countries like India and Singapore to more informal, context-driven applications in countries like Korea. This raises a crucial issue: why do some countries establish specialised behavioural units while others adapt these ideas into existing structures? Governance needs, cultural norms, and institutional

trust play significant roles in shaping these decisions. Singapore stands out as a model of formalisation, with its high public trust and efficient bureaucracy enabling the seamless integration of behavioural insights into policy. The country's formal nudge unit has achieved success in areas like health, sustainability, and financial habits, demonstrating how strong institutions can amplify the impact of behavioural science.

On the other hand, In India, there is no formal nudge unit. NITI Aayog, the apex thinktank of Indian government, in 2019, partnered with Ashoka University to establish the Behavioural Insights Unit, which has worked on various projects. Japan, on the other hand, has tailored its behavioural interventions to address generalisability of desired behavioural changes in sectors like environmental and demographic challenges. Japan has both a national level and localised behavioural Insight Unit.

Unlike Singapore and Japan, where the adoption is mostly dependent on trust and a coherent institutional framework, India's great cultural and regional variety calls for decentralised and personalised solutions, which might be difficult to carry out. The varying acceptance of behavioural insights across Asia not only reflects the political and cultural diversity of the region but also raises questions about ownership and sustainability. While formal systems provide clear institutional frameworks and stability in countries like Singapore and Japan, they largely rely on high trust and cohesiveness among citizens. In countries lacking institutional stability or public confidence, nudges may be perceived as manipulative and thus less effective. South Korea and China offer other perspectives in this conversation. Though they lack official nudging units, both nations have incorporated behavioural ideas into their policies. Although this presents significant ethical and transparency issues, China's application of behavioural insights in public health and its other sectors, demonstrates the integration of behavioural science into government-led initiatives. South Korea proves that creating distinct institutions is not essential for implementation since it effectively used behavioural insights for changing public perception of its civil servants.

These examples illustrate that the integration of behavioural governance into local governance systems determines its effectiveness more often than formalisation. In high-trust countries like Singapore and Japan, nudges can be more readily used cooperatively. Low-trust settings like India, on the other hand, face more resistance and require more complex, dispersed strategies. Adoption is heavily influenced by cultural factors. For instance, collectivist countries such as South Korea and Japan often respond favourably to measures emphasising societal benefits. Different democracies, like India, however, call for tailored approaches that consider regional and socioeconomic disparities.

The decision to formalise nudge units finally raises significant questions about political culture, government capacity, and how faithfully behavioural science can adapt. While formal units can provide coherence and visibility, using informal approaches might offer more adaptability and responsiveness to local requirements. Regardless of the method used, the primary challenge is ensuring consistency, openness, and ethical applicability. The success of behavioural governance in Asia depends on the ability of these various approaches to develop into sustainable systems that address both immediate policy concerns and long-term issues.

Thus, the rise of nudge units in Asia highlights an innovative yet complex interplay of global influence, local cultural dynamics, and policy priorities. Unlike in Western contexts, their success in Asia rests not only on technical application but also on navigating diverse political systems, varying levels of trust in government, and deeply ingrained cultural norms. Countries like Singapore and Japan

demonstrate how centralised, technocratic governance can seamlessly integrate behavioural insights into policymaking, while India and Pakistan exhibit both the potential and challenges of decentralisation and external collaborations. However, for these units to be effective, they must address important gaps, such as the need for greater local support, ethical interventions, and flexible frameworks that cater to a diverse population. Questions about their effectiveness remain, warranting further research.

As the rise of nudge units in Asia continues to grow, the question remains whether these actually work or if they are merely window dressing for actual efforts. ■

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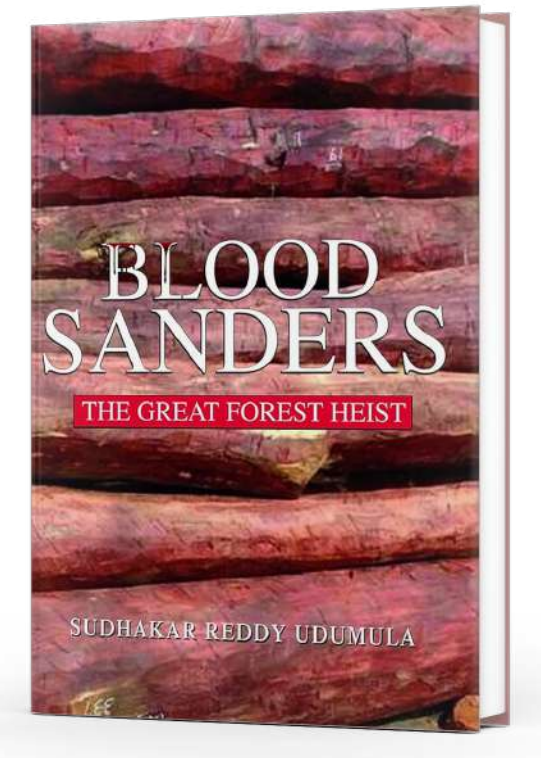

Blood Sanders The Great Forest Heist By Sudhakar Reddy Udumula, Perfect Paperback, 2021

Reviewed by Manashjyoti Karjee

Blood Sanders: The Great Forest Heist by Sudhakar Reddy Udumula is a startling exposé on the widespread and intricate criminal trade in red sanders, a rare and endangered wood species that is indigenous to the Seshachalam forests of South India. Udumula, a journalist with more than thirty years of experience covering crime, creates an engaging story with his first-hand recollections that emphasises the close ties between foreign purchasers, bureaucrats, politicians, and smugglers.

Beyond simple reporting, his book offers a thorough examination of the socio-political and ecological effects of this illegal trade, which has made the forests of Seshachalam a battlefield for survival for the trees and the people caught up in its web. The scarce manpower and lenient justice for repeated offenders, often shielded by pleas of ignorance and the guise of activism, hinder attempts to counter the smuggling. Yet the book lights a path to resolve this predicament.

Ten well-researched chapters, each focusing on a distinct aspect of the environment surrounding red sanders smuggling, divide the book. It starts with an overview of the economic and cultural significance of red sanders, sometimes referred to as "red gold," before delving deeply into the smuggling racket's operational and historical foundations.

The first few chapters focus on the unique properties of red sanders and their widespread use, particularly in China and Japan, for the production of musical instruments such as the Japanese shamisen, luxury furniture, and 'sex' pills. Rooted in the lore of the Ramayana, Hindus revere red sanders, believing that their touch on the forehead draws one's soul closer to the divine. Hence, cradled by tradition and scarcity, the red sanders command astronomical prices, soaring near two crore rupees per tonne.

The book also describes the growth process and quality of the desired red sander. The price of the wood depends on the age and the environment in which it has grown. The harsh conditions of the forests for about 60-70 years provide the red sanders with a wavy texture, which has a higher market value, unlike the artificial cultivation that produces white sapwood, which has a lower market value.

Udumulu skilfully weaves a tapestry of

ascents and descents. The rise of smugglers and the guardians committed to their downfall coincides with the swift ascent of political figures. The following chapter delves into the intricacies of the smuggling operation, encompassing the participation of local labourers, worldwide mafia networks, sophisticated methods to evade law enforcement, and even a captivating storyline featuring Tollywood celebrities.

Udumulu narrates the sociological and psychological aspects of the smuggling business through isolated cases associated with red sanders. Chapter two provides insight into the harsh realities of places such as Javadi, where the role of foot soldiers in the smuggling business is not only lucrative but often the sole means of securing a livelihood. Entangled in all of these, the fourth chapter delves into the love stories of Sangeeta and Lakshman and Neetu and Mastan. Two pairs bound by love and the perilous world of red sanders.

The book also discusses the state's efforts to combat smuggling, which include the establishment of special task forces and modifications to forestry legislation. Udumula, however, is not afraid to point out the corruption and inefficiencies that undercut these policies.

Events like the 2015 Chittoor encounter, which resulted in the deaths of 20 suspected smugglers, vividly illustrate the bloodshed and human cost associated with this activity in the book. Then there is a narration on the attempts by the state government to sell the confiscated wood and the legality of such auctions and the farmers caught up in the midst of all this.

The narrative then explores the global reach of the smuggling, highlighting the involvement of Chinese actors and markets and the availability of the lower-quality African red sanders available at a mere fraction of the price. The concluding chapter advocates for conservation efforts, recognising administrative shortcomings and emphasising the implemented and potential steps to protect the Red Sanders.

The book weaves several key themes rooted in the tales of red sanders. A community graced with treasures unique to its land must strive collectively to preserve them, as should have been for the red sanders of Seshachalam's dense, dry-deciduous embrace. Red sanders need not be said to be also essential to preserving the ecological balance of the area. Its depletion jeopardises local residents' livelihoods in addition to biodiversity. Udumula cautions that careless tree-cutting may result in the extinction of these species within ten years. He draws attention to how the forest's natural regeneration cycle is upset when mature trees that are valued for their thick heartwood with a girth of 70 cm or over are selectively harvested.

The book reveals the complex network of participants in the trade, ranging from foreign purchasers who drive demand to poor woodcutters forced into illicit forestry. Udumula shows how local workers, frequently from underprivileged areas and disadvantaged social classes like Dalits, are taken advantage of by middlemen and wind up taking the brunt of police activities while the kingpins get away with it. A detailed account of their operations on the specific days is also narrated. The story also examines the function of middlemen, such as the notorious Dawood Shahul Hameed, a wanted criminal who plans schemes from overseas.

The book's thorough examination of the relationship between smugglers and political organisations is among its most important contributions. The clandestine trade of 'red gold' and the labyrinthine corridors of Andhra Pradesh politics intertwine, each shaping the other in a dance of power and profit. The trade is a deeply ingrained issue because of this mutually beneficial connection, which guarantees its continuation. He also highlights the considerable amount of non-cooperation from the forest officials and the police while picking up information for the book.

The international market for red sanders,

especially the immense demand in China, is the subject of the penultimate chapter. Due to its scarcity, the wood has become a status and wealth symbol, which has caused prices to skyrocket, according to Udumula. In order to highlight the problem's worldwide scope, the chapter also discusses the function of cross-border mafias and refugee groups like the Burmese and the usage of hawala networks for money laundering.

The book and Udumula embody strengths that enrich their narrative. The author's ability to do thorough research is evident throughout the book. His narrative gains credibility from his ability to make connections between local and international players, which is supported by two decades of field reporting.

The book is written in an engaging style, with vivid descriptions and real-life tales that keep readers interested despite its heavy subject matter. For example, the chapter on the Chittoor incident, which highlights the moral conundrums confronted by law enforcement, is both compelling and thought-provoking.

The book provides practical suggestions for addressing the Red Sanders dilemma, going beyond simple critique. In order to stop smuggling, Udumula supports stronger enforcement of forestry regulations, community-based conservation initiatives, and increased international collaboration.

The book speaks of timely truths, deepening its relevance and amplifying its reach. Although Blood Sanders is an admirable endeavour, it is not without flaws. The perspectives of local residents that rely on the forest for their livelihoods are occasionally overshadowed by the book's emphasis on exposing the smuggling network. A more comprehensive understanding of the problem might have been achieved by incorporating more viewpoints from these parties, who are important stakeholders. Furthermore, the book occasionally goes into technical issues and official posts that readers who are not familiar with international trade regulations or forestry may find overwhelming. The visual representation of the various local routes would have enhanced readers understanding of the unfamiliar terrains.

Given the growing focus on environmental preservation and the part organised crime plays in resource depletion, the book's release year of 2021 is noteworthy. Policymakers, environmentalists, and the public are all awakened by Udumula's work. It emphasises how urgently sustainable forest management and more stringent anti-smuggling legislation are needed. The book also emphasises how investigative journalism has the power to promote societal change. Udumula has made it possible for more study and campaigning by bringing the problem to light. The Chief Justice of India, Justice N.V. Ramana, stated during the book's launch that the media's role in bringing attention to structural flaws and holding authorities responsible is more important than ever.

Blood Sanders: The Great Forest Heist addresses one of India's most urgent environmental issues in a compelling and topical manner. For anybody interested in investigative journalism, organised crime, or environmental protection, Sudhakar Reddy Udumula's thorough research and captivating story make it an essential study. The book challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with nature and the structures that oversee its exploitation, in addition to providing information. Udumula's work serves as a sobering reminder of the price of complacency in a time when economic expansion frequently takes precedence over ecological concerns. He has made a strong argument for swift and ongoing action to save India's forests and the communities that rely on them by exposing the environmental and human costs of red sander smuggling. Blood Sanders is a call to action for a more just and sustainable future, not merely a novel. ■

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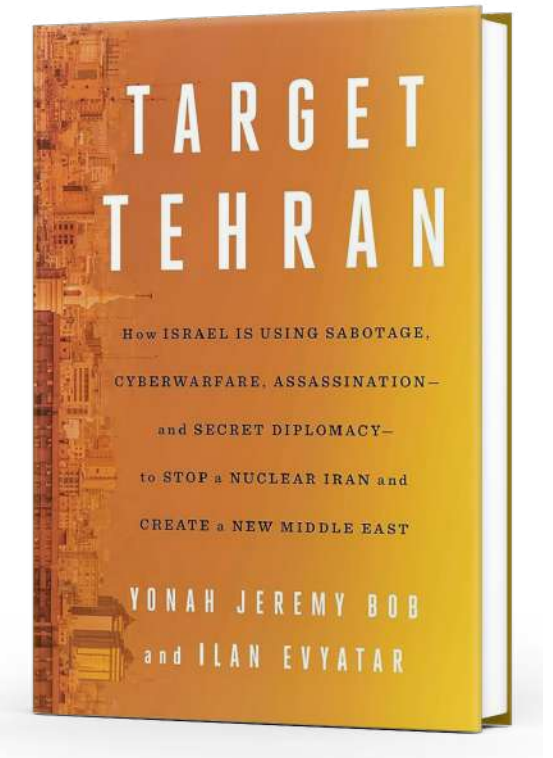

Target Tehran: How Israel Is Using Sabotage, Cyberwarfare, Assassination – and Secret Diplomacy – to Stop a Nuclear Iran and Create a New Middle East by Yonah Jeremy Bob and Ilan Evyatar, Simon & Schuster, 2023

Reviewed by Priyanka Garodia

The world of espionage has captured the attention of people all around the world. Whether it be the debonair James Bond, the agile Jack Ryan or the quick wit of Alec Leamas, intelligence has been sold to people through books, films and TV series. The covert nature of the job, the disguises used, and the highly dangerous nature of the work has been well consumed in popular imaginations. However, there exists a world where espionage and intelligence gathering are not scripted and performed in front of a camera but actually done with real consequences. People who work for their country, who are masters of deception, deal with highly dangerous life-threatening situations that have broader implications for the world. They help topple governments, they assassinate leaders who make things hard for them and have aliases they use to protect their families and often a times even die in service to their nation. 'Tehran Targets: How Israel Is Using Sabotage, Cyberwarfare, Assassination and Secret Diplomacy to Stop a Nuclear Iran and Create a New Middle East' written by Jeremy Bob and Ilan Evyatar, two Israeli journalists, falls nothing short of reading like a spy novel. Exploring the intricate web of Israel's intelligence strategies and their regional implications, the book explores how diplomacy, espionage and intelligence can be used as national security tool to effect change.

The middle east is arguable one of the most volatile geopolitical theatres in contemporary times. The bi-lateral ties between member states are in taters and alliances and deals crumble overnight. Some actors are belligerent and often everyone's national interest calculus is seen as a threat for the other. The region with its cultural heritage, is also foreshadowed with religious wars and differences that seem unsolvable even with modern tools of arbitration. Iran and Israel share a contested past whose repercussions are still felt in the region. Israel's deep suspicion of Iran's nuclear capacities and its worry over the fact that Iran could be lying to the world resulted in one of the largest and most covert intelligence operations carried out by Mossad on foreign soil. The book is a gripping account of how diplomacy and intelligence guided Israel's action against Iran nuclear capacities and later impacted regional dynamics in the Middle East.

The themes that run through the book can be clubbed into groups: the use of diplomacy and its impact on regional dynamics; the changing nature of espionage to include cyberwarfare and its consequences and how US-Israel relations have real time implications for the Middle East.While these themes play out across the ten chapters in the book, the details often appear to be one-sided and lacking the weight of holistic analysis including a complete disregard of non-Arab yet powerful actors in the region like Turkey, Russia or even China. The book while a compelling, fast paced read of fascinating information on Mossad and its greatness, falls a little short of offering a balanced view of the region.

Target Tehran offers its readers a detailed exploration of the intelligence operations carried out by the Mossad in the Middle East particularly against Iran and its nuclear capacities. One of the intended effects of the intelligence missions carried out was to chart a diplomatic path for Israel that helps it influence the regional dynamics with the Arab states. The nexus of this regional banding is a shared concern regarding Iran's belligerence and how its aggression can be counterbalanced in an effective way. The Abraham Accords which were a direct product of one of the largest ops carried out by the Mossad that stole Iranian files on its nuclear capacities, was seen as a historic mission that allowed Israel to become a regional stabiliser.

On the basis of the intelligence it had gather, Israel leveraged covet meeting with countries like Saudi Arabia and UAE to bring to attention Iran's lies. The common concerns shared by these nations allowed them to enter into security alliances that was used to counter Iran and its destabilising moves. Israel implemented new security frameworks in the region and shifted alliances to contain Iranian action. The role of the United States in the matter especially given that it preferred a diplomatic style of affairs to the more hardline and militaristic approach adopted by Israel was highlighted indicating leniency showed to the Iranian side. The authors did not seem too happy with the Unites States in this regard, despite the fact that the CIA and Mossad were deeply embroiled in most missions and share a deep relationship.

While it is hard to argue with such a straightforward analysis, the book would have benefited from a more critical inquiry that firstly spoke on the sustainability of such alliances and secondly, addressed the retaliations and counter alliances that emerged after. One of the direct impacts of the Arab states and Israel banding together was Iran's closer association with the Hezbollah and the Houthis – the nature of which can be seen in today's volatility in the Middle East.

The main crux of Target Tehran lies in the in-depth description it offers of the high-tech, high-end and dangerous intelligence mission that the Mossad carried out to disrupt the Iranian nuclear regime. Whether it be the 2019 Nuclear Heist or the use of Stuxnet virus to cripple Iran's nuclear capacities or the assassination of the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in 2020 – the Mossad is a lethal agency that uses the perfect blend of old school tactics like assassination and new age digital and cyberwarfare to achieve its objects. It has been described as a near-perfect, lethal force that is employed by Israel to neutralise its threats making it an essential cog to its national security apparatus.

The Mossad is often celebrated in its action and not looked at critically. To appear less as propaganda, it becomes important to understand the shortcomings of such institutions as well as it accolades. The risks of the style of Mossad have been most prominently accounted for by Tamir Pardo, former Mossad director. While the authors do mention him, it is in passing without engaging with his point on the sustainability of such intelligence missions in the long term and its effectiveness. Along with this, the implications for international norms and the potential fallback of such operations including copycat behaviour have also not been given much thought. The lack of

accountability as displayed by the Mossad should not be glorified internationally but engaged with more critically given the very real consequences that these organisations have especially with respect to life and death and even human rights. They have shortcomings as displayed by the October 7th Hamas attack, mentioning which would have helped their readers create a more informed view of things.

The close partnership shared by the US and Israel has been addressed by the authors in the book especially with respect to Iran's nuclear capacities. While the United States and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were willing to cooperate with Iran, the intelligence gathered by Israel that pointed to the use of nuclear energy for weapons purposes, resulted in the JCPOA being disbanded. Israel was enraged on the discover and demanded swift and militaristic responses where the Americans stressed a more diplomatic path of engagement. This did not bode well with the Israelis and was seen as leniency by the Americans. The section tends to slip into a more advocative prose rather than a balanced examination of rationalities behind state action. This often leads readers away from forming more informed opinions on what is going on.

The strengths on Target Tehran rests on its ability to captivate readers from the first page – it takes you through a ride that often reads more like fiction than non-fiction. The meticulous research done by the authors is evident in the details given and it displays the ability to simplify complicated geopolitical issues. While the book favours a more dramatic style of prose over analysis – an intended effect of this could easily be the trivialisation of long-tern effects of such action.

Intelligence is fallible, the Mossad could fail and often does and sometimes calculations do not pay off. Intelligence is a human product and espionage even when done well can still be subject to mistakes. To understand this and to then analysis perhaps one of the greatest intelligence organisations in the world would be a more convincing argument. The ethical and moral domains of the world of counterintelligence is given a cursory glance by the authors and roadmap they offer for regional affairs is often overshadowed by their dramatic style of writing. Bob and Evyatar offer readers a highly valuable lens to analyse the changing nature of cyberwarfare, diplomacy and espionage but they do so imperfectly. The full appreciation of the gravitas of the forces at play and their consequences is severely lacking in the book. ■

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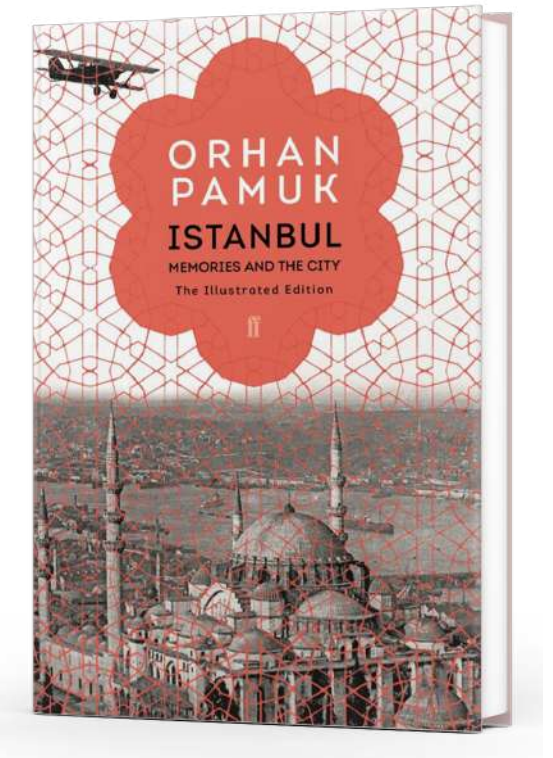


Istanbul (Deluxe Edition): Memories and the City by Orhan Pamuk, Knopf; 2017

Reviewed by Khushi Kesari

Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul: Memories and the City is both a deeply personal memoir and a poignant tribute to the city of Istanbul. As a Nobel laureate and one of Turkey's most celebrated authors, Pamuk is known for exploring themes of memory, cultural identity, and the tension between East and West. Originally published in 2003 and translated into English by Maureen Freely in 2005, this book captures Pamuk's reflections on growing up in Istanbul during a time of cultural and political change. It combines his personal memories with an exploration of Istanbul's history, architecture, and unique character.

The memoir is more than just a chronicle of Pamuk's early life; it is a reflection on how cities shape people and vice versa. Pamuk portrays Istanbul as a city of contrasts—rich in its past yet burdened by the melancholy of its decline. This unique mood, which he calls hüzün, permeates the book.

Pamuk's Istanbul is not the vibrant, cosmopolitan city often romanticised in travel literature. Instead, it is a land of fading grandeur, with streets haunted by the ruins of Ottoman history and the weight of modernism.

This review examines how Pamuk uses his relationship with Istanbul to reflect on broader themes of identity, memory, and cultural change. Through his evocative descriptions, he transforms Istanbul into a metaphor for both personal and collective experiences. The analysis will highlight the book's strengths, including its lyrical style and rich cultural insights, while critically engaging with its limitations, such as its introspective lens that prioritises the author's perspective over other voices.

The review aims to explore how Istanbul: Memories and the City beautifully blends the personal with the universal, crafting a rich narrative that resonates with readers from all walks of life.

In Istanbul: Memories and the City, Orhan Pamuk reflects on his upbringing and early adulthood in Istanbul, creating a portrait of both the city and himself. The book is set in the mid-twentieth century, a time when Istanbul was undergoing considerable transition as the Ottoman Empire declined and the new Turkish Republic emerged. Pamuk recounts his experiences growing up

in a once-wealthy family in the Nişantaşı district, a neighborhood shaped by European influences. His narrative reveals the tensions within his family, including their fading fortunes and their mixed embrace of Westernisation.

Pamuk's personal journey unfolds alongside Istanbul's changing identity. The book is divided into 37 chapters, each blending his own memories with reflections on the city's architecture, history, and culture. Pamuk revisits his childhood fascination with painting, his admiration for Istanbul's crumbling mansions and forgotten streets, and his eventual decision to become a writer. He frequently explores the idea of hüzün, a Turkish word for a collective sense of melancholy. For Pamuk, this feeling defines both his inner world and the spirit of Istanbul, rooted in the city's history of loss and disconnection.

A distinctive feature of the memoir is how it situates Pamuk's personal narrative within Istanbul's broader cultural and literary context. Pamuk draws on the works of European writers like Gustave Flaubert and Theophile Gautier, who romanticised Istanbul, as well as Turkish authors such as Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, who captured the city's shifting identity. Through these influences, Pamuk bridges the gap between Istanbul's Ottoman past and its modern struggles, presenting the city as a metaphor for cultural hybridity.

The memoir also integrates visual elements, including black-and-white photographs by Ara Güler, which evoke the fading beauty of Istanbul's landscapes. These images complement Pamuk's lyrical prose, creating a multisensory experience for the reader. The book's fragmented structure mirrors the way memory operates, allowing Pamuk to piece together his past while exploring Istanbul's layers of history.

Orhan Pamuk's memoir, reveals a profound and intimate connection between the author and his native city. For Pamuk, Istanbul is not merely a setting but an integral part of his identity. He explicitly acknowledges this bond, stating, "Istanbul's fate is my fate." This statement encapsulates the central theme of the memoir: the intertwining of personal memory with the city's history and culture. Throughout the book, Istanbul becomes both a metaphor for Pamuk's inner life and a canvas on which he paints his reflections on loss, identity, and transformation.

One of the most striking aspects of Pamuk's relationship with Istanbul is his exploration of hüzün, a Turkish concept describing a deep sense of melancholy. Unlike Western notions of individual melancholy, hüzün is collective, rooted in Istanbul's history of decline and its struggle to reconcile its Ottoman past with its modern identity. Pamuk finds hüzün in the remains of old wooden homes, narrow, foggy lanes, and remains of Ottoman grandeur. He does not mourn these losses in isolation but connects them to the shared disillusionment of a city caught between East and West. This melancholy, Pamuk suggests, is not merely a source of sadness but also a form of pride and resilience. It binds Istanbul's inhabitants to their history, shaping their identity as much as the physical cityscape does.

Pamuk's relationship with Istanbul is deeply ambivalent. On one hand, he romanticises the city's crumbling beauty, finding inspiration in its ruins and silences. On the other hand, he is critical of the modernisation efforts that sought to erase Istanbul's Ottoman heritage. He describes the post-war city as "black and white," a place stripped of its vibrancy and diminished in the eyes of the world. Yet, Pamuk resists idealising the past. Instead, he embraces Istanbul's contradictions—its simultaneous beauty and decay, its grandeur and decline—as reflections of his own identity.

As Pamuk walks through the backstreets of Istanbul, he meditates on the duality of the city. He imagines "another Istanbul," hidden beneath the postcard-perfect images of mosques and the Bosphorus. This imagined city represents the soul of Istanbul, one that is often overlooked in favor of its touristic

appeal. Pamuk also creates parallels between his personal identity and Istanbul's. Just as the city oscillates between Eastern and Western influences, Pamuk himself navigates the tension between tradition and modernity. This duality becomes a defining feature of the memoir, transforming Istanbul from a backdrop into a dynamic character.

Ultimately, Pamuk's relationship with Istanbul is as much about self-discovery as it is about the city itself. By weaving together his personal memories with Istanbul's collective history, Pamuk creates a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally resonant. Istanbul, for him, is more than a city; it is a mirror of his struggles, aspirations, and creative imagination.

Istanbul: Memories and the City occupies a unique space within both Turkish and global literature. While it is a deeply personal memoir, it also functions as a broader commentary on the cultural and historical identity of Istanbul. Pamuk situates his narrative within a rich literary tradition, drawing parallels between his own experiences and those of other writers who have depicted Istanbul. This intertextual approach gives the memoir a layered complexity, blending autobiography with literary and cultural analysis.

A key influence on Pamuk's portrayal of Istanbul is the work of European travelers such as Gustave Flaubert, Gerard de Nerval, and Theophile Gautier. These writers visited Istanbul in the 19th century, capturing its exoticism through a Western lens. Pamuk engages with their works critically, acknowledging their romanticised portrayals while also recognising their impact on how Istanbul is perceived globally. In doing so, he presents himself as both an insider and an outsider, using what he terms a "double gaze." He sees Istanbul from his own intimate experiences while also thinking how it may look to outsiders. With this dual perspective, Pamuk is able to bridge the gap between the city's Eastern and Western tales.

Pamuk also draws heavily on the works of Turkish authors such as Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar and Yahya Kemal, who explored Istanbul's transformation during the early Republican era. These writers mourned the loss of the Ottoman Empire and grappled with the imposition of modernity. Pamuk extends their themes by examining how these tensions persist in contemporary Istanbul. However, unlike his predecessors, Pamuk avoids nationalist sentiment, instead focusing on the universal aspects of Istanbul's identity. His memoir becomes a dialogue between Turkish and Western literary traditions, highlighting the city's role as a cultural crossroads.

Another important part of the memoir is the incorporation of visual elements. The use of black-and-white images by Ara Güler and others lends credibility to Pamuk's story while underlining the themes of memory and loss. These photographs, which frequently reflect the crumbling grandeur of Istanbul's architecture, serve as visual accompaniments to Pamuk's writing. They capture the city's hüzün in ways that words alone cannot, strengthening the reader's connection to the story.

Pamuk's writing style is influenced by modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust. His fragmented structure, which alternates between personal experiences and historical narratives, reflects the way memory works. Pamuk uses this style to look at the diversity of Istanbul's identity, portraying it as a mosaic of experiences, emotions, and histories. The ultimate result is a book that goes beyond the scope of autobiography, providing readers with a sophisticated grasp of Istanbul as both a real and imagined location.

In its cultural and literary context, Istanbul: Memories and the City stands as a testament to the power of storytelling to capture the essence of a place. Pamuk's ability to weave together personal and collective narratives situates the memoir as a significant contribution to both Turkish and world literature. By reflecting on Istanbul's past and

present, Pamuk creates a work that is as much about the human experience as it is about the city itself.

Istanbul: Memories and the City is a work that carefully integrates the personal with the collective, creating a vivid portrayal of Orhan Pamuk's inner world as well as Istanbul's fluctuating identity. While the memoir succeeds in capturing the spirit of the city through its melancholy beauty and Pamuk's contemplative style, it also raises challenges about perspective and scale.

Pamuk's ability to intertwine his personal journey with Istanbul's history is one of the memoir's most compelling features. By using his own life as a lens, he creates a vivid and intimate portrait of the city that is deeply relatable yet distinctly unique. His exploration of hüzün is particularly striking. Rather of portraying communal sorrow as solely negative, Pamuk imbues it with dignity and strength. He defines hüzün as a common cultural experience that shapes Istanbul's character, providing readers with a comprehensive grasp of how cities may embody emotions.

The memoir's structure is another of its strong points. Pamuk uses a fragmented narrative, shifting between personal experiences and larger cultural views. This method mimics how memory works, giving a sense of authenticity and depth. Pamuk's childhood memories and reflections on Istanbul's architecture, history, and literature alternate effortlessly across the chapters. For example, his comments on Istanbul's deteriorating wooden homes elicit both personal melancholy and a wider criticism on cultural decline. This dual perspective strengthens the tale by allowing Pamuk to discuss universal concerns within the setting of Istanbul.

The incorporation of black-and-white images strengthens the memoir's impact. These photographs, many of which illustrate the city's deteriorating beauty, act as a visual extension of Pamuk's narrative. They capture Hüzün's texture in a way that enhances his words and strengthens the reader's connection to the story. The collaboration with photographer Ara Güler underscores the memoir's multisensory approach, making the book not just a memoir but a visual and emotional experience.

Pamuk's prose is lyrical and evocative, transforming Istanbul into a character in its own right. His descriptions of the Bosphorus, the foggy streets of Nişantaşı, and the remnants of Ottoman grandeur are filled with vivid imagery and emotional depth. For example, his descriptions of nighttime walks through Istanbul's backstreets capture both the solitude of his inner world and the silent grandeur of Istanbul's forgotten corners. These passages are not only wonderfully written, but also deeply contemplative, giving readers an insight into how cities develop and are shaped by their residents.

While Istanbul: Memories and the City delves deeply into memory and location, it has several limits. One criticism is its very subjective viewpoint. As a memoir, Pamuk's experiences and feelings define the book, often overshadowing other viewpoints on Istanbul. His narrative focuses mostly on his own relationship with the city, with little engagement with the voices and tales of other residents.

For example, while he discusses Istanbul's cultural richness in the past, including its Greek, Armenian, and Jewish populations, these topics frequently appear secondary to his own experience. This personal emphasis, while appealing, limits the memoir's reach.

Another critique concerns the portrayal of Istanbul's modern transformation. Pamuk often laments the loss of the city's Ottoman heritage, describing modernisation as a force that erases history and identity. While this perspective is powerful, it risks romanticising the past and underrepresenting the complexities of urban development. Istanbul's modernisation, for many, also represents progress and opportunity, particularly for communities seeking better living conditions. Pamuk's emphasis on decay and melancholy,

though beautifully articulated, may not resonate with readers who view the city through a more optimistic lens.

Furthermore, the memoir's fragmentary structure, while evocative of memory, can sometimes appear disconnected. The swings between personal experiences and historical articles, while thematically related, may challenge readers who prefer a more linear narrative. The literary and historical observations occasionally disrupt Pamuk's personal experience, making the book feel uneven. While this strategy adds complexity, it necessitates a certain degree of patience and attention from the reader.

Pamuk's portrayal of hüzün also invites critical reflection. While he frames it as a defining feature of Istanbul, some critics argue that this melancholy is more reflective of Pamuk's own experiences than a universal truth about the city. The concept of hüzün may not resonate equally with all Istanbulites, particularly those from different social or cultural backgrounds. This raises questions about whether Pamuk's Istanbul is truly representative of the city or primarily a projection of his own identity.

Despite its limitations, Istanbul: Memories and the City remains a significant work that contributes to our understanding of how cities are experienced and remembered. Pamuk's exploration of hüzün challenges readers to think about the emotional dimensions of urban life, highlighting how personal and collective memories shape our relationship with place. His narrative raises wider themes about storytelling's function in maintaining cultural legacy, particularly in rapidly changing cities.

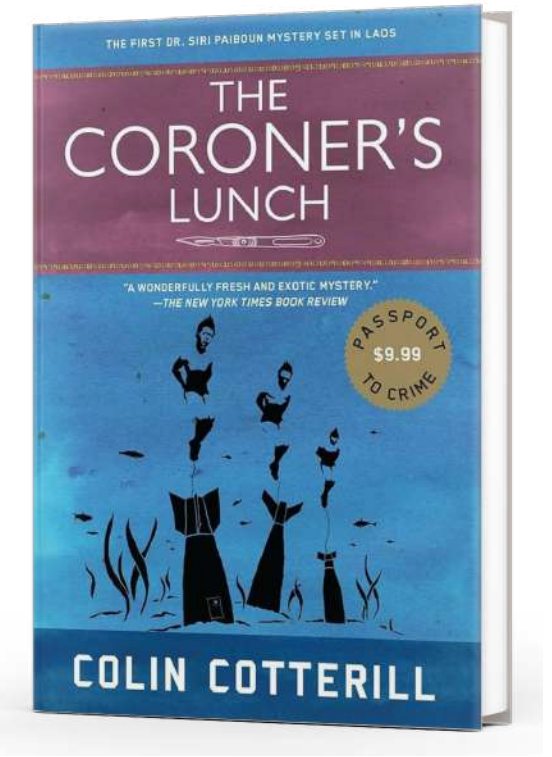
Pamuk's dual perspective, as both an insider and an outsider, lends another dimension of complexity to his story. He bridges cultural differences by drawing on both Turkish and Western literary traditions, presenting Istanbul as a hybrid environment. This method not only enhances the story, but also establishes Istanbul as a work that crosses national and cultural barriers.

Istanbul: Memories and the City is a tribute to the city Orhan Pamuk calls home, blending his personal experiences with Istanbul's layered history. Through Orhan Pamuk's lyrical prose, Istanbul emerges not merely as a city but as a living presence, reflecting the contradictions of tradition and modernity, loss and resilience, East and West. Central to this narrative is the concept of hüzün, a collective melancholy that Pamuk identifies as the essence of Istanbul's soul. This exploration imbues the memoir with a profound emotional resonance, drawing readers into the layered complexities of a city shaped by its history and its people.

Pamuk's ability to intertwine personal memory with broader cultural reflections gives the book its richness. His observations, whether on the crumbling mansions of Nişantaşı or the silences of his childhood home, resonate as much with a universal longing for the past as they do with Istanbul's unique character. However, the memoir is not without its challenges. Its introspective focus sometimes limits the representation of Istanbul's diversity, and its emphasis on loss risks overshadowing the dynamism of the city's present. Yet these critiques are also what make Pamuk's vision so distinct—a deeply personal rendering of a city that, for him, is inseparable from his own identity.

In its final essence, Istanbul: Memories and the City is a celebration of memory and place as the foundations of both storytelling and self-understanding. Pamuk reminds us that cities are more than their physical structures; they are repositories of history, emotion, and imagination. By capturing Istanbul in all its contradictions, Pamuk creates a work that is as much about the universal human experience as it is about his own. This memoir leaves readers not only with a portrait of Istanbul but also with a renewed appreciation for the enduring bond between people and the places they call home ■.

book reviews.



Dr. Siri Paiboun Series by Colin Cotterill, Soho Crime

Reviewed by Amogh Dev Rai

We meet Dr. Siri Paiboun sometime in 1976; he is an old revolutionary who was trained as a doctor in France; the communists have taken over Laos, the royal family has been deposed, professional classes have fled, and when a senior Laos leader is dead, the old revolutionary doctor is made the national coroner of the country without any training or enthusiasm for the job. Thus begins one of the most enjoyable series I have come across on Laos.

The Dr. Siri Paiboun series by Colin Cotterill takes readers on an unforgettable journey into post-revolutionary Laos through the eyes of an unforgettable protagonist: the 70-something national coroner who never cared for the job and, having been a revolutionary, does not really care for his colleagues now in power. The first book, The Coroner's Lunch, is set in 1975 and the series spans15 novels; the series weaves historical fiction, mystery, and elements of magical realism into a rich tapestry that transcends genre conventions; it is also a great introduction to Laos, its history, culture, and in general a lamentation on the tragedy of revolutions.

Dr. Siri Paiboun is one of the most intriguing characters in modern mystery fiction. A Paris-trained doctor and longtime communist revolutionary, he becomes Laos's national coroner after the Pathet Lao victory. An unexpected gift matches his medical knowledge: he learns that he is the vehicle for an ancient Hmong shaman whose spirit brings both insight and considerable inconvenience to his investigations. Rather than using these supernatural elements as easy solutions, Cotterill integrates them naturally into the spiritual fabric of Laotian culture, where they serve to deepen both the atmosphere and Siri's character development.

Just as well-developed are the members of the supporting cast. Nurse Dtui, based on a real nurse Cotterill met during his own stay in a Laotian hospital, has a quick wit and practical sensibilities to bring to the investigations. Siri's old friend Civilai, who is also a member of the politburo and as powerful as one can be but still manages to retain a sense of irony and humour, brings political insights and late-night drinking companionship to ponder how they fit into the revolution's aftermath. Each character feels fully realised, their relationships evolving naturally across the series. There is a rich cast of characters

Geung, who suffers from Down's syndrome but is the best help that Siri and Dtui could have asked for in the morgue, we encounter Madam Daeng who plays Siri's love interest and was once an assassin for the revolution.

The years Colin Cotterill spent living in Laos and recording local stories for a development organisation infuses the novels with authentic detail. The writing captures both the physical sensations of oppressive heat before monsoons, terrible hospital coffee, constant mosquitoes, and complex social and political dynamics of 1970s Southeast Asia.

The mysteries themselves are intricately plotted, often featuring multiple cases that fit together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle which Siri has to untangle. Above all what stands apart with this series is its feeling for place and time. As experienced through Siri's eyes, we witness a pivotal historical moment: the early years of communist Laos, marked by idealism, contradiction, and challenge. Political change, cultural preservation, personal integrity or lack thereof, and entertaining qualities of detective fiction are on display throughout the series.

For mystery readers looking for more than just puzzle-solving, the Dr. Siri Paiboun series holds rich rewards. Taken on their own, the books are great mysteries but read together; they form a continuing narrative of friendship and political change, all wrapped around one reluctant coroner's late-life journey into an unexpected calling. This series does well to show how the mystery is used as a vehicle to explore memory, history, and changing contours of culture, as well as the human condition, without losing the essential need to tell a good, gripping story.

The novels are best appreciated from the start with The Coroner's Lunch since the character relationships and historical context build meaningfully across the series. However, Cotterill's masterful writing ensures that each book also stands alone while contributing to the larger tapestry of narrative. The series is an outstanding achievement in cross-cultural storytelling, bringing a pivotal period of Southeast Asian history to life through the eyes of one of crime fiction's most unique and engaging detectives.

In Dr. Siri Paiboun's series, Colin Cotterill masterfully weaves the complex history of the Laotian Civil War and its aftermath into the narrative fabric of his mysteries. The series begins in 1975, just after the Pathet Lao communist movement took control of Laos, following a conflict that had become inextricably entangled with the larger Vietnam War and the Cold War power struggles in Southeast Asia.

A true revolutionary of communist ideals, Siri spent years battling as a communist fighter and doctor in the jungle, rising as high as Major General in the Vietnamese communist army. Our doctor is cynical about how those ideals are being implemented, which adds depth to the series' exploration of this post-revolutionary Laos. Stories disclose how the country became known as the "Land of a Million Elephants and the CIA" during the war years, when American forces conducted a "secret war" that made Laos, per capita, the most heavily bombed nation in history. A fact that historians beyond South East Asia have largely forgotten.

Cotterill subtly weaves into the narrative historical elements like the Hmong people's role in the conflict on the losing side and, upon the end of the civil war, the persecution they face from the state; the Hmong people have rich spiritual traditions, which come alive through Siri's shamanic connections.

The books are full of details on the war's lasting legacy: unexploded bombs that continue to menace civilians, complex relationships with communist Vietnam and capitalist Thailand, and the difficulties of rebuilding society after decades of war. Through characters like Siri's friend Civilai, we get a glimpse of the ideological battles within the revolutionary movement itself as former fighters adapt to being bureaucrats, administrators, and statesmen.

The series excels in showing how the war affected daily life in Laos after its end. Siri's morgue struggles with even basic supplies, reflecting economic challenges in the post-war period. Soviet advisors with very little advice, disgruntled Vietnamese allies suspicious of Laotian's growing fondness for the Chinese, and suspicions of Western influences make for a rich backdrop of mysteries. Even elements apparently straightforward, like the disgusting coffee Siri grumbles about, resonate with broader themes about historical trade restrictions and economic disaster under the new government.

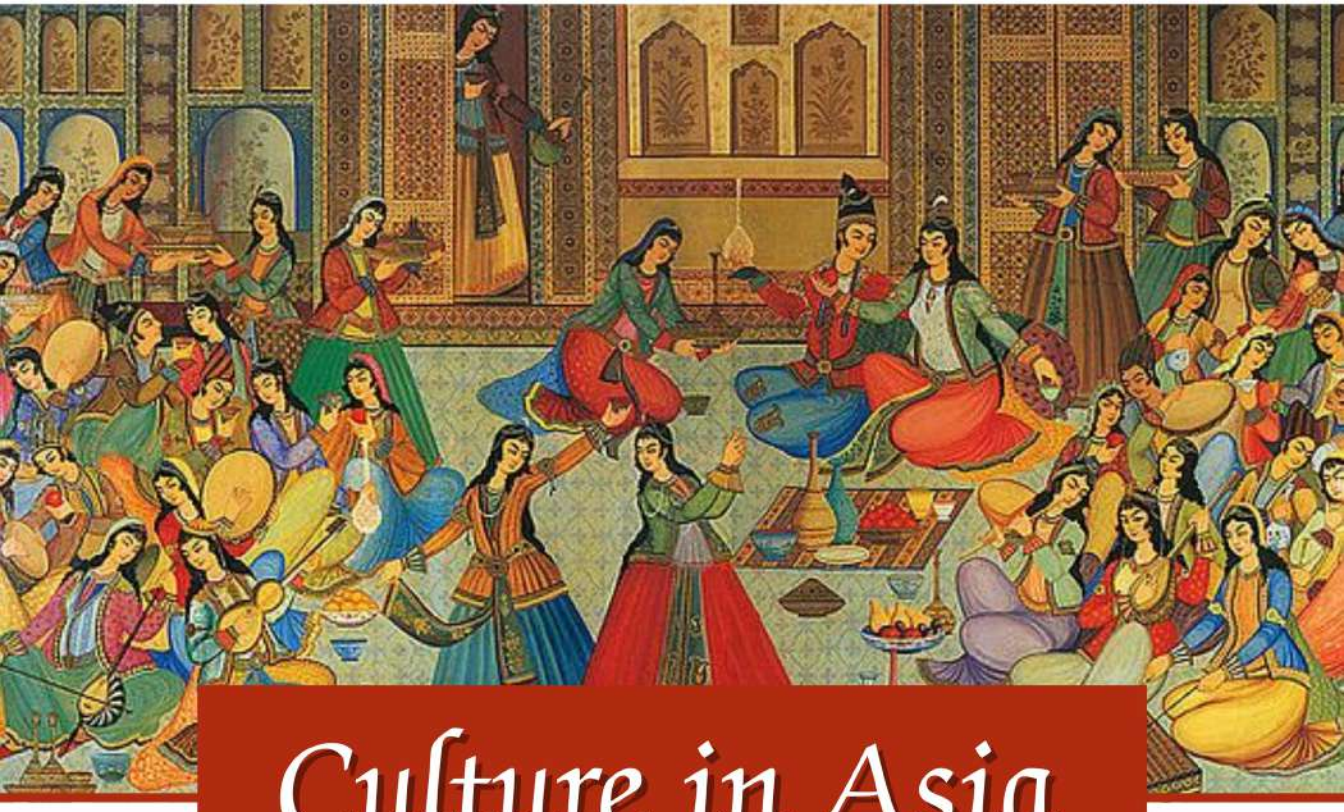
It is particularly effective in how history naturally emerges from character interactions and plot developments. Rather than delivering lessons in history, the series shows how past events affect present investigations. The legacy of war pops up in all sorts of ways: a corpse may be linked to old CIA operations, a murder investigation may trace back to wartime allegiances, or a seemingly simple case may unveil intricate international intrigue from the conflict years.

Through it all, Siri's unique position as both a former revolutionary and a pragmatic problem-solver allows him to navigate the complex political and social landscape of post-war Laos. His investigations often reveal how the idealism of the revolution confronts the realities of governance and how larger historical forces shaped individual lives. In fact, the series is a triumph both as an assortment of intriguing mysteries and as an insightful study into one of the most crucial periods of Southeast Asian history, shaping the region still.

These historical elements contribute depth to the mysteries without overwhelming them, making a series that educates as it entertains. Cotterill's own extensive research, as well as first-hand experience in the region, shines through in the authentic details and complex characterisations, making Dr Siri books valuable both in terms of being historical fiction and detective novels.

The Pathet Lao's inadequacies as a governmental authority are a recurring theme throughout the Dr Siri series, depicted in darkly humorous observations or very serious consequences. In this series of books, Cotterill shows how the revolution's effectiveness in fighting a guerrilla war was not duplicated by the practicalities of governing the country or how managing the economy is slightly more complicated than the dialectics of Marx or Mao.

The series tells the story of the continuous trial and error with which the daily operations of the morgue have to be managed, where threats, pleas, and bribery are ever present as formaldehyde. Yet this is not a jaundiced view of a great country; it is an empathy-laden account of a people making their way through a bureaucracy in the making. Cotterill portrays Laos in a nuanced rather than purely critical light. In characters like Siri and Civilai, we observe how even committed revolutionaries could hold to their principles while recognising the failure of their movement in governance. It is implied that these issues were not just a matter of ideology but practical issues in turning a guerrilla movement into an administrative state in a country ravaged by years of war and foreign interventions. So if you can pick up any of the 15 books featuring the good doctor, you will enjoy a crackling tale told well, with just the right dash of history coupled with a whodunit to keep you working through the pages. ■



Culture in Asia

Where to Go...

Jahn-e-Rekhta

Date: 13-14-15 December 2024

Venue: JLN Stadium, New Delhi

Jashn-e-Rekhta is a vibrant three-day festival celebrating Urdu's beauty through its language, literature, and cultural heritage. Experience Ghazals, Qawwalis, poetry symposiums, and Sufi melodies in this rich showcase of art and tradition.

20th Edition of the Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops

Date: 7 - 16 February 2025

Venue: Siem Reap, Cambodia

The Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops is an annual event in Siem Reap, Cambodia, celebrating photography as a medium of storytelling and social engagement. The festival includes exhibitions, projection evenings, and workshops, offering opportunities for photographers worldwide to showcase their work and connect with audiences.

What to Play...

Civilization VI (Khmer)

Sid Meier's Civilization VI is a dynamic strategy game where players guide their civilisation through diplomacy, warfare, and culture from ancient times to modernity. The Khmer and Indonesia Civilization & Scenario Pack adds depth with unique leaders, units, and the "Path to Nirvana" scenario, emphasising religious expansion. Features like Angkor Wat, Ha Long Bay, and gameplay mechanics enhance the immersive experience for casual and seasoned gamers alike.

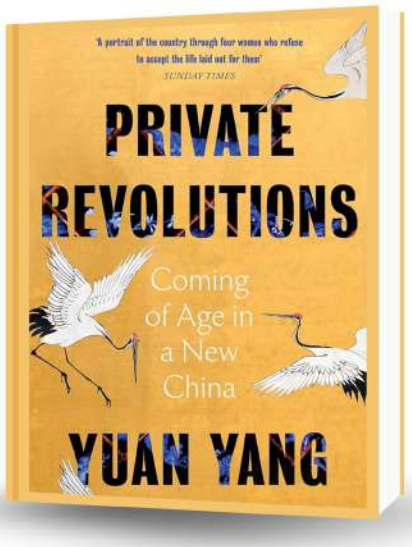
Kabaret

Kabaret is a dark fantasy visual novel inspired by Southeast Asian folklore, blending storytelling with adventure elements and the traditional art of 'wayang kulit' shadow puppetry. Players follow Jebat, a cursed boy-turned-monster, navigating the mythical realm of Alam Bunian through tea ceremonies and encounters with supernatural beings. The game features traditional music in Bahasa, folktale-inspired creatures, and mini-games like Congkak, celebrating Malaysian cultural heritage.

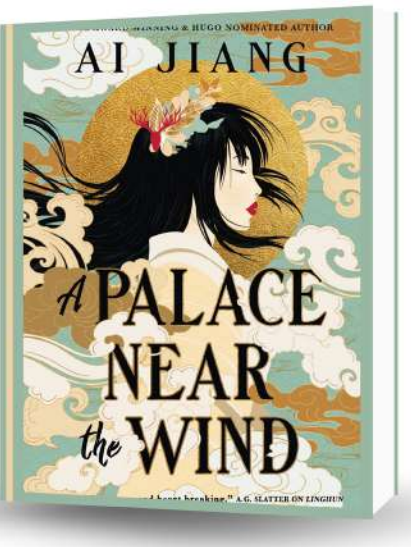
What to Read...

Hwang Bo-reum (Author), Shanna Tan (Translator)
Bloomsbury Pub Plc USA
Date: February 2024

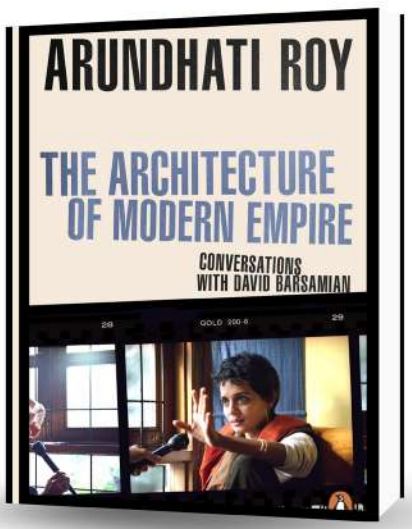
Eve J. Chung
Publisher: Berkley
Date: May 2024



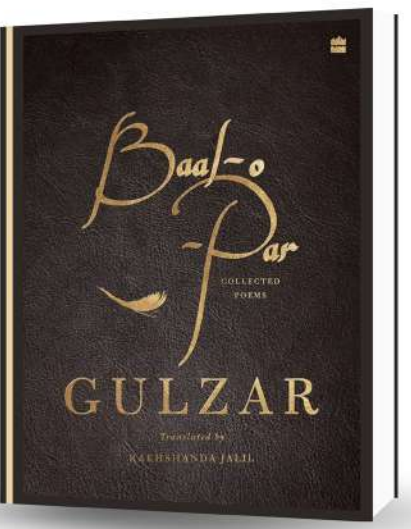
Yuan Yang
Publisher: Viking
Date: July 2024



Ai Jiang
Publisher: Titan Books
Date: April 2025



Arundhati Roy
Publisher: Penguin Books
Date: June 2024



Gulzar (Translation by Rakhshanda Jalil)
Publisher: HarperCollins India
Date: January 2024

What to Watch...

Between the White Key and the Black Key

By Tominaga Masanori

Cast
Kuda Daiskei
Yoriko Dôguchi
Kenzo Fukutsu

In a bold reimagining of the biopic, this ensemble drama transforms jazz pianist Minami Hiroshi's memoir into a surreal, playful tale of dreams, disillusionment, and the inner lives of artists. Ikematsu Sosuke portrays two versions of Minami —the naive newcomer and the jaded veteran—who cross paths in Ginza's seedy alleys and jazz clubs over one fateful night, encountering a cast of vibrant characters.

Big World

by Yang Lina

Cast
Jackson Yee
Diana Lin
Jiang Qinqin
Zhou Yutong

Big World, directed by Yang Lina, follows Chunhu, a resilient young man with cerebral palsy, as he balances helping with his grandmother's stage play and preparing for college exams. Featuring Jackson Yee, Diana Lin, and Jiang Qinqin, the film explores family dynamics and societal integration, with music by Kobayashi Takeshi.

What to Watch...

Sima's Song
By Roya Sadat

Cast
Mozhdah Jamalzadah
Niloufar Koukhani
Aziz Deildar
Leena Alam

Set in 1978 Afghanistan during the shift to socialism, Sima's Song explores the lives of two college girls—one a wealthy communist, the other a poor Muslim—amid the Soviet invasion and the rise of anti-Soviet forces. The film delves into the nation's overlooked 1970s history, portraying personal and societal upheaval during this turbulent era.

The Colors Within
By Yamada Naoko

Cast
Suzukawa Sayu
Takaishi Akari
Kido Taisei
Aragaki Yui

Totsuko, a high schooler with the unique ability to perceive people's "colors," forms a band with her friends Kimi, whose color is exceptionally beautiful, and Rui, a passionate music lover. Directed by visionary filmmaker Yamada Naoko, this highly anticipated original animated film delves into the themes of music, friendship, and adolescence.

Knowledge Events

The **16th Asian Conference on the Social Sciences (ACSS2025),** organised by the International Academic Forum (IAFOR) and Osaka University, will take place from 11 to 16 May, 2025, at the Toshi Center Hotel in Tokyo, Japan. In collaboration with the IAFOR Research Centre, ACSS2025 aims to foster interdisciplinary dialogue among scholars and policymakers to tackle global challenges. The event will run alongside related conferences on cultural studies and humanities, offering a platform for broad academic exchange and collaboration. Link : https://acss.iafor.org/

The **11th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD)** will be held from 20-23 February , 2024, at the UN Conference Centre in Bangkok and online. It focuses on accelerating progress toward the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development amidst crises, emphasizing resilience, inclusivity, and innovation. The forum brings together diverse stakeholders to review key SDGs, share best practices, and develop policy recommendations.

Link: https://www.unescap.org/events/apfsd11

Geotech Asia 2025, organized by the International Society for Soil Mechanics and Geotechnical Engineering (ISSMGE), the Indian Geotechnical Society, and the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, will be held from 7 to 10 October, 2025 at the Taj Cidade De Goa Horizon, Goa. Under the theme "GeoVadis: The Future of Geotechnical Engineering," with a focus on sustainability and advanced technologies. Link: https://geotechasia.org/

The **Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Conference 2025,** organised by the Center of Geosocial and Cultural Research for Sustainable Development at Walailak University, will take place from 23 to 25 July, 2025 in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand. This year's theme, "Geo-Social Connection: The Continuing Journey of Critical Inquiry," highlights the intersection of geography and society in shaping knowledge production across Asia. With a rich history of fostering intellectual exchange, IACS 2025 will bring together scholars and researchers to collaborate on innovative approaches to cultural and social studies. Link: https://iacs2025.com/

Monsoon: The Sphere of Cultural and Trade Influence, organized by the Advanced Study Institute of Asia in collaboration with Indira Gandhi National Centre of Arts and Ministry of Culture, Government of India, will take place in February 2025 in New Delhi The theme of the conference studies the long ties of India with other Southeast and South Asian Countries, with a focus on trade and cultural transmission and amalgamation of Idea and values. The Conference will bring together scholars, researchers and professionals from diverse fields. The research works presented at the conference will be compiled into a book.

What to Listen...

Asian World Podcast with Dr. Michael Hawkins

Join Professor Michael Hawkins, Ph.D., on a captivating journey through Asian history and culture, exploring the influence of empires, kingdoms, and the resilience of Asian peoples in shaping the region's unique identity.

Eat Drink Asia | Podcast on Spotify By South China Morning Post

Eat Drink Asia is a popular podcast exploring the hidden histories of Asia's iconic dishes. SCMP journalists uncover the stories behind beloved foods, drinks, and condiments, with insights from chefs and culinary experts across the region.

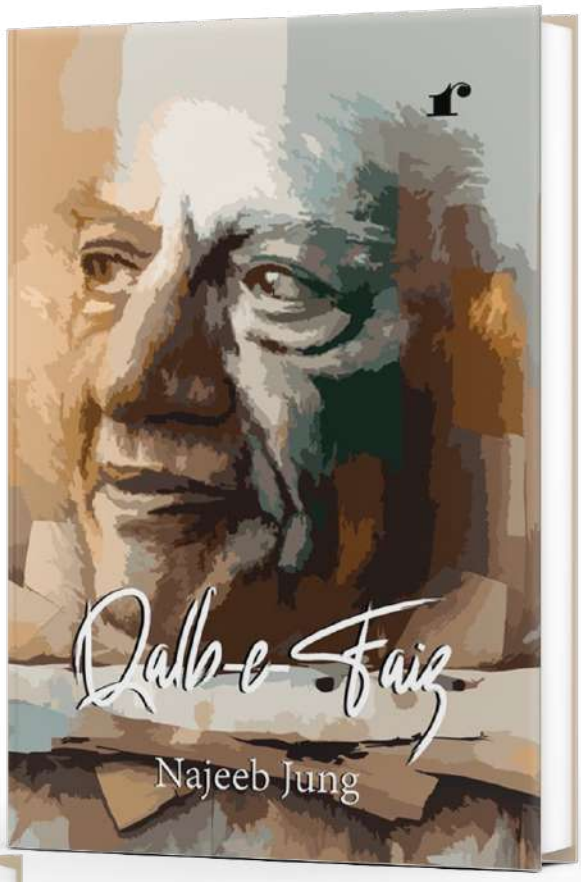
Qalb-e-Faiz

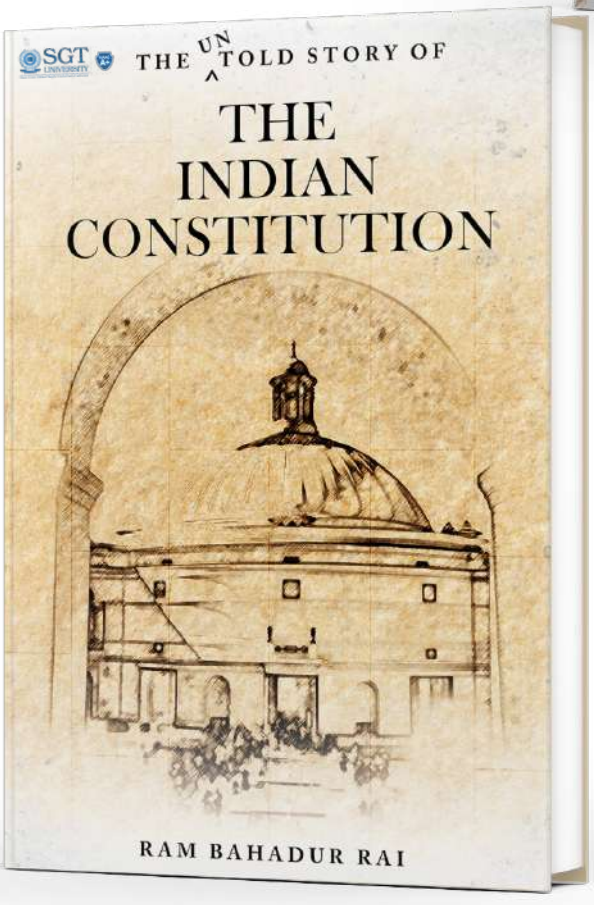
Najeeb H. Jung

Publisher: ***Rekhta Publications***

ISBN: 978-81-978557-9-5

Releasing 15th December, 2024





The Untold Story of The Indian Constitution

Ram Bahadur Rai

*Publisher:****SGT University***

ISBN: 978-93-92787-95-9

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