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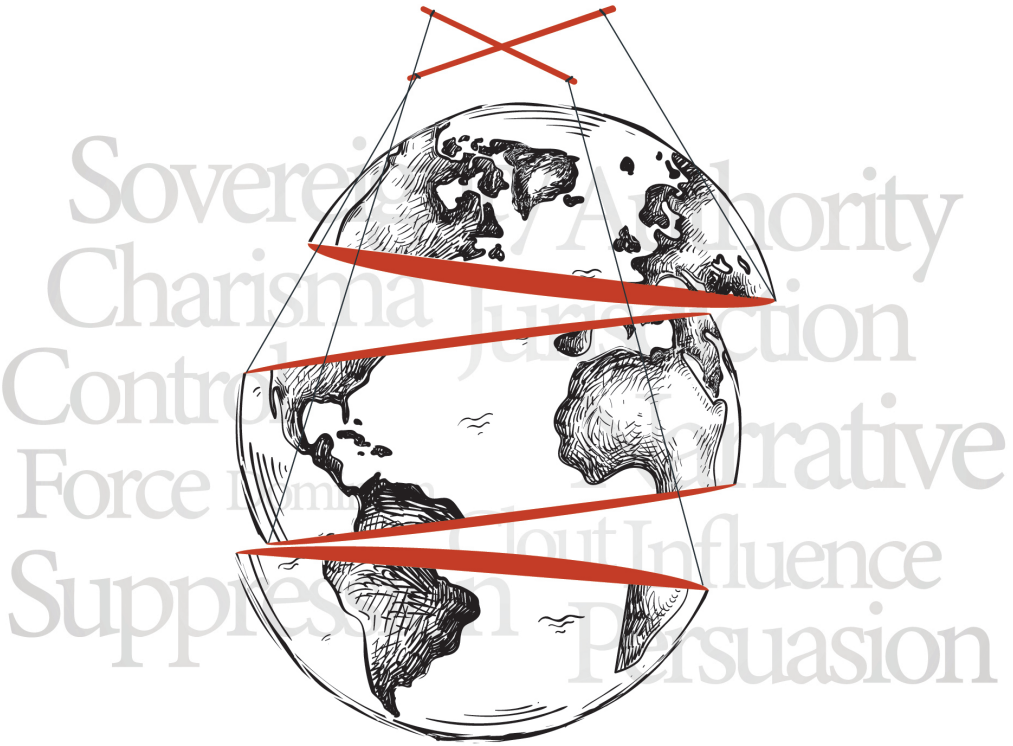
(Em)Powered? Authority in a Fragmented World



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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.

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In this Issue

Editor's Note

AURKO CHAKRABARTI,
EDITOR, DECYPHER

In this issue...

Power rarely announces itself. It hides in familiar places: in markets, indicators, contracts, and code, while shaping the decisions that govern lives. It is not always loud or violent. Sometimes it speaks through silence, through procedure, through what is no longer questioned. This edition of Decypher asks: what does power look like in the present? Where is it concentrated? How does it travel? And what are the stories it tries to suppress?

The theme of this issue is not confined to formal authority. It explores the dispersed, hidden, and constructed forms of power that define our contemporary moment. Across essays, interviews, and reviews, contributors trace how power operates within states, markets, data systems, geopolitical alignments, and even the realm of sport. The result is not a single narrative, but a series of overlapping insights that invite us to read between the lines.

Daniel Morales opens with Mapping Power Relations in a Multipolar World, a piece that moves past simplistic binaries to show how influence now flows through coalitions, transactional diplomacy, and shifting alignments. Power has become more fragmented, but no less hierarchical.

Oscar Rickett's The Littling of Great Britain offers a sobering reflection on decline. Through a close reading of Britain's post-Brexit politics, he captures how nationalism has become a mask for economic stagnation and cultural disorientation. Nostalgia replaces strategy, and the empire lingers as both wound and myth.

In Withering American Influence, Paul Krugman flips the global hierarchy on its head. The essay examines how rising inequality, crumbling infrastructure, and dysfunctional governance have begun to draw parallels between the United States and the very countries it once pathologised. Krugman is not being rhetorical. He is identifying the symptoms of a reversal in credibility.

Closer to home, Farheen's The Long Shadow of Econocracy examines how technocracy becomes a form of depoliticisation. When policy is spoken in the language of fiscal ceilings and growth maximisation, justice and equality are treated as externalities. This is power through abstraction, where economic tools obscure rather than illuminate social priorities.

Aurko Chakrabarti's Sport and the Construction of Political Legitimacy takes us to stadiums and arenas. Sport is no longer just competition. It is image management, diplomacy, and a way for regimes and corporations to soften their public profiles. Aurko probes the asymmetries in who gets to rehabilitate their image through sport, and who remains morally disqualified.

Priyanka Garodia's The Changing Contours of the Modern War traces how warfare has expanded beyond physical battlefields into cyberspace, surveillance systems, and media manipulation. The tools have changed, but the logic of domination remains. Information, in many cases, has become a weapon more powerful than artillery.

Power also plays out through identity and memory. In State Identities in South Asia: A Contested Road, Najeeb Jung examines how the postcolonial state has defined itself through acts of exclusion, whether linguistic, religious, or regional. Khushi Kesari's Monsoon Empires explores a different register of power: the soft, cultural legacy of South Indian kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Temples, rituals, and languages cross borders even when modern maps do not.

In Up the Drum Tower: The Confucian Comeback, Daniel A. Bell reflects on governance, pedagogy, and meritocracy through his experience inside Chinese academia. Rather than caricature Chinese statecraft, he examines it on its own terms and asks difficult questions about how legitimacy is earned, not just claimed.

Manashjyoti Karjee's Writing on Snow explores the Arctic as a space of paradox. It is one of the last regions where science, not sovereignty, has guided governance. But as climate change opens new routes and interests, that fragile order is increasingly under pressure.

Ashwin Prasad's Is Space the Final Frontier? surveys the transformation of India's space sector. The liberalisation of space services brings opportunity, but also raises new tensions around regulation, equity, and access. What was once the domain of the state is now an arena for private capital, strategic competition, and international visibility.

In The Churn in the Indian Ocean: India & Middle Powers, Pooja Bhatt navigates the maritime domain, where shipping routes, energy corridors, and naval presence serve as instruments of strategic leverage. India's power in this space is more about balancing than dominating, and Bhatt highlights the subtleties involved.

Shipra Agarwal and Shivani Singh's Medical Monopolies and Inverted Pay-offs interrogates how intellectual property regimes and pharmaceutical economics produce scarcity in the name of innovation. The result is an inverted reality where life-saving technologies remain out of reach for many, not because they do not exist, but because access is priced out of feasibility.

Cahal Moran's Why We're Getting Poorer unpacks the structural causes behind economic stagnation and inequality. Moving beyond GDP, he questions whether our current metrics can even capture what progress should mean.

This edition also features a SenseMaker interview with Rajat M. Nag, where development is explored not as a neutral process, but as a deeply political and contested journey. The conversation probes how aspirations, exclusions, and strategies collide across Asia's changing economic landscape.

The issue closes with two thoughtful reviews. Poulami Saha's engagement with Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks is a meditation on how connection, control, and communication have shaped human history, from oral storytelling to algorithmic curation. Unnati Gusain revisits India's Cold War diplomacy in her review of The Nehru Years, interrogating the selective silences and strategic contradictions that marked India's global positioning.

These essays together reveal that power is not always where we expect it. It is not just about who rules, but about who frames, who normalises, and who disappears from the record. Power is as much about what is said as what is never said. ■

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Mapping Power Relations in a Multipolar World

What does the World Power Index reveals about global change?

DANIEL MORALES RUVALCABA

For decades, the analysis of power in the international system has revolved around a few predictable actors: the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Russia. International relations have been interpreted as a contest among major powers, with the rest of the world reduced to the role of recipient, spectator, or arena of competition. This logic has dominated both geopolitics and theory, shaping the organisations that still govern the global order.

But that way of seeing the world has never been sufficient—and today it is less so than ever. In a context marked by the fragmentation of multilateralism, the rise of non-Western actors, and growing strategic uncertainty, it is increasingly evident that national power is no longer concentrated or exercised as it once was. It has begun to shift towards unexpected margins of the international system.

While attention remains focused on the movements of traditional powers, dozens of countries in the Global South are assuming key roles: mediating regional or subregional conflicts, promoting trade agreements, stabilising volatile areas, or serving as platforms for alternative diplomatic initiatives. These developments are not necessarily explained by large accumulated capabilities, but rather by different forms of functionality, contextual positions, and trajectories of mobility that go beyond classical frameworks.

Understanding the new map of power requires rethinking the categories through which it has been observed and, therefore, measured. It is no longer enough to count tanks or tally GDP points. Even the distinction between hard power and soft power proves insufficient. It is necessary to grasp how a state's national power is configured, how it evolves historically, what position it occupies within the system, and what kind of impact it exerts on its immediate and extended environment. Only then can the shifting of global balances be understood—how, why, and where they are changing. And why, to explain it, looking to the Global South is no longer optional: it is essential.

DANIEL MORALES RUVALCABA is a global governance and strategic analyst. He contributes to international forums studying diplomacy, finance, and multilateral cooperation, bringing a critical lens on international institutions and geopolitical power dynamics.

Power, Mismeasured

The prevailing understanding of power in international relations has long relied on a logic of accumulation: more territory, more wealth, more weaponry, more influence. Within this framework, power is measured as volume, represented as structure, and exercised through domination or control. From the Cold War to American unipolarity, this approach offered a seemingly clear reading of the world order.

From the 1990s onwards, Joseph Nye introduced a significant refinement by proposing the concept of soft power, understood as the ability to persuade through values, institutions, or culture. This idea expanded the conceptual repertoire of power analysis, suggesting that influence did not depend solely on military coercion or economic weight. However, this theoretical broadening did not result in an effective integration with approaches focused on hard power. In practice, both dimensions developed in parallel, without producing a coherent framework to explain how they interact and combine across different historical and spatial contexts.

Despite its terminological adjustments, this perspective has continued to privilege dominant powers and conventional forms of influence. The issue is not one of flawed observation, but of partial observation: it privileges imposition over coordination, values domination more than adaptation, and focuses on central actors while ignoring the foundations that sustain—or challenge—that dominance. By overlooking the capacities of lesser states and the sources of power that do not manifest in military parades or cultural rankings, this approach creates strategic blind spots.

Such methodological blindness has hindered understanding of how certain states with limited resources manage to perform stabilising functions, act as regional hinges, or sustain domestic legitimacies with international resonance. It has also ignored the rise of non-Western coalitions gaining strategic relevance without fitting into traditional models. As a result, the Global South has remained at the margins of empirical research, lacking systematic tools to capture its contribution to the reconfiguration of the international system.

This analytical limitation demands new lenses—capable of grasping the complexity and diversity of the Global South not as an exception, but as a constitutive part of the emerging world order.

Mapping Power in a Multipolar World

Rethinking power from and for the Global South doesn't mean ignoring the major powers—but it does mean shifting the lens. It calls for looking beyond the usual centres of gravity to consider actors long underestimated. The goal isn't to idealise them, but to recognise their role in the international system. The real question isn't just who holds more resources, but how their power has evolved, where they stand in relation to others, and what role they play in their surrounding environment.

Yet this perspective has long been missing from mainstream analytical frameworks. For decades, the Global South has been examined through external categories—linked to ideas of backwardness, dependence, or vulnerability. Within this view, its states have been placed at the margins of the system, lacking agency or autonomy, treated mainly as battlegrounds for competition between greater powers. This reductionist reading has created a major blind spot. When their historical trajectories are studied in a comparative light, what emerges is not a passive periphery, but a series of dynamic processes shaped by positional mobility, institutional adaptation, and strategic influence.

This insight brings a dual challenge. On the one hand, it is necessary to build a different way of thinking about power—not to reject accumulation or scale, but to move beyond them through a relational and articulated perspective. On the other hand, empirical tools are required that can capture not only levels of national power, but also their functional articulation, ripple effects, and positional variations across time and space.

This is where the World Power Index (WPI) comes in. Designed as a framework for analysing national power, the WPI looks at three interrelated dimensions: material capacities (such as the economy, defence, and scientific research), semi-material capacities (like population, wellbeing, and consumption), and immaterial capacities (including culture, communication, and cosmopolitan appeal). This trio allows us to observe not only how resources accumulate, but also how they combine and function together. More importantly, as the product of the broader theoretical framework behind it, the WPI introduces a shift in perspective: it treats power as a multidimensional phenomenon, where capacities interact dynamically within an international geostructure that is constantly evolving.

The WPI doesn't aim to replace other approaches, but to complement them with a lens more attuned to historical trajectories, specific roles, and unconventional forms of global projection. One of its key contributions is to make the Global South more visible—not just in its internal diversity, but also in its collective contribution to a complex and changing global architecture.

The New Geographies of Power

In an increasingly interdependent and competitive international system, power is not only being redistributed—it is also concentrating in specific areas of the Global South that have managed to combine growth, institutional stability, and international coordination. These concentrations do not necessarily rival the major powers, but they do introduce new geopolitical reference points, new governance platforms, and new interlocutors for global agendas.

Regions such as South Asia, Southeast Asia, and parts of South America have seen significant increases in national power over the past three decades. Yet the most revealing development is not simply the rise of certain countries, but the fact that this power is being organised through networks rather than hierarchies. The expansion of alliances like the BRICS—in its expanded version—or non-Western interregional frameworks has allowed these actors to move beyond their traditional role as passive recipients, becoming instead catalysts of new geopolitical dynamics.

Unlike the rigid blocs of the Cold War, the BRICS have consolidated a flexible, diverse, and continually expanding platform that enables new forms of leadership within the Global South. Their logic is not to homogenise interests, but to connect different experiences under a shared ambition: to change how decisions are made in the international system. Since 2024, with the group's enlargement, that ambition has gained both strength and legitimacy.

This kind of coordination has been made possible by a stronger material foundation, growing political legitimacy, and an evolving institutional framework. Drawing on these renewed endowments of power, the BRICS have carved out new room for manoeuvre. Through rotating summits, development banks, sectoral forums, and horizontal cooperation networks, the group positions itself as a driver of South–South convergence. From Africa to Latin America, from West Asia to the post-Soviet space, this articulation does not arise as a response to an external mandate, but as a reflection of new internal capacities.

This process has far-reaching implications for the powers of the Global North. It not only alters historically inherited centre–periphery dynamics but introduces new logics of governance: more distributed, less hierarchical, and connected to neglected priorities. It is no longer simply a matter of enlarging the table, but of recognising that the margins have shifted. For actors such as the G7 or the European Union, this implies revisiting their frameworks of engagement and rethinking their role in an order that no longer revolves exclusively around them.

Rather than representing a threat, the rise of the Global South signals a strategic turning point: the opportunity to build a more balanced international governance system, where legitimacy does not stem from historical weight but from the commitment to propose common solutions and the ability to implement them.

Where Power is Absent, but Not Irrelevant

The world map of power is not only shaped by new concentrations; it is also marked by vast areas where capabilities remain low, unstable, or difficult to project. While the regions clustered around BRICS and other emerging platforms represent new poles of influence, other parts of the Global South — such as Central Africa, the insular Caribbean, segments of the Sahel, or certain areas of Central America — exhibit more erratic trajectories, with limited strengthening or no sustained improvement in national capacities.

However, to mistake the lack of accumulated power for irrelevance would be an analytical and strategic error. Far from being passive, these regions occupy sensitive spaces in contemporary geopolitics and geoeconomics: logistical corridors, porous borders, key ecosystems, energy transit zones, expanding digital platforms. These are territories where power is not concentrated — and may even have declined in recent decades — but where strategic competition still plays out: through disputes over presence, external projection enclaves, or interventions driven more by vacuum than consensus.

The paradox is that many of the countries least visible in power metrics are, in practice, destabilising elements or unexpected pivots in the system. Their fragility makes them strategic. And their apparent marginality enables them to influence broader processes: blocking collective decisions, triggering migration crises, disrupting critical routes, or even experimenting with innovative forms of cooperation and diplomacy.

From this perspective, the importance of a state does not always stem from its accumulated capabilities. Rather, it lies in the function it performs within the international order — whether as a transit channel, a geographic buffer, an information hub, an environmental tipping point, or even an institutional testing ground. In some cases, its strategic relevance stems not from the power it holds, but from the systemic effects it produces.

Understanding this reality requires closer attention to the dynamics of relative positioning. It is not only a matter of observing visible poles, but also of recognising edges, intermediate spaces, and actors that — while not powers — function as hinges, crossroads, or catalysts. In this approach, power does not distinguish between "strong" and "weak", but between those who generate ripple effects from unexpected places.

Thus, the key question is no longer simply how much power is accumulated or where it is concentrated, but how it is redistributed in an international system that can no longer rest on the permanent exclusion of large parts of the planet.

Reading the New Map of Power

Nothing that is happening in the international system today can be fully understood without paying attention to what is taking place on the margins of the Global South. Where previously subordinate roles were assumed, today protagonists emerge. Where passivity was assumed, initiative is now visible. And where chronic dependencies were expected, some countries have begun to build functional autonomy. This transformation does not follow a single formula, nor does it result from any coordinated strategy. It stems from multiple trajectories, combined capacities, institutional efforts, and various ways of adapting to a volatile environment.

The good news is that tools are now available to better observe such complexity. The challenge is not to abandon measurement, but to go a step further: to use it as a starting point for interpretation. Measuring is necessary, but not sufficient. Understanding power in the 21st century requires grasping its multidimensionality, its trajectories, its articulations, and its indirect effects. It is no longer enough to record who accumulates the most. It is also essential to understand how capacities are combined, from where they are projected, and what dynamics they generate. Power does not always manifest as superiority; at times, it lies in the ability to connect, to resist, to propose, or to sustain cohesion in fragile environments.

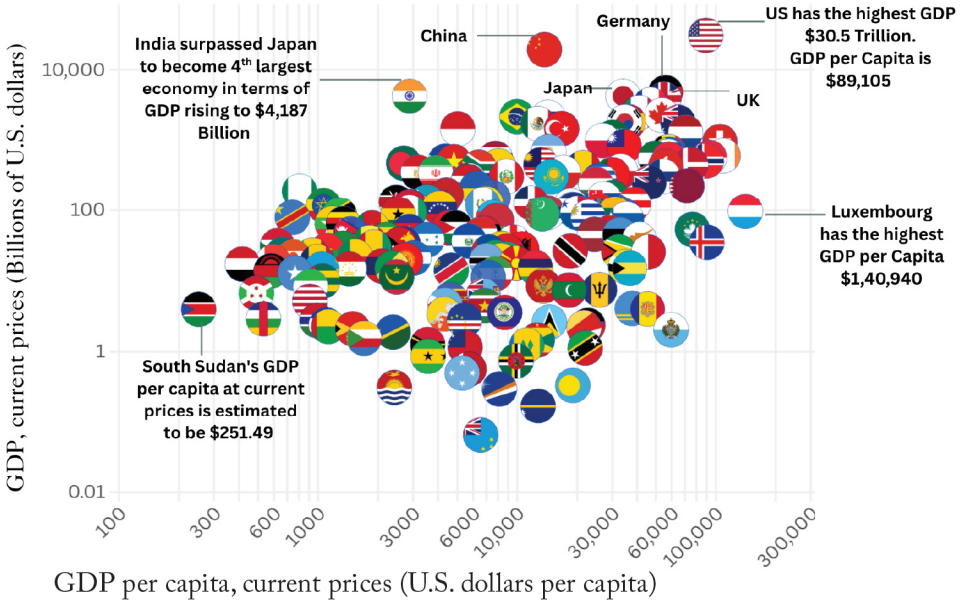
What is at stake is not merely a contest for power, but a deeper redefinition of how leadership, legitimacy, and international influence are understood. The rise of new South–South alignments, the strategic role of seemingly peripheral regions, and the loss of centrality of traditional poles do not signal the end of the world order, but the need to rethink it. Perhaps the more relevant question is no longer who is in charge, but how the system is configured, who keeps it running, and from which places. And to answer that, it is not enough to look upwards — it is necessary to look in all directions.

If this reconfiguration is taken seriously, the implications are clear. International organisations will need to adjust to a more dynamic map, with multiple centres of coordination and dispersed zones of influence. Decision-makers can no longer operate according to outdated cartographies: they must acknowledge that the sources of legitimacy and leadership are no longer concentrated solely in the North. And for traditional powers, the challenge is to accept that influence is increasingly exercised not from fixed positions, but through complex negotiations — where the Global South is no longer a mere observer, but a shaping force, with its own trajectories and priorities that can no longer be ignored. ■

decypher data dive.

Global Economic Comparison: GDP Per Capita and Total GDP

The chart shows countries' GDP per capita (x-axis) against total GDP at current prices (y-axis) for 2025



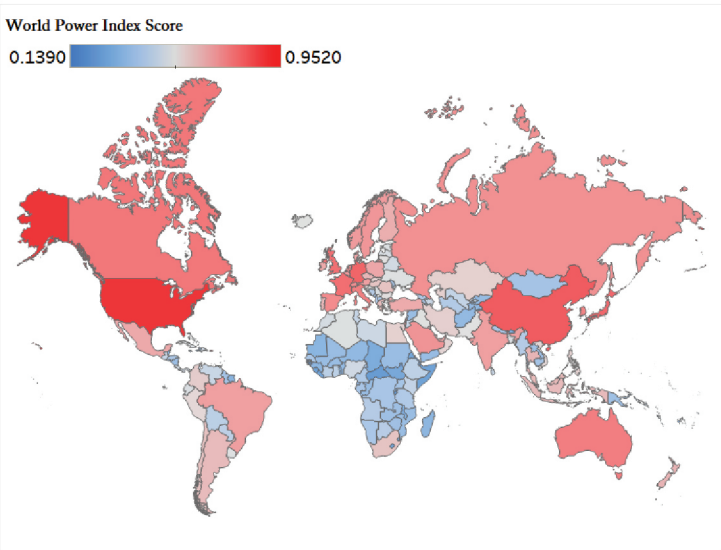
Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook (April, 2025)

Although China, India, Japan, Germany, and especially the United States rank among the world's largest economies by total GDP, their GDP per capita remains significantly lower than that of smaller, wealthier nations such as Luxembourg and Switzerland.

According to the IMF's April projections, India's GDP is expected to slightly surpass Japan's, with figures standing at $4,187.02 billion for India and $4,186.43 billion for Japan.

World Power Index (WPI), 2022

WPI is a sum of the 3 sub-indices-Material Capacities Index (MCI), Semimaterial Capacities Index (SCI) and Immaterial Capacities Index (ICI). Higher score indicates powerful nation.



Top 10 powerful nations based on WPI, 2022

	Scores
United States of America	0.9520
China	0.8620
Germany	0.8400
Japan	0.8350
France	0.8190
United Kingdom	0.8170
Canada	0.8020
Australia	0.7890
Italy	0.7840
South Korea	0.7750

Note: Data for some of the countries is not available.
Source: Morales Ruvalcaba, D. (2023). WPI Database. Available at World Power Index: https://www.worldpowerindex.com/wpi-database/

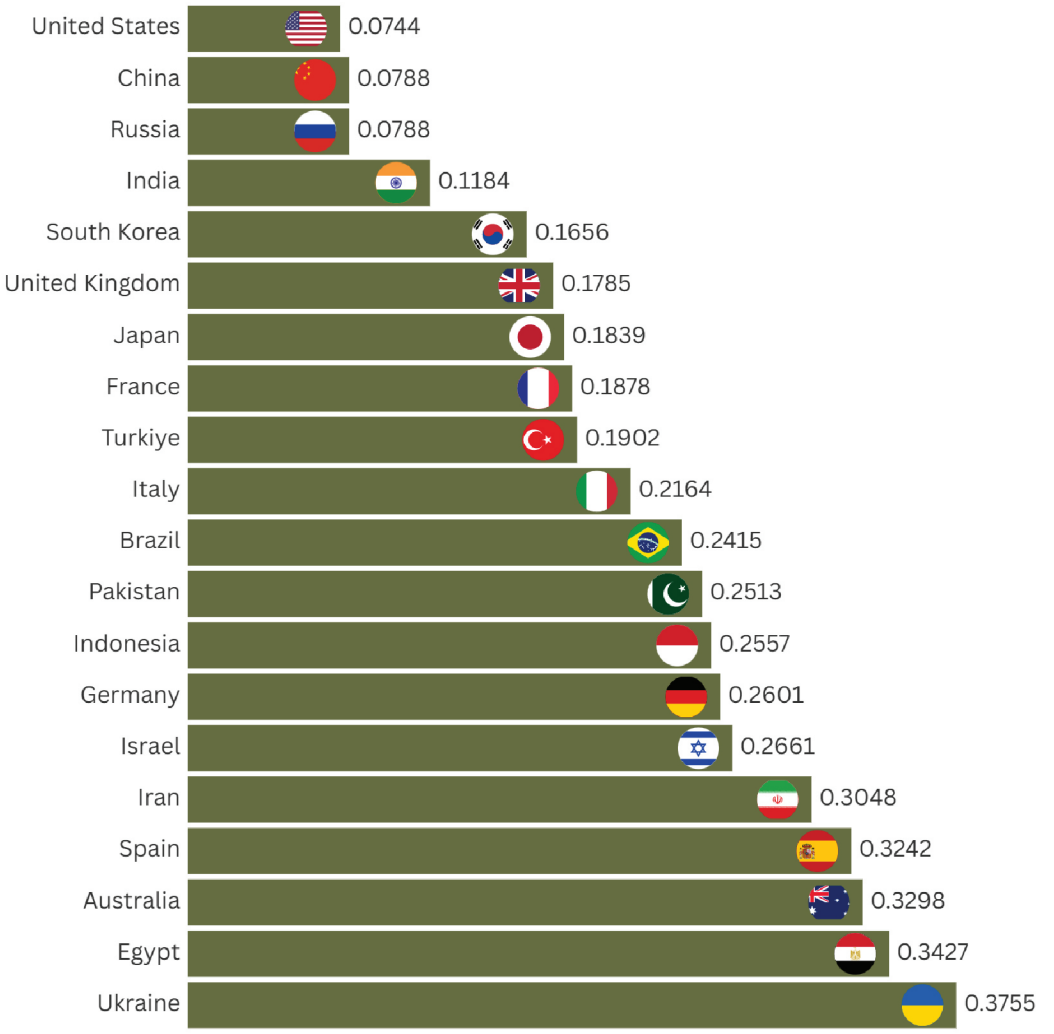
The Material Capacities Index, consisting of key indicators, provides insights into this facet of power, commonly referred to as hard power.

Semimaterial power, a crucial dimension of a nation's strength, considers not only economic factors like wealth and consumption but also social and quality of life aspects such as healthcare, education, and energy accessibility.

The Immaterial Capacities Index (ICI) is a valuable tool, utilizing key variables to provide insights into the intangible aspects that underpin a nation's so-called soft power.

Top 20 Global Military Powers

Countries ranked highest on the Global Firepower Power Index Score of 0.0000 is perfect / most powerful

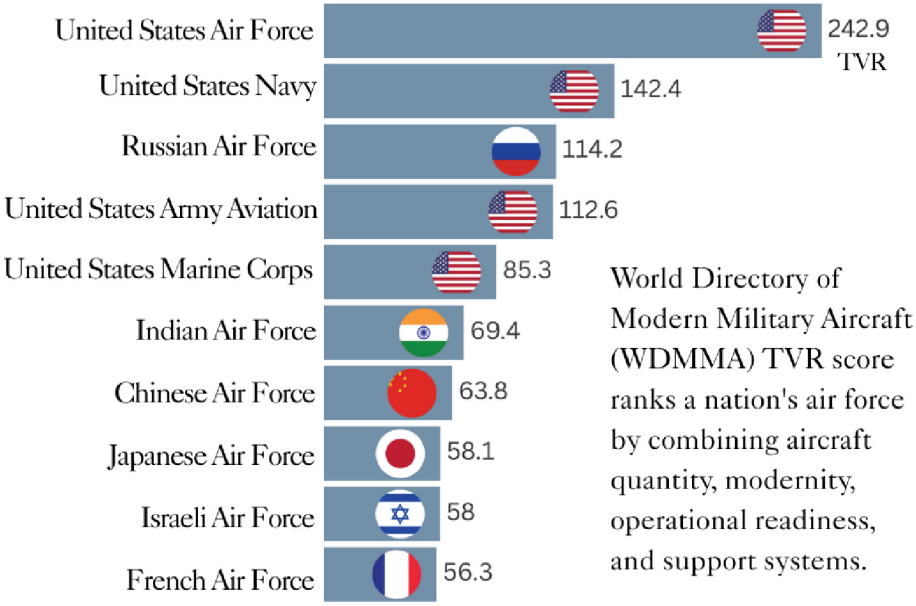


Source: Global Firepower

The United States retains the top spot in 2025 military strength rankings, driven by unmatched global capabilities and defense spending. Russia and China closely follow, tied in PowerIndex score, with expanding arsenals and modernisation efforts.

Top 10 Global Air Powers

A higher score - 'TruVal Rating' (TVR) means greater combat potential.

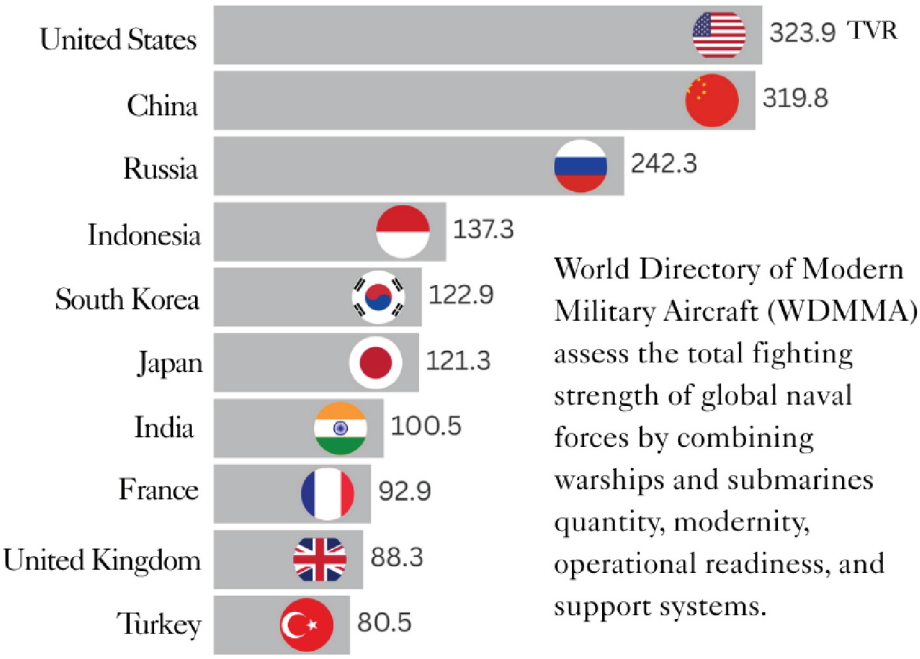


World Directory of Modern Military Aircraft (WDMMA) TVR score ranks a nation's air force by combining aircraft quantity, modernity, operational readiness, and support systems.

Source: World Directory of Modern Military Aircraft (WDMMA)

Top 10 Global Navy Powers

A higher score - 'TruVal Rating' (TVR) means greater combat potential.



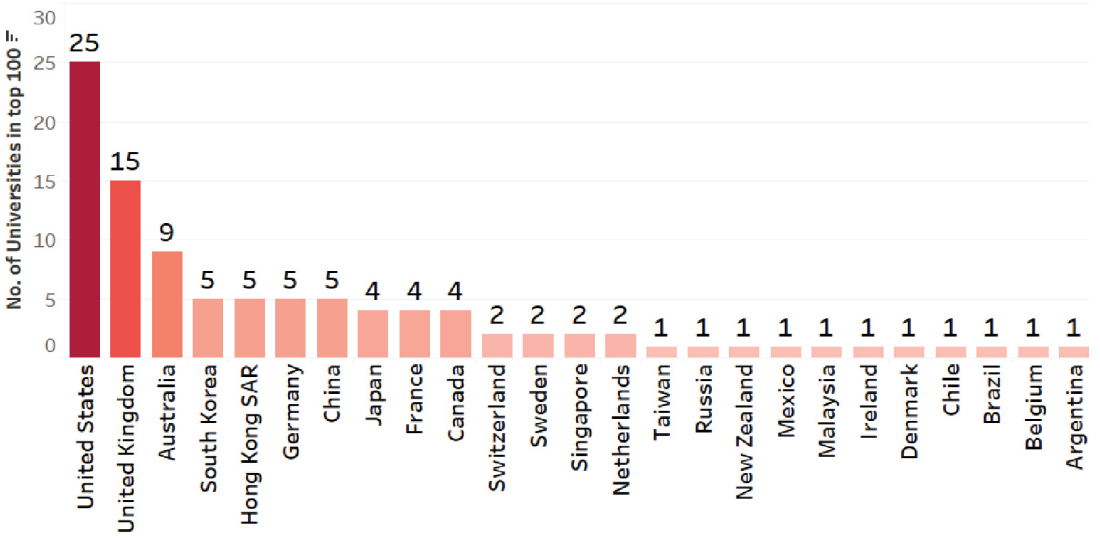
World Directory of Modern Military Aircraft (WDMMA) assess the total fighting strength of global naval forces by combining warships and submarines quantity, modernity, operational readiness, and support systems.

Source: World Directory of Modern Military Aircraft (WDMMA)

Countries with Universities in Top 100

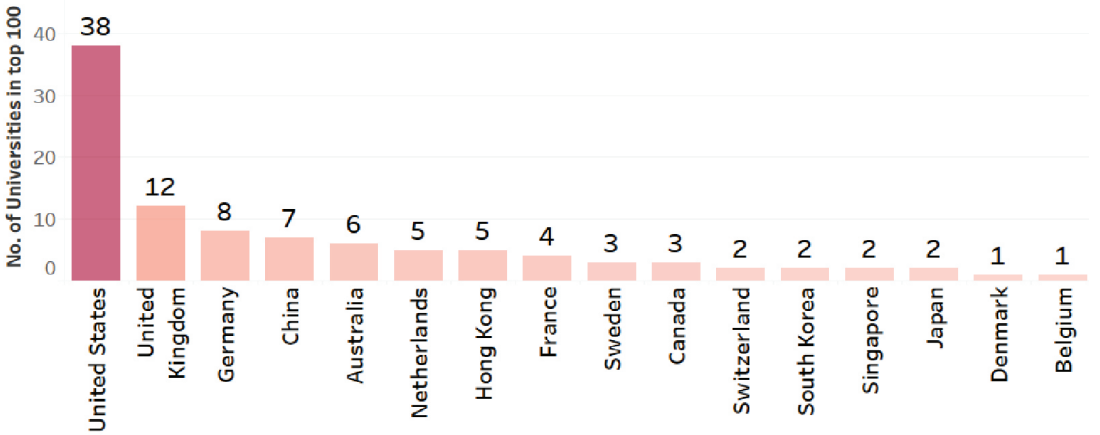
The United States and the United Kingdom have the highest number of universities featured in the top 100 of both the QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings for 2025.

Number of Universities Based on QS World University Rankings 2025



Number of Universties Based on Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2025

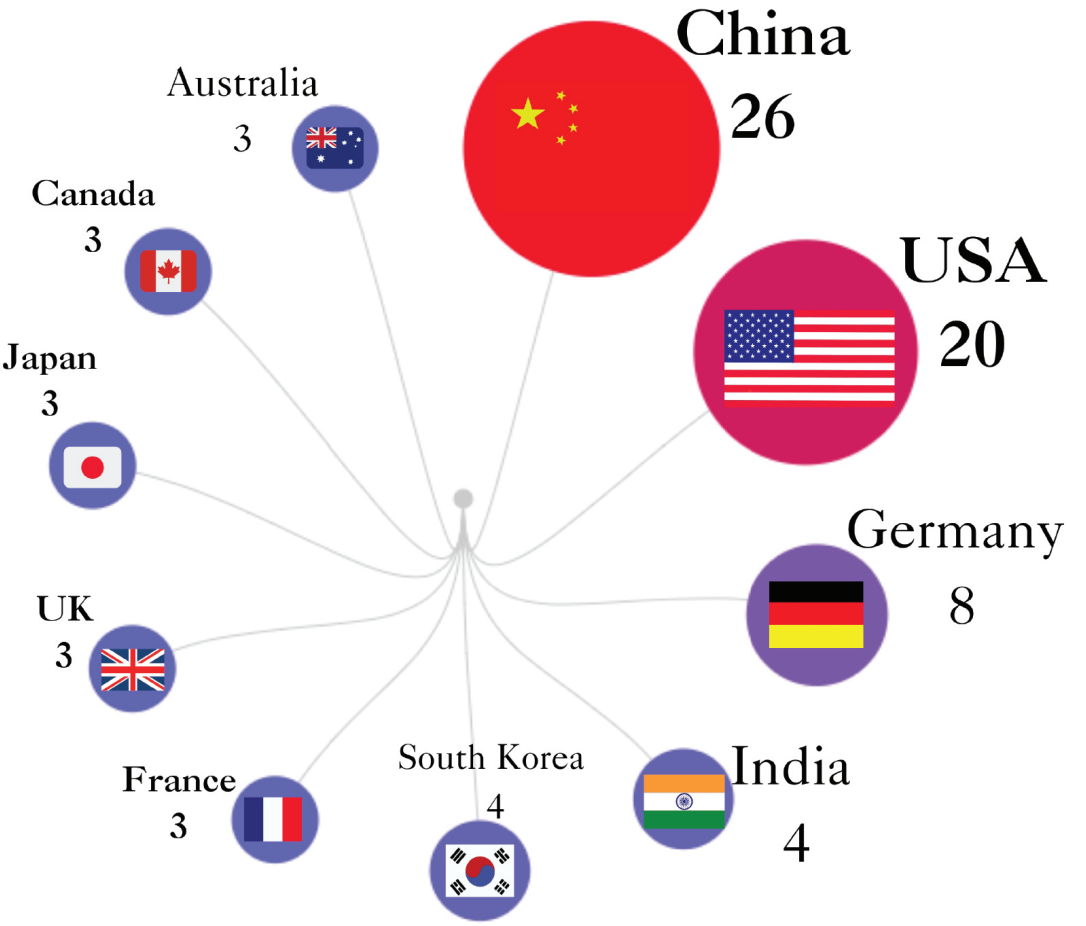
Note: In the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, some universities are assigned the same rank.



Source: QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education

Economies with Three or More Top 100 Science & Technology (S&T) Clusters, 2024

China (26) host the World's Largest Number of S&T Clusters.

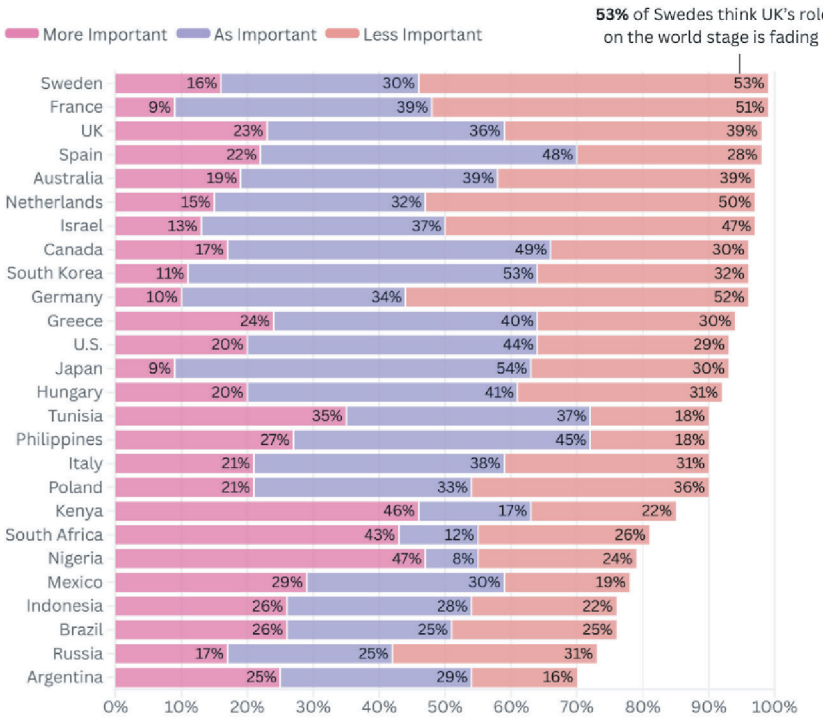


Source: World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

China, for the second consecutive year, leads with the most clusters (26) in the top 100. The United States follows closely behind with 20 clusters. Germany ranks third with eight clusters in the top 100.

Global Perception: Britain's Global Status is Stagnant or in Decline?

Does UK Plays (more important, as important, less important) role in the World compared to 10 years ago

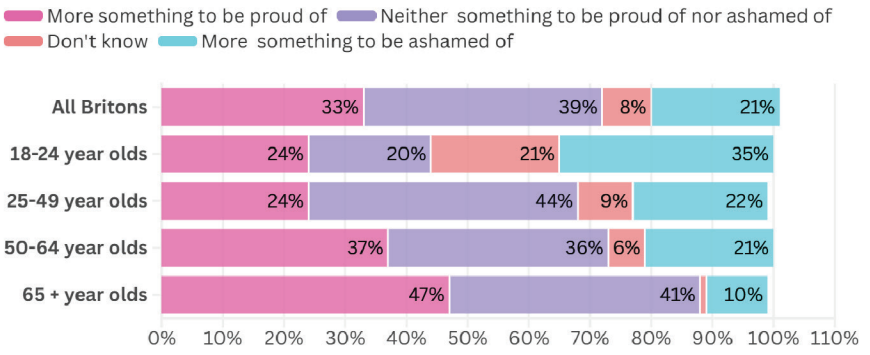


Source: World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

British Perspectives on the British Empire

Based on the YouGov survey examining Scottish public opinion on the British Empire

Thinking about the British Empire, would you say it is more something to be proud of or more something to be ashamed of, or neither? %

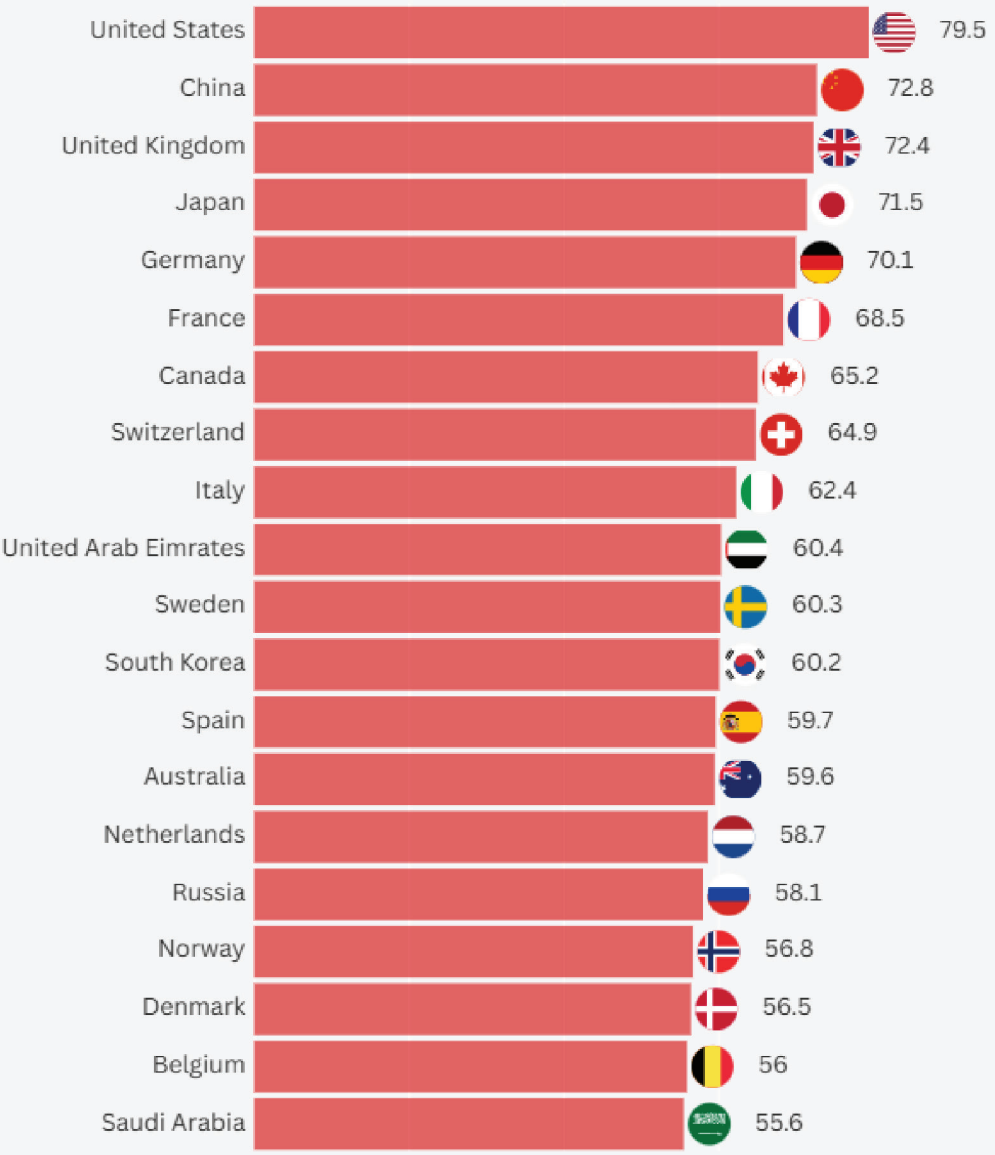


One in three Britons (33%) say the British Empire is more something to be proud of, compared to 21% who see it as more something to be ashamed of.

Source: Source: YouGov

Global Soft Power Index, 2025

Top 20 Countries



Source: Brand Finance, Global Soft Power Index, 2025

The *Littling* of Great Britain

OSCAR RICKETT

On arrival at London's Heathrow airport, an advertising campaign that looks to project both British tradition and diversity lines the walls. We see pictures of cab drivers, market stall traders, a bearskin-wearing guardsman, an actor at Shakespeare's Globe theatre, itself a reconstruction of a playhouse first built in 1599. These Londoners are men and women, they are white, black and brown.

The image presented is one of a former imperial metropolis now happily peopled by the descendants of empire, a modern country that has accepted the old slogan of anti-racist campaigners in Britain: "We are here because you were there."

The story is different in the UK's halls of power. Prime Minister Keir Starmer doesn't celebrate the country's diversity. He echoes Enoch Powell as he issues dark warnings about Britain becoming an "island of strangers". He boasts about deporting a record number of asylum seekers. He is never far from a Union Jack flag.

The Labour leader was elected prime minister last year in a curious election. For 14 years, the right-wing Conservative Party, one of the most successful political machines in the world, had led a series of governments from one catastrophe to another, as the country decayed at home and became irrelevant abroad.

Domestically, Chancellor George Osborne took a hatchet to public expenditure, supposedly in response to straitened circumstances following the financial crash of 2008. Osborne's austerity campaign would see 60p in every pound given by central government to local administrations cut. It would result in 190,000 "excess deaths" between 2010 and 2019, and prompted a UN poverty expert to brand poverty in the UK "not just a disgrace but a social calamity and an economic disaster".

In 2016, Britain voted to leave the European Union without having any real idea of how to do that and what it would mean for a country whose economic model was dependent on unfettered access to the EU. Rage at the state of the country was directed at Europe and foreigners, as a diffuse Leave campaign led by right-wing firebrands Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage easily defeated an insipid Remain campaign that offered nothing more than a depressing status quo.

As the Conservatives lurched from one leader to the next – the smoothly vacuous David Cameron, the sternly wooden Theresa May, the notorious liar Johnson, the shortest-lived prime minister in British history Liz Truss, the investment banker Rishi Sunak – Labour's socialist left wing was revived under Jeremy Corbyn, who came

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from obscurity to win the party's leadership contest in 2015.

By 2019, Corbyn had been beaten down by an implacably hostile media and by his party's failure to come to a coherent position on Brexit, which had been mired in the mud as the Conservatives fought over how best to do it.

In that year's election, held during a bleak and miserable December, Johnson's Tories won a thumping victory campaigning on a simple message: "Get Brexit done." Travelling across the country reporting on the campaign, the sense of futility – that politicians were liars and that they never changed anything for the better – could be found everywhere.

The navel-gazing did not end with Brexit. The corrupt handling of the Covid-19 crisis put paid to Johnson, who had partied while people up and down the land missed their relatives' funerals because of pandemic rules brought in by his government. Both Truss and Sunak promised and duly failed to "unleash Britain's potential" by securing trade deals with big international powers like the US and India, the former colony whose GDP, still dwarfed by the UK in the first decade of the century, overtook it in 2022.

After 14 years of the Conservative Party taking a hatchet to the state and turning Britain into a joke abroad – and with the hapless banker Sunak either disliked or ignored by the public – a Labour victory in 2024 was all but guaranteed.

By this point, the party was no longer the chaotically anti-establishment force it was under Corbyn. The grandees and financial backers – including former prime minister Tony Blair – who abhorred Corbyn's scruffiness, his devout belief in socialist economics, his instinctive anti-Americanism and his longstanding support for Palestine, had taken their party back from the activists.

Starmer, who seemed to have no real political beliefs of his own, was their vehicle for doing that. A former human rights lawyer turned public prosecutor, he had served in Corbyn's cabinet and had enough credibility with some of Labour's socialist members, who were responsible for electing the party's leader. But, crucially, he was a knight of the realm, a man of the establishment who, at heart, held left-wingers in contempt.

The campaign to install him as leader began in secret before the General Election of 2019, with Corbyn still at the head of the party. A Labour Party apparatchik called Morgan McSweeney, who came to Britain from his native Ireland as a teenager and lived on an Israeli kibbutz, had used a group called Labour Together to collect vast amounts of information on Labour's members. McSweeney hated the left and wanted to return Labour to being a party that embraced more traditional cultural positions. He saw the pro-Israel groups that accused Corbyn of antisemitism as "heroes".

McSweeney and his financial backers, including the octogenarian pro-Israel businessman Trevor Chinn and the hedge fund millionaire Martin Taylor, settled on Starmer as the man to succeed Corbyn and crush Labour's left wing. To win the contest to succeed Corbyn, they positioned Starmer as a grown-up version of the former leader, a progressive leader who would wear a suit and tie.

Once in power, the left-wing promises Starmer had made when campaigning to be leader fell away one by one. Rather than trying to take on Britain's vested interests, the power of a wealthy elite entrenched in the City of London, and the attachment to a foreign policy in thrall to Washington, Starmer was simply going to be a bit more sensible than the Conservatives.

Labour won big in 2024. The party's vote, though, was thinly and efficiently distributed. This was a clever way of winning an election, but it contributed to a situation in which Starmer's popularity quickly began to tank once he was in power.

In the north-east of England for the election campaign, I moved from one immiserated town to another, witnessing first-hand the damage done by the deindustrialisation and sweeping privatisation brought in by Margaret Thatcher and her successors. Everywhere in the country, the underfunding and costly privatisations of parts of the health service have led to a situation in which people spend years waiting for vital treatment. People no longer bother calling for an ambulance if they need one – they know one will not appear, they know they will have to get themselves to hospital.

In Stanley, a former coal-mining town in County Durham, one man in his sixties told me he and his fellow residents were "waiting to die". In Chester-le-Street, a town not far from Newcastle known for its international cricket ground, a group of teenagers said the most exciting thing that had happened to the place was the arrival of a shop selling desserts the year before. The Labour candidate in this constituency was Luke Akehurst, a pro-Israel lobbyist from the south who had not set foot in North Durham before the election.

An area once known for its shipbuilding, its steel industry, its coal mining, an area once defined by a strong labour movement, had been decimated, with some of its inhabitants drawn to the racist rhetoric of Farage's new right-wing political party, Reform.

Reform told them a story about what had happened to their home, a place once imbued with pride and some prosperity. It told them that this was not the fault of neoliberal capitalism, of a system that transported working-class jobs to wherever they could be done cheapest, but of foreigners. It told them to hate the country's elite, but only because they were letting black and brown people come here and take their jobs and claim benefits.

Reform is now riding high in the polls, partly because Starmer cannot tell a convincing story that challenges its right-wing narrative. He has, instead, been drawn into trying to imitate it, to denigrate foreigners, to present himself as a nationalist, to drape himself in the flag. His watered-down impression is unconvincing. An uncomfortable communicator at the best of times, the British public can smell Starmer's lack of authenticity. His personal approval rating has now sunk to -46, the worst it has ever been.

While Starmer has lacked any real conviction of his own when it comes to many domestic and foreign policy issues, his approach to Israel's war on Gaza, launched after the Hamas-led attacks of 7 October 2023, has been noticeably single-minded.

Ignoring the advice of two prominent Jewish friends, the lawyers Philippe Sands and Richard Hermer, now Starmer's attorney general, the prime minister has backed Israel to the hilt. This backing has been rhetorical and diplomatic, but it has also come in the form of hundreds of Royal Air Force flights over Gaza, launched from Cyprus and intended to gather intelligence, and in the sale of components for the F-35 jets with which Israel is destroying the Palestinian enclave.

Rhetorically, this support for Israel has shifted in recent weeks, earning the ire of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has accused Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron of "backing Hamas". Starmer now calls the situation in Gaza "intolerable". He is more open in calling for an end to Israeli aggression.

Alon Pinkas, an Israeli diplomat, told me recently that this change of rhetoric reflected the position European leaders have always held; it's just that now it has become "unequivocal and public". And yet it still has not been backed up by significant, concrete action.

The impact this has had on Britain's standing abroad seems to be underestimated by the country's powerbrokers. Across much of the world, the UK's steadfast support for

Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression has been contrasted with its steadfast support for Israeli aggression. Charges of hypocrisy have inevitably followed.

Britain has, of course, been here before. In the age of empire, there was much talk of the country's "civilising mission", alongside the development of a science of racism that justified the vast expropriation of wealth from far-flung parts of the globe. The high-minded rhetoric ushered in by the European Enlightenment was forever at odds with the plunder practised by European empires.

In my own lifetime, Tony Blair's misadventures in Afghanistan and Iraq saw the UK mired in Washington's war on terror, a racist endeavour that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives and arguably continues to this day, with the heavy policing and criminalisation of independent thought and activism state policy in Britain.

The ghosts of empire continue to haunt these islands perched on the north-western edge of Europe. Britain still suffers from what the great scholar of race and culture Paul Gilroy called "postcolonial melancholia" – the pain of losing empire remains unprocessed and has produced many violent reactions.

Rather than defending humanitarian law abroad and supporting a multicultural society at home, British leaders continue to undermine both. Rather than take on the role of a larger version of a Scandinavian country, the UK continues to audition for the long-outdated role of Athens to America's Rome. The result of this is a loss of standing on the global stage and a dangerous fraying of the social fabric in the domestic space.

As this old country continues to crumble, its ruling class unable and unwilling to do anything ambitious about the many crises it faces, it falls piece by piece into the seas that surround it, unloved and unmourned. ■


THIS
COUNTRY
IS
OURS!

Withering American Influence

How to destroy 80 years of credibility in less than 3 months

PAUL KRUGMAN

Oops, they're doing it again.

Major news media organisations sanewashed Donald Trump all through the 2024 campaign, cleaning up his incoherence and downplaying his extreme policy positions. Aaron Rupar reminds us of this:

It's hard to know how much that contributed to his victory, but it must have been a factor.

But the desire to see Trump as reasonable is a more widely shared syndrome which isn't confined to the media. It was abetted by the business world, which was gripped by "euphoria" after he won, despite clear signs that he would implement destructive economic policies.

Remarkably, the sanewashing continues despite the unprecedented craziness of the

Source: CNBC

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past 10 days. Many observers assert that Trump has backed down on tariffs and will speedily make a bunch of trade deals. The first assertion is just false, while the second is very unlikely.

Harris and Trump Embrace Tariffs, Though Their Approaches Differ

Both Democrats and Republicans are expressing support for tariffs to protect American industry, reversing decades of trade thinking in Washington.

In fact, savvy traders have realised that there's no coherent economic strategy. There's an old line about military analysis: "Amateurs talk about tactics, but professionals talk about logistics." Well, when it comes to taking the pulse of financial markets, amateurs talk about stocks, but professionals talk about bond and currency markets. That's because bond and currency markets are generally less driven by emotion. There's no "meme gambling investing" in bond and currency markets. And these markets are both signalling major loss of faith in America.

First, about tariffs: It's true that for the time being Trump has scaled back some of the tariffs displayed on his big piece of cardboard last week. For example, unless we have another policy swerve, the European Union will now face a 10 percent tariff over the next three months rather than a 20 percent tariff. But the tariff on China, our third-biggest trading partner after Canada and Mexico, has gone from 34 percent to more than 130 percent. And we still have high tariffs on steel, aluminium and so on. In effect, observers who claim that tariffs have gone down are missing the biggest part of the story.

Economists who have actually run the numbers, like those at the Yale Budget Lab, estimate that the 9 April tariff regime will raise consumer prices more than the 2 April regime because of the extraordinarily high tariff rate on Chinese imports. Specifically, the Budget Lab estimates that the latest version of Trump's trade war will raise consumer prices by 2.9 percent. This is roughly ten times the probable impact of the infamous Smoot-Hawley tariff of 1930.

It's hard to overstate the craziness of announcing a radical tariff plan, then announcing a quite different but equally radical plan just a week later. Furthermore, the claim that the wild zigzags in policy were always part of Trump's plan just adds to the destruction of the administration's credibility.

But are these tariffs just an opening gambit for trade negotiations? I doubt it. Bear in mind that Trump and Peter Navarro, his tariff guru, start from the premise that other countries are cheating, that they're taking advantage of America and treating us unfairly. In fact, however, most of them aren't. Take the case of the European Union. The EU imposes an average tariff on U.S. goods of just 1.7 percent, and there aren't any significant hidden barriers.

So what are we supposed to be negotiating about? Nations can't promise to lower their trade barriers when there aren't any barriers. Navarro has been claiming that value-added taxes are de facto tariffs, but they aren't, and EU nations literally can't afford to give them up.

I guess other countries might make fake concessions that Trump can claim as fake victories. This is what he did with China during his first term, claiming that it had made significant concessions — claims which were, in the end, false. In fact, American soybean farmers have never fully recovered the loss of market share. And remember too how Trump made minor changes to NAFTA and claimed to have negotiated a whole new trade pact.

However, Trump is now clearly high on his own supply. Even with the 9 April tariff regime, Trump is imposing high tariff rates on our three largest trading partners. Currency and bond market traders — no

fools they — are certainly not acting as if we're on a path to successful deals.

For example, economic theory and history both say that the imposition of tariffs normally leads to a stronger currency unless other countries retaliate. During his confirmation hearing, Scott Bessent, the incoming Treasury Secretary, argued that a 10 percent tariff would lead to something like a 4 percent rise in the dollar. But not this time. Instead of going up, the dollar has plunged.

The obvious explanation is that crazy policies have shaken investors' faith in America, which has traditionally been viewed as a safe haven.

The topic of how Trump's policies have messed with the bond markets — including the market for US Treasuries — is too difficult for me to cover today, but here's more. The key point is that massive tariffs have disrupted the plumbing of the financial system, leading to soaring interest rates on US government debt. That's abnormal: rising odds of a recession usually lead to falling long-term interest rates, because the prospect of a recession raises the likelihood of future cuts by the Fed, which controls short-term rates. This time, however, rates are spiking, especially for very-long-term instruments like 30-year bonds, shown at the top of this post.

The common thread in currency and bond markets is that, thanks to Trump, dollar assets — traditionally the foundation of the global financial system — are no longer perceived as safe.

The combination of interest rates soaring amid a slump and the currency plunging despite rising interest rates isn't what we normally expect for advanced countries, let alone the owner of the world's leading reserve currency. It is, however, what we often see in emerging-market economies. That is, investors have started treating the United States like a third-world economy.

Did I see this coming? No, not really. Unlike the sanewashers, I knew that Trump's policies would be irresponsible and destructive. However, even I didn't expect him to destroy credibility accumulated over 80 years in less than three months. But he has.

And even if Trump were to backtrack on everything he's done, we wouldn't get the lost credibility back. The whole world, sanewashers aside, now knows that America is run by a mad king, surrounded by enablers, who can't be trusted to behave rationally.

I don't know how this ends. In fact, I don't know what policy will be next week. But that's basically the point. ■

Source: xe.com


money

The Long Shadow of Econocracy

FARHEEN

Introduction

They don't stand for elections. You won't see their names trending online either. But economists, more quietly than most, end up shaping some of the most critical decisions that affect all of us. Things like whether a country should borrow more, how much a government can actually spend on health, or which industries must shrink because they're seen as inefficient. John Rapley, the political economist, once put it best: economics has become the world's new religion, and economists, the high priests who interpret.

At the Spring 2025 Meetings of the IMF and World Bank, that quiet power became visible, if only briefly. When the U.S. Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, told both institutions to "stick to their economic mandates" and back off from broader goals like climate and gender justice, and the IMF followed suit. Years of internal work on those issues were, more or less, shelved. The leadership came back to what it called "core macroeconomic fundamentals", debt repayment, inflation control, fiscal restraint. At first glance, it looked like a technical correction. But really, it said something far more political.

This is the strange paradox of economic governance today. Economists often say they're just following the numbers, running models, looking at the data. Yet, as Johan Christensen at Leiden University argues, they've become what he calls a "core profession of the state." That means they aren't just giving advice. They're inside powerful bureaucracies, setting the terms for what counts as sensible, and what gets pushed off the table entirely.

But the more this influence grows, the more important the questions become. How did they gain this power? how do economists use this power? And what are its implications?

Rise of Econocracy

It's easy to think economists rose to power simply because they were the smartest in the room. But that's not the full story. Their ascent wasn't natural or inevitable. It came through a slow, structured process, shaped by institutions, ideologies, and a quiet rewriting of what we call common sense. Over time, economics stopped being one tool among many. It became the dominant frame, the language that decides what's legitimate and what's not.

Johan Christensen captures this shift in Western democracies. After World War II,

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economists came in as technical advisers for rebuilding. But by the 1980s, they were no longer in the background. They had become policy architects, especially in finance ministries and central banks. This change was driven by growing faith in economics as neutral and scientific. Neoliberalism helped too. It reframed political questions like taxing the rich or funding education, as problems that needed technical optimisation. "Sound economics" became the new gold standard for "good governance." In countries like New Zealand and Ireland, Christensen shows how generalist bureaucrats were gradually replaced by economists. These new actors arrived with reformist zeal and a vocabulary of models and metrics. They often overruled local knowledge and democratic input.

Indonesian economists Ali Wardhana (left) and Widjojo Nitisastro (right), members of Suharto's "Berkeley mafia," speak with Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation Eegje Schoo at a meeting of the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia in The Hague, Netherlands, June 1983.Credit: Rob Croes/Anefo

A similar shift happened in Asia, and in some places, it was even sharper. Take Indonesia. In the late 1960s, General Suharto leaned on a group of U.S.-trained economists, the Berkeley Mafia. They introduced sweeping liberalisation: opening markets, slashing subsidies, cutting public spending. Their power didn't just come from Suharto. It came from their Western training and global credibility. As MacIntyre notes, they acted "above politics." But in truth, they shaped politics deeply, redefining development and deciding priorities.

This idea of expertise as neutrality is appealing. But William Easterly warns that it often becomes a "tyranny of experts." Economic advice tends to arrive wrapped in the language of necessity. But underneath, it carries political judgments, about whose interests count, what kind of future matters, and which costs are acceptable.

Economists don't just rely on models. They project authority through how they speak, how they dress, and where they work. Maesse and others show that economists perform credibility. They use charts, jargon, and institutional badges to signal rigour, even when their assumptions are questionable. This creates a hierarchy. A World Bank economist automatically carries more weight than a local NGO researcher, even when making the same argument.

The media helps sustain this. Research by Mellado and colleagues shows that journalists often turn to economists for "objective" views, even on debates full of values, like welfare or environmental justice. Economists become default explainers. They break down complex issues using GDP or inflation. But this narrows the debate. Those who speak from lived experience or moral tradition are pushed aside.

This is what Cahal Moran, Joe Earle, and Zach Ward-Perkins call the "econocracy." It's a world where economics replaces democratic debate. Universities play a key role. As the authors argue, economics education has become depoliticised. Students are trained to solve neat puzzles, not to ask critical questions. When they graduate, they're ready to answer "how much" or "how fast", but not "for whom" or "why." They're taught to treat politics as noise. The economy becomes a machine. Dissent becomes irrational. This thinking continues into their careers. They enter think tanks, global agencies, and regulators. And there too, policies are crafted using equations, not ethics.

One clear example of this shift is the rise of central banks. Once low-profile, they now sit at the heart of economic policy and often operate outside democratic checks. As Marion Fourcade shows, this is part of a larger pattern. Economics has become a global profession, with common norms and authority structures.

The steady global rise of central banks marks the growing institutionalisation of economic authority. Credit: Marion Fourcade, Berkeley; The construction of a Global Profession: Transnationalisation of Economics

This narrowing of perspective has real effects. During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, UK economists warned against taking on more debt. The government delayed lockdowns and spending. A 2021 parliamentary inquiry called it one of the worst public health failures in British history. Sweden followed a similar logic. Economists assumed people would act rationally without mandates. But the virus spread, and deaths rose far above those in neighbouring countries. In the U.S., economists in the Trump administration resisted large stimulus plans. They believed markets would self-correct. But unemployment soared. In Asia, similar debates played out. South Korea managed to contain the virus early on. But proposals for stronger support to low-income workers were blocked by fiscal hawks. In Japan, the Ministry of Finance hesitated on cash transfers, even as economic distress grew.

Despite these missteps, economists haven't lost influence. Why? Because they've redefined "credibility." Fourcade and others found that the public sees economists as more trustworthy than politicians, even when their advice fails. Their power doesn't come from elections. It comes from status, institutional roles, and fluency in numbers. Global imitation adds to this. Countries don't just adopt reforms under pressure. Often, they do it to appear modern and competent. As Dani Rodrik notes, reform trends spread faster than their results can be evaluated. Leaders bring in economists to send a signal to investors, donors, or other governments. Economists become symbols of rational statecraft.

So, what's happening here isn't just about who holds the job. It's about how authority itself is changing. Economists are no longer backstage advisers. They're often the final word on what's "serious" or "sensible." Economic thinking has replaced older ways of talking about justice, care, and solidarity.

The rise of the econocracy isn't just about expertise. It's about the quiet erasure of politics itself.

How the Multilateral Organisations Extended Economists' Power

Perhaps the clearest example of how economists came to shape not just ideas but outcomes was the structural adjustment era in the 1980s and 1990s. Debt crises swept through Latin America, parts of Africa, and much of Asia. Governments were desperate. And so, one after another, they turned to the IMF and World Bank.

Help was offered, but not without conditions. These weren't just any loans. They came attached to sweeping economic reforms: devaluing currencies, cutting public subsidies, reducing the size of the state, opening up to foreign trade, and tightening public finances. Each of these steps was justified as economically sound. The argument was that these measures would help fix balance-of-payments problems, restore investor confidence, and eliminate inefficiencies.

But that's only one side of the story.

The human cost was steep, often devastating. Social protections were stripped back. Inequality widened. Elected governments saw their space to manoeuvre shrink.

And who designed these blueprints? Not politicians. It was economists, most of them trained in elite U.S. universities or closely linked to international institutions, who were now setting the rules.

Sociologist Marion Fourcade describes this shift as the rise of a global economic elite. They weren't united by nationality but by training, credentials, and a shared outlook rooted in Anglo-American economic ideas. They spoke the same technical language. They valued the same "indicators." And most importantly, they were treated as the final word on what counted as rational policy.

But this wasn't just about individuals. The spread of central banks tells us something deeper. Since the late 19th century, these institutions have multiplied. And after 1945, their growth exploded. Most of them are kept at arm's length from public accountability. Yet they control interest rates, inflation targets, even employment goals. In many ways, they became the institutional face of technocracy. They are the infrastructure of what many now call the depoliticisation of economic governance.

This world didn't collapse after the 2008 crisis. In fact, it became even more entrenched. The global financial crisis caused enormous disruption, bank failures, evictions, mass unemployment. People were angry. And for a moment, it seemed like the credibility of economists might finally crack. How could they not have seen this coming?

But oddly, the opposite happened. Economists were brought right back in to fix what they hadn't prevented. Central banks got more powers. New layers of regulation were added. In places like Italy and Greece, unelected technocrats were brought in to lead governments, on the assumption that economic expertise mattered more than political mandate. "Confidence" and "stability" became the language that drowned out all dissent.

COVID-19 did disrupt this pattern, but only briefly. Faced with a global health emergency, governments across the world suspended the usual rules. They paused austerity. They spent money. And they spent big. For once, the priorities were clear: public health, basic welfare, livelihoods. Many economists hesitated. They warned against runaway debt. They feared inflation, moral hazard, unsustainable deficits. But public pressure and sheer urgency forced states to act. And here's what's striking: the doomsday predictions didn't come true. Governments pumped in cash. Benefits were extended. Central banks bought bonds like never before. And yet, the sky didn't fall.

Still, as soon as the crisis eased, the old playbook returned. By 2021, the IMF was once again talking about fiscal consolidation. Reports urged governments to start planning for debt reduction. Pandemic-era welfare schemes, they said, had to be rolled back. Meanwhile, voices from healthcare, education, and climate action asked for continued investment. But those voices were drowned out. Once again, economic discipline took centre stage.

And in the Global South, this return was even more unforgiving. Zambia, Sri Lanka, Argentina, all found themselves in new IMF deals. And like clockwork, the conditions followed: cut spending, reduce deficits, restructure debt. None of this was new. Ghana had seen this script in the 1980s. Back then, the IMF had advised sharp currency devaluation, large-scale layoffs, and subsidy removal. Rural economies crumbled. Education became harder to afford. But these outcomes were treated as unfortunate side effects, regrettable, perhaps, but necessary. The same story played out in Pakistan in 2022. To qualify for an IMF bailout, the government was required to slash fuel subsidies, at the exact moment inflation was hitting poor families the hardest. Again and again, countries have had to make the same trade-off: set aside domestic priorities, whether jobs, food, or healthcare, for the sake of macroeconomic "stability." That word, stability, hides a great

deal. What it usually means is investor confidence, currency discipline, and reduced deficits. But it rarely includes equity, human dignity, or long-term development.

And who defines this version of stability? Not the public. Not elected leaders. But experts. Economists. Often not even from the country concerned. They sit in Washington, or Paris, or London. And they decide what is acceptable. This is not just a technical question. It's a political one. Who gets to decide what a country can or cannot do? Who has the right to draw the boundaries of the possible? When unelected experts start taking those calls, we have to ask, what happens to democracy?

Why It Matters

You'd think that with all the noise around populism, anti-elitist rhetoric, distrust of institutions, economists would find themselves on the defensive. That hasn't really happened. If anything, they've stayed put. In many cases, they've just shifted slightly, adjusting their language without changing much underneath. Populism, it turns out, doesn't always replace the economic orthodoxy. Often, it just bends around it. Experts across regions, Europe, Asia, Latin America, have observed the same thing: short-term boosts in spending, some louder calls for redistribution. But the basic rules stay the same. The same benchmarks. The same gatekeeping logic.

And that logic runs deeper than people realise. It's not just that economists influence policy. It's that they shape the way we talk about policy in the first place. The vocabulary. The assumptions. The categories we think in. Take something like welfare. It used to be about rights, about justice. Now it's about whether we can "afford" it. Whether there's room in the fiscal "space." Language like that, once it becomes normal, starts to change everything.

Because once you start talking like that, other things get pushed out. Questions about fairness, about harm, about who gains and who loses, they don't go away, but they get harder to ask. Not because anyone banned them, but because the frame has shifted. Redistribution becomes a risk. Demands for jobs or social investment sound irresponsible. Even harmful policies, ones that leave people worse off, get framed as "necessary reforms."

The most powerful kind of influence isn't when someone tells you what to do. It's when they convince you that other choices don't exist.

That's where the model comes in. Once a spreadsheet tells you something is "unsustainable," most people stop arguing. They don't ask what's behind the formula, or whether the assumptions make sense. They just take it as a limit. A rule. And that's the quiet power, when policy paths get closed off before they're even voiced.

And it doesn't just affect governments. Even well-meaning leaders find themselves boxed in. Central banks, credit rating agencies, market pressures, they all create a corridor. Not one with walls, exactly, but with warnings. Step outside and you risk panic, downgrade, and, capital flight. So even when people want to do something different, they're told "we can't." Or worse, "we shouldn't."

Over time, that builds up into a kind of resignation. You see it in technocratic language, how officials talk about trade-offs, how they justify cuts or delays. They're not bad people. But they've been taught to think within a system that feels neutral, even when it isn't.

And here's the kicker: economists often believe in the neutrality too. They're not trying to be ideological. But as Algan and others have shown, many economists trust their models too much. They believe in the universality of what they're doing. But assumptions don't always travel. What works

in one context may fall flat in another. And when it does, the fallout isn't theoretical. It's real. Still, the models spread. Goutsmedt is right, central banks and expert agencies don't just apply knowledge, they define what knowledge looks like. And because the templates mostly come from the West, countries in the Global South adopt them not because they always work, but because they're expected to. They make you look credible. They speak the right language.

That's the paradox. It's not that economics is detrimental. It's that it's become too narrow. Too closed. Too sure of itself. What we need isn't less economics, it's more room for debate inside it. More pluralism. More discomfort. Less pretending that politics can be optimised away.

Because in the end, the real question is: who decides what matters? If those decisions happen outside democratic spaces, wrapped in technical language, we're not just losing policy fights. We're losing the ability to ask the right questions. ■

2025 Spring Meetings of The WB and The IMF Credit: World Bank


PARIS 2024

Sport and the Construction of Political Legitimacy

AURKO CHAKRABARTI

Bread, Circuses, and the Business of Image

In ancient Rome, a satirical poet named Juvenal coined the phrase "bread and circuses" to mock a political strategy where the masses were pacified with food and grand spectacles. Gladiatorial games and festivals were not innocent entertainment. They were tools of distraction, designed to ensure the public forgot its hunger for justice, rights, or accountability. What mattered was the appearance of stability, strength, and generosity.

Two millennia later, that strategy persists. Only now, the arenas are global. The players are oil-rich monarchies, climate-damaging corporations, and major powers staging tournaments for the world to cheer. And the term we use for it is sportswashing.

Much has been written about authoritarian states using sports to launder their reputations, but what if the very concept of sportswashing is politically loaded? What if it reflects not just ethical concern, but a deeper struggle over who gets to define legitimacy and whose exercise of power is seen as manipulative or noble?

This article traces the double standards that underpin the popular usage of sportswashing. It looks at how sport has always been used as a vehicle for soft power, and questions why some actors are applauded for their outreach while others are ridiculed or condemned. More importantly, it asks whether the term itself has become a form of narrative control, used selectively by those who claim moral superiority while practising the same tactics themselves.

Sportswashing: A Brief History of a Loaded Term

Although the word "sportswashing" only entered mainstream discourse around 2015, the practice it describes is ancient. From Athenian chariot races staged mid-war to Roman gladiatorial games that followed mass executions, sports have long been used to distract, pacify, and project dominance.

Modern sportswashing has clearer roots in 20th-century authoritarianism. Italy's 1934 FIFA World Cup under Mussolini was a tightly controlled spectacle meant to glorify fascism. Two years later, Nazi Germany hosted the 1936 Berlin Olympics

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with the explicit intention of whitewashing its militarism and antisemitism. Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, described the Games as an opportunity to portray Germany as cultured and peace-loving. Anti-Jewish signage was temporarily removed. Roma and Sinti families were rounded up and placed in camps. Meanwhile, foreign newspapers reported cheerful crowds and "picturesque" hospitality. Within three years, Germany invaded Poland and launched the most devastating war in human history.

These early examples are not marginal. They are foundational. The Berlin Olympics set the pattern that many governments would later follow: distract global audiences with coordinated visual storytelling, suppress internal dissent during the event window, and use the international press as unwitting amplifiers of the state's narrative.

The term "sportswashing" itself emerged much later. Amnesty International popularised it in 2018 while criticising the decline of human rights in Russia during its hosting of the Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup. The term was then applied to Qatar's 2022 World Cup, to Saudi Arabia's massive investments in boxing, Formula 1, and golf, and to China's hosting of the Winter Olympics. Its usage spiked from 51 media mentions in 2018 to over 6,000 in 2023, according to media tracking by The Conversation.

Yet this explosion in usage raises a central question: Why is sportswashing applied mostly to Gulf states, China, and Russia, while similar efforts by the United States, the United Kingdom, or major corporations are labelled cultural diplomacy or soft power?

The Bias of Soft Power

Joseph Nye famously defined soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. When the US funds basketball leagues in Africa or hosts Olympic Games, it is often seen as fostering cross-cultural understanding. When the UK launches the Premier League as part of trade diplomacy, it is celebrated as creative foreign policy. Even military-funded spectacles, such as the NFL's "Salute to Service" campaigns funded with over USD 50 million from the Pentagon, are framed as patriotic outreach.

But when Saudi Arabia invests in Newcastle United, launches the LIV Golf tour, or wins a bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup, the word used is sportswashing.

This discrepancy is not accidental. The distinction between soft power and sportswashing is one of perspective, not substance. The West, which has long defined the terms of legitimacy in global politics, is quick to delegitimise similar strategies when deployed by rising powers. Both the UK and the US have used sport to repair reputations after controversial wars, yet receive little criticism. By contrast, when Middle Eastern nations do the same, the result is international outcry, boycotts, and moral grandstanding.

It is not that criticisms of human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia or China are invalid. They are crucial. But the question is why similar scrutiny is not applied to the sponsors of the NFL, the ownership of American franchises by fossil fuel corporations, or the treatment of migrant workers in US-hosted events.

In short, the problem is not the exposure of abuses. It is the selective attention to which abuses deserve exposure, and which are politely ignored.

When Power Stops Pretending

In 2023, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was asked about accusations of sportswashing. His response was

characteristically blunt: "If sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by 1 percent, then we'll continue doing sportswashing." It was a remarkable moment, not just of defiance, but of clarity.

This was not the performance of soft power. This was power owning the strategy. There was no attempt to hide behind reformist rhetoric or global dialogue. Saudi Arabia had become, as many commentators described it, the world's leading sportswashing machine and it no longer cared who knew.

The brazenness of this admission may have shocked Western observers, but it revealed a truth that has long been obscured: that sportswashing is not about deception alone. It is also about permission. And when institutions like FIFA or the International Olympic Committee grant mega-events to countries with known human rights abuses, it is not simply those regimes that are engaging in reputation-laundering. The bodies that award these events and the sponsors that fund them are fully complicit.

The awarding of the 2034 FIFA World Cup to Saudi Arabia is a case in point. In May 2025, a coalition of international lawyers filed a complaint arguing that FIFA had breached its own human rights rules by greenlighting the bid without any public plan to address civil liberties, women's rights, or judicial independence in the kingdom. One of the signatories was Mark Pieth, FIFA's former anti-corruption advisor. Yet despite these legal concerns, FIFA President Gianni Infantino called the decision "a positive step."

This wasn't a naive misstep. It was a calculated move that reinforced the principle that sports diplomacy is judged not by universal standards, but by global hierarchies of political and economic usefulness.

The Gold Cup and the Geography of Power

In the summer of 2025, another sportswashing controversy surfaced, not in Saudi Arabia or China, but in the United States.

Saudi Arabia had been invited to participate in the CONCACAF Gold Cup, a tournament traditionally reserved for North and Central American teams. The invitation made little competitive sense. Saudi Arabia had not even qualified for the Asian Cup. Yet it appeared in a tournament halfway around the world, wearing the badge of legitimacy.

Behind this invitation lay a complex web of sponsorship deals. Aramco, Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil giant, had recently become CONCACAF's official energy partner. Riyadh Air signed on as its airline sponsor. The kingdom's Public Investment Fund (PIF) was already heavily invested in football, with ties to Atlético Madrid and the Premier League.

This was not about football. It was about influence acquisition. By embedding itself in regional sports ecosystems, Saudi Arabia was exporting its brand, not only in the symbolic sense, but through physical infrastructure, logistics, and finance. What looked like soft power on the surface was, in fact, strategic capture.

Even the U.S. Senate took notice. Senator Richard Blumenthal launched a probe into PIF's influence operations in the United States, including its role in the controversial merger between LIV Golf and the PGA Tour. While Saudi entities resisted subpoenas, the episode revealed the limitations of Western regulatory frameworks. Foreign soft power could operate freely in domestic markets, but media narratives would still frame the Saudis as invaders rather than participants in a shared game.

When Corporations Play the Same Game

The critique of sportswashing often targets authoritarian governments. But what about corporations? If the test is whether powerful entities use sport to sanitize harmful activities, then fossil fuel companies, gambling firms, and even national militaries are deeply guilty.

According to a 2024 Guardian investigation, fossil fuel companies have spent over USD 5.6 billion on global sports sponsorships. Aramco led the list, followed by Ineos, Shell, and TotalEnergies. Their logos adorn Formula 1 cars, football jerseys, golf tournaments, and snowboarding events. Shell has been a sponsor of Ferrari in F1 since 1929. Aramco backs Aston Martin's racing team. Ineos co-owns Manchester United.

What do these companies have in common? They are among the top global emitters of carbon. They have been accused of obstructing climate policy, funding denialist campaigns, and downplaying the health consequences of their operations. Yet their presence in sport presents them as champions of innovation, resilience, and high performance.

The parallels with tobacco advertising in the 1990s are not accidental. As climate think tanks like the New Weather Institute have argued, this is healthwashing at a planetary scale. By associating their products with elite sport, oil companies seek not only visibility, but emotional alignment with vitality and celebration.

And yet, we rarely call this sportswashing. When a monarchy invests in football, it is manipulative. When a carbon major funds Formula 1, it is just business.

This double standard reveals a deeper problem. It is not just that some forms of soft power are overlooked. It is that the very tools used to critique soft power are themselves selectively deployed a kind of epistemic sportswashing, where criticism becomes a shield for power rather than a mirror to it.

The Behavioural Economy of Belief

To understand why sportswashing works, we need to step away from geopolitics and consider how sport operates on the human psyche.

Sport is immersive. It is one of the last truly live forms of entertainment, with built-in drama, symbolism, and emotional payoff. Unlike a film or a campaign ad, a football final or a title race cannot be replayed, edited, or paused. It commands undivided attention. That attention—when directed en masse—is what makes sport one of the most valuable marketing platforms in the world.

As David O'Connor, a media executive and sports investor, put it: "Sport is the single greatest aggregation of audiences. It's consumed live, therefore it becomes the single most valuable marketing platform in the world."

This insight is critical. Sportswashing is not effective because it hides the truth. It works because it offers a more compelling alternative to the truth—one wrapped in the universal language of emotion, loyalty, and triumph.

When fans cheer for Lionel Messi in a Paris Saint-Germain jersey, sponsored by Qatar Airways, they are not consciously thinking about labour rights in Doha. When millions tuned in for LIV Golf, few were reflecting on the Yemeni blockade. This is not indifference. It is cognitive dissonance management. The psychological theory suggests that people resolve uncomfortable contradictions by rationalising their passions—telling themselves that sport is "just sport," or that politics should be kept out of entertainment.

Behavioural economics offers additional tools to explain this. The halo effect—where

admiration in one domain spills over into others—means that athletic excellence can shield corporate or state sponsors from scrutiny. The moral licensing effect means that small gestures of goodwill (like public donations or gender equity statements) can obscure deeper structural harm.

In short, the public is not deceived so much as it is emotionally co-opted. Sportswashing works not by lying, but by reshaping the stage on which morality itself is judged.

Resistance, Fractures, and Fan Pushback

Despite this, resistance has grown. Fans are not passive consumers. In Newcastle, some supporters formed the group NUFC Against Sportswashing, openly protesting Saudi ownership of their football club. Bayern Munich fans unfurled banners decrying their club's relationship with Qatar. Human rights groups have launched campaigns targeting sponsors, venues, and sports federations.

But even here, the politics of protest are uneven. Fan groups in the West are often lauded as ethical watchdogs, while protests in the Global South are framed as instability or cultural discord. Activism against sportswashing is necessary—but to be effective, it must also be self-reflective. It must ask whose moral instincts are centred, whose suffering is spotlighted, and whose complicity remains invisible.

The most promising avenue for disruption is transparency. If sportswashing depends on emotional opacity, then data, disclosures, and investigative journalism can force public reappraisal. Reports tracing fossil fuel sponsorships, legal challenges to FIFA's bid process, and Senate investigations into sovereign wealth influence are all signs that the curtain is beginning to slip.

But awareness alone is not enough. As Charles argues in his SSRN paper, most global audiences already know what sportswashing is. The challenge is not knowledge, but incentive. Until sport federations, sponsors, and consumers face reputational or financial risk, the game will go on.

Reversals and Ironies

Here is the ultimate irony: the term "sportswashing" has become so overused, so selectively applied, that it is beginning to backfire—not just for regimes, but for the media critics themselves. If every event is sportswashing, then none are. If only certain actors are called out while others escape scrutiny, then the critique begins to look like geopolitics dressed up as ethics.

Some Gulf officials have already begun to flip the term on its head. They embrace it as a symbol of strategic success. Mohammed bin Salman's comment was not only bold; it was a kind of discursive judo—deflecting criticism by acknowledging its economic logic.

This reflects a broader shift. The age of plausible deniability is over. Power no longer pretends. It no longer asks for moral validation. It only asks to be seen, and to be recognised as legitimate through participation.

The real question now is not whether sportswashing is happening, but who gets to name it, and who gets to escape it. And more dangerously, whether the critique itself has become a tool of soft power—selectively applied to delegitimise others, while protecting those who profit from the same playbook.

Rethinking Power in the Age of the Spectacle

If sport was once a neutral terrain, an arena for pure competition, community, and

shared humanity, that innocence is long gone. In today's global economy, sport is infrastructure. It is narrative. It is capital, diplomacy, soft power, and emotional control.

And it is power. Not just the visible kind wielded by regimes or executives, but the quieter, more insidious kind that Steven Lukes would call the "third dimension" of power. This is the power to shape what is seen as legitimate, what counts as politics, and whose image is allowed to be rehabilitated.

The term "sportswashing" has become a weapon in this arena. For some, it is a way to call out hypocrisy and injustice. For others, it is a moral label applied selectively, one that obscures how deeply the Global North has used sport to manage its own crises, wars, and inequities.

What's missing from much of the current discourse is this understanding of asymmetry. Not all regimes play on equal footing. Not all actors have the same access to forgiveness or forgetfulness. And not all critiques are born from altruism. The West, too, has used sport to launder its reputation. The United States created a Sports Diplomacy Division in 2002 to project soft power through cultural exchange. The United Kingdom used the 2012 Olympics to reposition itself after years of military intervention abroad. Even multinational corporations, from Shell to Coca-Cola, have used sports to distract from labour abuses, climate damage, and market monopolies.

The Moral Politics of Attention

So how do we make sense of sportswashing without becoming trapped in its contradictions?

One approach is to examine not just what is being said, but who is saying it and why. When Western media outlets call out sportswashing, are they truly defending human rights? Or are they defending a monopoly on image-making? When fans protest foreign ownership but ignore domestic exploitation, is that moral clarity or selective outrage?

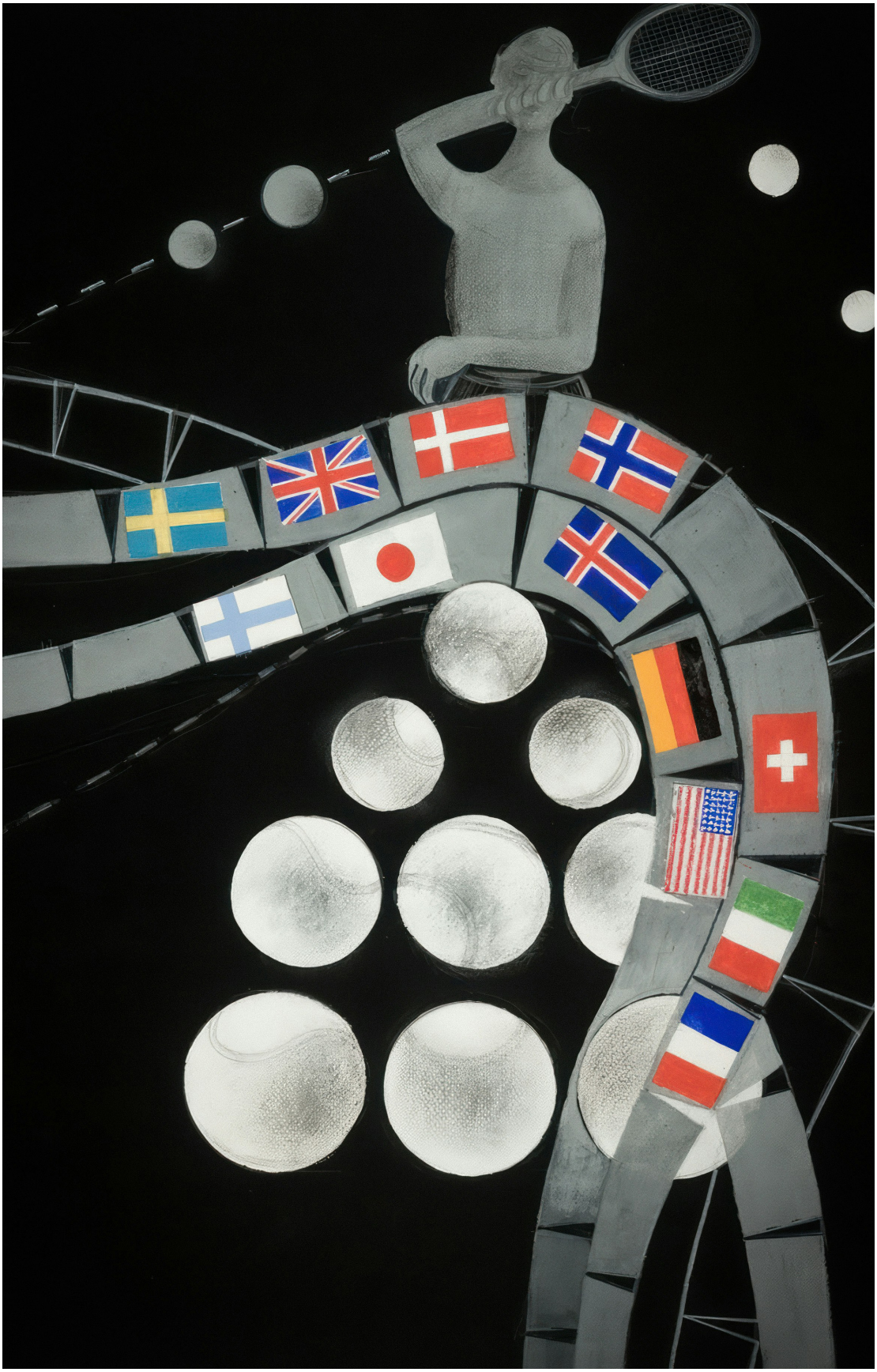
To be clear, none of this means sportswashing is a fiction. The abuses in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, China, and elsewhere are real, documented, and worthy of scrutiny. But to engage in that scrutiny meaningfully, we must also interrogate the frameworks we use, lest they become tools of erasure themselves. A truly global conversation on sport and power must be non-hypocritical, non-exceptionalist, and historically conscious. It must ask why the suffering of some workers is more visible than others. It must look at who profits from global tournaments, who gets silenced in the name of commercial partnerships, and who benefits when ethical critique becomes performative theatre.

Whose Game Are We Playing?

In the end, the problem is not sport. Sport is joy, aspiration, and unity. The problem is how easily it can be captured and turned into a stage for denial, distraction, and domination.

Sportswashing is real, but so is narrative laundering. The task before us is not to silence critique, but to sharpen it. To ensure that it doesn't become another commodity sold back to us in the form of clickbait headlines or selective outrage. We must look not only at the regimes that play the game, but also at the referees, the rule-makers, and the fans in the stands. We must ask who gets to own the spectacle, and who is forever seen as suspect for trying.

Because in the world of sportswashing, the real question is not who's playing. It's who's allowed to win. ■



The Changing Contours of the Modern War

PRIYANKA GARODIA

The world once was a tug-of-war between two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union. It then became a solo venture by the United States resulting in a unipolar order. Today, it is chaotic and anarchic with multiple actors vying for influence, assertion and power.

This multipolar world order does not have clear dichotomies. Conflict isn't simply about guns, missiles and bullets but also about narratives, culture, economics and algorithms.

The rupture of the world order is more than the simple redistribution of power but reflects a deeper transformation of the nature of conflict. War is a highly political phenomenon, so much more than simply what states do.

It is a fragmented landscape of power across institutions, domains and actors. The gun is as important as micro-fibre cables, cash-flows and algorithms. War is shaped by domestic turbulence, politicking, struggles over identities, culture and decentralised power cores as it is by AK-47s or an M60. Power today is diffused, multi-dimensional, and often wielded by actors beyond the state, requiring a fundamental rethinking of both strategy and governance.

Why has the world which was once averse to war seeing so many active conflicts today? Who are the primary actors involved in these conflicts? Are the threats that lead to conflict different from what they used to be or are they the same? Are states still the sovereign actors involved in war? And most importantly what implications does this have for power?

Understanding Power Today

Power today can be imagined broadly as a triangle – with each end representing hard, soft and smart power. Hard power is the military strength of a country and soft power - the ability to persuade others to work in their interest with the help of culture, values, diplomacy and ideology. Smart power integrates both hard power and soft power dependant on the audiences and circumstances in which a country finds itself. Modern conflict is a manifestation of all these forces playing out among different actors.

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The Rise of Sharp Power

There a fourth node of power as well – sharp power. Sharp power in the application of corrosive tactics, deception and manipulation to influence perception. This involves the weaponisation of technology, misinformation campaigns, the spreading of lies - all used to amass popularity and power.

The old-world order was dominated by hard power. Today's multipolar world does on rely on hard power alone but also the power of countries to persuade and co-opt. Guns and grenades are a necessity but not the only markers of strength.

Hybrid Wars and Multipolarity

Conflict has become hybrid. Nations need to convince people into believing they are right, reliable and respectable in their motives and do not rely solely on conquest. It is determined by the sociopolitical conditions in which national politics takes place. The dispersion of power has led to increased competition over resources, technology, values and recently over who gets to decide the narrative that shapes the global world.

The transformation in conflict in recent times is largely due to a change from centralised state-oriented political power to a more dispersed spectrum that includes non-state actors, markets, weapons manufacturers, technological companies and others. The resulting landscape is a messy, chaotic and ever-changing scene of actors involved in modern day conflict with differing agendas to achieve.

The Multipolar World

Every country is developing its own doctrine and strategy of power - with a toolkit designed to maximise its influence.

The United States has moved away from a doctrine that relied on hard power to a smarter blend. While having the world's largest military it also uses the power of Hollywood, alliances, elite universities to project its power. It balances the use of charm and violence when it comes to attainting its objectives.

Similarly, China has developed an arsenal of soft and smart power. It uses large infrastructural projects like the Belt and Road Initiative and a slew of Confucius Institutes (CI) to promote economic influence and Chinese culture abroad. In the shadows of this diplomacy, it has quietly been modernising its army.

Countries like India and Brazil have been pursuing a blend of soft power and smart power with an emphasis on tech diplomacy, regional cooperation, and cultural exports. The Middle East uses long-term partnerships and alliances to create deeper connections. Turkey uses its state capacities to increase its connection with the Islamic world while Gulf States are deeply entrenched in upscaling its miliary-industrial capacities.

Russia has adopted a blend of defence diplomacy and strategic disruption. It has used the import of the S-400 missile system to deepen dependence on it. Its recent invasion of Ukraine has relied mostly on the use of hard power to achieve its global ambitions.

Europe on the other hand leans heavily on the use of soft power where it focuses on human rights, climate diplomacy, peacekeeping and tourism. When it comes to military strength it relies on NATO that acts as its borrowed muscle.

What can be inferred from this is that countries behave differently when their survival is secured. Liberal democracies that were once convincing enough to create consensus among people to meet political ends is undergoing a transformation presently.

War no longer remains a political project of the state solely. The stakes are higher and the actors involved in modern conflict have more to loose - from power, profit and the ability to influence people.

The Proliferation of Conflict Actors

The scattered landscape of conflict is littered with a slew of actors vying for a slice of the power-pie – the state and non-state actors, technological giants, economic institutions and shadow agents.

Modern agents of conflict have evolved with globalisation and technological advancements. Battlefields include militias, tech giants, humanitarian agencies, insurgent groups and other non-state actors along with the state.

The state remains central to the edifice of conflict, however, some of its influence has been dispersed to other actors. Sovereignty and the official use of violence remain in the sole control of the state making it a primary actor. However, since conflict has become messier and is often defined by the larger sociopolitical conditions of national politics – the agents of conflict are those who have some political stake in the situation.

The myriad intersections of threats, interests and opportunities that these agents pursue become issues at stake and violence erupts. Whether it be the troubled Assad regime in Syria that just fell or the Sudanese crisis between the SAF and the RSF or whether the FARC that fought the Colombian government till 2017.

Violent Non-State Actors

The dichotomy between legitimacy and non-legitimacy has broken down in today's times. Weak states see the emergence of "shadow elites" that operate between the official and private spheres – they often challenge traditional notions of accountability and democracy. These power brokers emerge from communities that govern themselves, build alliance and are involved in resource distribution – as displayed by the emergence of non-state actors both violent and non-violent internationally.

Violent non-state groups are embodiments of those agents that mix governance, identity, and advance-technology weaponry. Outfits like these - that mostly use propaganda and digitally networked identities to weaponise both ideology and infrastructure have begun to access superior technology weapons making them more dangerous. Groups like this challenge the monopoly of violence that rests with states. They have begun to adopt technologically superior weaponry like drones and autonomous weapons systems (AWS) not simply for tactical advantages but also to project power and influence from the bottom-up.

Jihadist organisations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda have used drone technology to enhance their operational capacities – as evidenced by the Al-Qaeda branches in Yemen or Syria. ISIS's wings in Iraq and Syria have developed a sophisticated system of drone technology that it uses for reconnaissance, surveillance and even in spreading propaganda. Hezbollah has also used advanced armed drones in their recent skirmishes with the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).

Paramilitary groups like Wagner and Blackwater have been equally influential situations of conflict. While they come with state support, they are still private security providers that exert undue influence in shadow conflicts. Wagner has been linked with the conflicts in Syria and the Central African Republic (CAR) where it was responsible for providing military training, security and combat training to rebel soldiers. Often seen as state proxies, these private security companies function

in a 'grey' zone which allows states to have plausible deniability, complicating issues of accountability.

Tech Giants as Geopolitical Players

Information and technology are a crucial source of power in post-industrial societies. The control over the flow of information and its consequent narratives equals the possession of power. Wars are being fought over servers and satellites too.

Technological firms are not bystanders but are heavily involved in conflicts – SpaceX's Starlink was crucial in the Ukrainian war to keep communications alive. Amazon and Microsoft provide cloud space to governments to upload their information for safe storage.

Social media platforms influence public opinion. Earlier states had the final say on what was true or not – now that is being challenged by these platforms. Bots, misinformation campaigns and viral hashtag influence foreign policy and global perceptions. Digital spaces have emerged as extensions of battlefields.

These technologies and their advancements are destabilising not simply because they can destruction but because of how they disrupt battlefield realities. Whether it be decision-making or distinctions between aggression and defence – technology has changed the game. Hypersonic missiles while reducing warning time of strikes also risks escalations. Cyber vulnerabilities of nuclear weapons have increased - leading to unpredictability and uncertainty that deterrence does not account for. Digital survival has become important.

Economic Institutions

Economic institutions like the IMF, World Bank and the World Trade Centre – are not above the fray. They are enablers and regulators. Conflict today plays out on excel sheets as much as the trenches. Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) as implemented by the World Bank have been linked to weakened state capacities in Zambia, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire and heightened vulnerability to conflict and triggering unrest.

China has created alternate economic platforms like BRICS and Belt and Road Initiative to create newer alignments and move away from western influence. Supply chains and financial flows are now used for coercion or alliance-building. The Bretton Woods economic order is being challenged by the Chinese and those who want to join its bandwagon.

Win Wars - Weaponise Everything

What binds all these dispersed domains is the conversion of tools into weapons. Everything from bullets to berets are weaponised in today's times. Drones that were meant for defence are now assets that are used by insurgents. Education with its original agenda of development has become a domain of power-influence.

Humanitarian aid corridors which are generally lifelines during times of war are now weaponised for systemic starvation – as evidenced in Gaza. Humanitarian assistance during the wars in Syria and Libya were selectively granted to faction complainant with western interests. Aid agencies are redefining and reorienting functioning in such a deeply politicised world. Peace has become illiberal. Whether it is sending satellites into the low-Earth orbit or other

such resilience strategies – everything has double use and can be weaponised.

What becomes important then for such dual-use technology is perception. With the normalisation of dual-use infrastructure like this – every grant, every project, every fibre-optical wire is investigated for hidden motives.

From machine learning models to AI models to quantum computing everything is used to further some or the cause – whether it is to predict troop movements or voting patterns.

Financial dependency has also been weaponised in today's times – China has been accused of using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to do the same; the US uses financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF to foster common financial interests, while Russia used energy exports to create a system of favour during the Ukrainian crisis. Asymmetrical economic reliance has caused geopolitical tensions.

Culture has been weaponised too – whether it is the soft diplomacy of K-Pop that South Korea uses or the appeal of Japanese ramen. Hollywood and Bollywood have emerged as major films industries that have been instruments of soft power dispersal. Streaming platforms like Spotify and companies like Apple – have been instrumental in generating soft power. China has created an entire social media ecosystem to counter-narratives of Western imperialism.

To draw a long story short – everything assumed to be neutral has been included into a geopolitical arsenal, whether it be education, trade, religion or media. Battlefields are borderless.

Reinventing Power – What it Means

We have more than 50 active conflicts being fought today as per the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), including the aggressions of Ukraine, the West Bank and Sudan. Cyberattacks, piracy and satellite-warfare has increased. It was assumed with the end of the second world war and the deployment of the nuclear bomb that – war was dead. Inter-state conflict was assumed to be all but over – what we see now is on the contrary. Conflict isn't over it has simply spilled over in domains that remained out of its reach – it has simply proliferated.

It is those actors that adapt to these hybrid circumstances are the ones who will win. The very meaning of the word victory is changing. During the Cold War, deterrence was imagined to be victory – when neither side could attack. Today victory could mean controlling narratives, technological supremacy and restricting adversarial momentum.

One of the primary reasons for the United States not winning its War on Terror or any of its Forever Wars including Iraq and Afghanistan was its unclear vision of what constituted a victory. This confusion along with the coherence and patience displayed by its adversaries did not allow USA to enjoy complete victory despite having superior armed forces.

Smart Power: The Path for Tomorrow?

Smart power needs to be reimagined to be more than a simple amalgamation of hard power or soft power. It should encompass reflexivity, the ability to pivot and assimilate new information, technology and economic stresses. The Clausewitzian understanding of war being fundamentally political would be correct with a few tweaks. While the term 'political' usually denoted partisan squabbling what modern conflict asserts is a struggle for institutional and ideological dominance as well. The largest armies do not win wars as evidenced by Ukraine's

resistance to Russian forces or America's failure in Afghanistan. What wins wars today is the ability to create an environment that moves both armies and narratives.

The idea of conventional deterrence does not hold true anymore – it is outdated and requires including the newer realities of the digital age. Tradition deterrence relied on the threat of retaliation but now with offensive and defensive postures blurring – stability is hard to come by. The nature of threats today is not simply kinetic but also include systems, networks, quantum archives, under-sea cables and botnets. Strategic literacy is required to break through silos and sectors. Anticipating memes with cultural value, understanding blockchain reactions along with drone components is important to understand global competition.

Conclusion - Towards a New Governance Architecture

With 50 active conflicts of which 10 are deemed critical, with countries more than ever on their armies, violent non-state actors becoming important and technological companies gaining precedence in war rooms – we need pre-emptive governance to take centre stage. International norms and humanitarian law are outdated and clearly non-functional. Enforcement by organisations like the ICC remain arbitrary and have mostly lost consensus as seen in Gaza, South Sudan. The right to protect is scattered and the UN has failed in its original mission to prevent conflict from emerging.

New norms that encapsulate the realities of the global order need to develop. The older western security architecture established post-Cold War does not capture the realities of the world including the rise of middle-powers, the ascent of China and the withdrawal of America from the position of global leader. It is on its last legs and requires replacement.

Conflict has been around since time immemorial - states remain the primary agent of war but the power landscape of modern conflict has proliferated significantly. Whether it be violent non-state actors, militant organisations, private militias, cyber actors, technological companies or people sitting behind computers and simply tweeting – all of them influence foreign and economic policies.

The nature of what constitutes an existential threat in today's times has undergone radical revision as well – nuclear missiles are as dangerous as misinformation campaigns or global pandemics. The times are changing, and governance needs to keep up. A more reflexive understanding of the proliferation of power and threats need to be adopted to make sense of what is happening today. ■

The SenseMaker™

Rajat Nag is a distinguished fellow and Member of the Board of the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA) at SGT University, a policy leader and educator. A former Managing Director-General at the Asian Development Bank and Distinguished Fellow of the Emerging Markets Forum, he focuses on governance, public policy innovation, and institutional development in emerging economies.

Amogh Dev Rai:

I formally welcome you to SenseMaker once again. It's good to have this conversation, sir. Good afternoon and we're meeting virtually after a long time. So, first and foremost, welcome back to SenseMaker. This is your third time as a speaker here.

Rajat Nag:

Thanks, Amogh. Glad to be here.

Amogh Dev Rai:

In no particular order, just to familiarise our readers and listeners—

You've served as the Managing Director General of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) from 2006 to 2013, and you've been part of the ADB and other international organisations before that. You got your undergraduate degree in engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi then moved to Canada for your first Master's, and later, another Master's from the London School of Economics and Political Science. You've often mentioned that your interactions with one of your teachers Prof. Amartya Sen) there was pivotal—it made you shift from investment

banking to the world of international development.

Since then, you've remained deeply engaged with international development. Your alma mater in Canada, University of Sakatchewan, conferred on you an honorary doctorate in 2016 in recognition of your contributions to the development story of Asia. After retiring from the ADB, you've served on multiple boards. You're part of a policy based think tank network in Washington D.C. where you a Distinighished Fellow as well at a similar institute in China. You also serve

as the President of the Action for Autism Network in India. And for our audience, of course, you are also a board member at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia and a Distinguished Fellow here at ASIA.

With that introduction, I want to begin the conversation proper. As always on SenseMaker, we're exploring a thematic issue. This edition of Decypher is centred around "Power." So my first question is simple:

Are we in the twilight of institutions? Have we reached a point where institutions are at the mercy of individual power, rather than the other way around?

Rajat Nag:

Well, the short answer is no. We are certainly not in the twilight of institutions. If anything, institutions are more needed now than ever before. I do understand where you're coming from institutions are indeed under threat, and in many places under attack. But that's exactly why they matter more. Societies cannot survive without institutions. They may evolve, take different forms, but I do not see us moving away from the need for strong, robust institutional frameworks.

Amogh Dev Rai:

That's interesting. Many of our readers will be aware of your contribution to this debate through your recent book From Here to Denmark, where you analyse institutional evolution across countries. One of the standout aspects of that book is how it combines analytical depth with grounded case studies—something not easy to do.

So as a follow-up can you walk us through some of the institutional stories you've studied? You allude to future generations in your answer, but I'm curious about what trajectories you've found across countries you've examined.

Rajat Nag:

Before diving into specific countries, let me step back briefly. At its core, the institutional story is about two things. First, institutions are the "rules of the game"—rules that societies evolve over time, giving a framework for how social interactions and governance happen. Second, and just as important, is enforcement. Rules without enforcement are mere words. Institutions only hold if both the rules and enforcement mechanisms exist and reinforce each other.

When we studied different societies—whether Denmark and Great Britain in Europe, Japan and Korea in Asia, Botswana in Africa, or Uruguay in Latin America—we saw a common thread. Despite different cultural and historical contexts, all these societies developed institutions by gradually building consensus around rules of engagement and their enforcement. This mutual reinforcement is key. You can't have one without the other.

Now, depending on the structure of society, institutions evolve differently. Broadly, we see two societal structures: limited access orders and open access orders.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Could you expand on that distinction a bit?

Rajat Nag:

Certainly. In limited access orders, elites control the levers of power. They write the rules to serve their interests and enforce them to maintain their dominance. This leads to extractive, exclusionary institutions designed to preserve the power of a few at the expense of the many.

On the other hand, open access orders are based on merit, competition, and fairness. Entry and rewards are not determined by one's birth or family connections, but by

one's ability and performance. Rules in such societies are clear and enforced uniformly.

So, for any society to achieve good governance, it must make the transition from a limited to an open access order. It doesn't happen overnight. It can take decades or even centuries. But that's the trajectory. Despite different paths societies may follow to reach their 'Denmarks' , the goal remains the same—open, inclusive institutions that uphold fairness.

Amogh Dev Rai:

I've always admired the breadth of countries you cover—you don't confine yourself to GDP per capita or the usual development yardsticks economists often prefer. But there's something I've been meaning to ask you again—because it puzzled me the first time we spoke about it.

What happens when institutions, having reached their apex, begin to turn inward or decline? We've seen this in the United States and other places. There's been a shift away from accountability, something you stress in your work as essential for institutional legitimacy.

In the US, people rally around "1776" as a kind of nostalgic war cry but they forget how long it actually took to build institutions that worked for everyone. Why do societies that have benefited the most from institutional strength seem to turn away from them?

Rajat Nag:

Let me try and break that down in two parts. First, the idea that institutions, once established, are somehow permanent—that's an idle thought. Institutions, even the most robust ones, are fragile. They need constant nurturing. They're not monuments; they're living organisms.

The context in which institutions emerge is never static. The social norms, cultural values, economic conditions—all of these change. So, institutions must evolve too. What worked in 1776 can't simply be carried over into 2025 without adaptation. Otherwise, they become irrelevant.

Now, the second part of your question: why do people start turning inward or away from institutions? That's about power. Remember, institutions are essentially frameworks for distributing and exercising power. But the people enforcing the rules are themselves part of that power structure. When that balance breaks down—when enforcement becomes ad hoc or self-serving—people lose trust. And when that happens, they retreat. First into themselves, then into smaller identities: family, community, tribe.

The global layer complicates this further. People are now impacted not just by domestic changes but by international economic shifts globalisation, supply chains, outsourcing. You could lose your job not because of anything local, but because someone across the world can do it cheaper. When institutions don't respond to this dislocation, people feel abandoned. That breeds resentment and fuels populist narratives.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And that sets the stage for my next question. In a recent speech at the India International Centre, you made a compelling point: that institutions require constant human engagement. They need flexibility, yes, but also decision-makers who see their human dimension.

So I want to focus on the relationship between institutions and economic shocks. How have economic shifts crises, growth spurts, collapses shaped institutional change in the countries you've studied? And what must we watch out for going forward?

Rajat Nag:

That's an important question. Economic growth, of course, matters. But what really drives institutional stability is a broader sense of fairness. People don't expect equality of outcome, but they do expect equity, they expect to be trated fairly. They expect fair access to opportunity and a fair share of the gains economic growth creates.

Growth without equity breeds frustration. Globalisation, for instance, has dramatically benfitted the world. Global poverty has come down significantly over the past several decades. People all over the world are richer, live longer and are more educated than they were a generation back. But not everyone has benefitted equally.

Take the Rust Belt in the United States. Workers there lost jobs, not because of personal failings, but because steel manufacturing moved elsewhere, to China mainly. The US car industry and others benefitted significantly from the cheaper steel. China benefitted from exporting the steel . The benefits were widely dispersed, but the costs were concentrated.but the steel workers in the US lost.

When this happens and society fails to recognise or compensate the losers, people lose faith in institutions. That's when institutions come under pressure, not because they're inherently flawed, but because they're perceived as indifferent to suffering.

Rajat Nag:

So, when institutions fail to mitigate or even acknowledge these losses—when they don't respond to the distress caused by dislocations like job loss, technological change, or globalisation—people begin to feel betrayed. They feel the system is rigged. And that opens the door to populism, resentment, and retreat from institutional trust.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Which brings us to a very paradoxical situation. As you said, globalisation has enlarged the pie. Today, we're not just talking about millionaires and billionaires—we're inching toward trillionaires. Yet, the backlash against the very institutions that facilitated this growth is strongest in the places that gained the most.

You mentioned fairness earlier. But how do we explain the fact that leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Donald Trump in the US—who belong to the very structures that benefited from institutions—are now attacking them? What's really driving this anti-institutional fervour from the top?

Rajat Nag:

It's a crucial question. Again, it ties back to inequality. Globalisation has done a lot of good economic, social, even cultural. But the perception of being left behind is a powerful one, and often it's not totally misplaced.

Steel workers who lose their jobs in the US rust belt see their lives stagnating. Their social standing erodes. A job is not just a paycheque it's also a marker of dignity, relevance, and purpose. When that's taken away, it breeds anger. And that anger can be harnessed by political forces.

Along comes a populist leader who says, "It's not your fault. The elites, the global institutions, the immigrants, the foreign trade pacts—they're to blame. But I'll fix it." This narrative has enormous emotional appeal. It's simple. It offers a target. And it claims to restore dignity.

The tragedy is that the institutions being blamed—multilateral bodies, trade systems, even democratic processes—are in many cases what held things together for decades. But they're not perfect. And when they

don't adapt fast enough, they become easy scapegoats.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And you know this better than most, having spent decades at the helm of a multilateral institution like the ADB. Let's talk about that a bit more directly. These institutions carry enormous power, but they're also constantly under pressure sometimes fairly, often unfairly.

You were managing director general during the 2008 financial crisis arguably the most serious economic shock in recent memory. So, I'd like to ask in two parts.

First, how do these institutions actually make decisions? From the outside, they often seem like black boxes—insular, opaque, elitist. It's easy for critics to say they're run by a few for the few. Is that true?

Rajat Nag:

That's a fair question. So, let's clarify how these institutions are structured. Take the Asian Development Bank, or the World Bank. Unlike the United Nations where each country has one vote, voting power in these multilateral development institutions is weighted by their shareholding.

This obviously means that developed countries have more say in decision-making. That's just a structural reality. But I must add that most decisions are taken by consensus.

Now, the critique that these institutions are black boxes it's not baseless. There's complexity, yes. But they do engage extensively with civil society and other stakeholers. It's part of the operational process. However, let's be clear: the loans or assistance ultimately go to sovereign governments. NGOs or citizens may offer inputs, but final decisions lie with the state.

So yes, civil society voices are heard. But no, they do not carry the same weight as that of member states, especially the more powerful ones.

Amogh Dev Rai:

That brings me to the second part of the question. Many of us, especially those trained in economics after 2008, have felt that the discipline had lost its moral compass. There's been a drift towards mathematical abstraction, sometimes called "physics envy," where models trump common sense. This has affected institutional policy-making too.

Take the United Kingdom. In your book, you mention its institutional transformation as an example of resilience. But economically, it's been trapped in austerity for more than a decade. Despite promises of reform, there seems to be no exit from this self-imposed straitjacket.

Why don't bad policies have expiry dates? Why can't institutions say, "This isn't working anymore. Let's stop." Why do we return to outdated metrics like GDP growth, as if they're sacrosanct?

Rajat Nag:

Good point. Yes, GDP is important, but woefully insufficient. The fixation with GDP as the sole metric of progress fails to recognise important issues such as inequality, social deprivations, health, education, climate change etc.

Now, austerity as an economic policy emerged from Keynesian thought—spend during crises, save during booms. But what happened in many countries was that governments didn't save during good times. When things got bad, there were no buffers left. So they were pushed into cutting spending at the worst possible moment.

Now, in theory, yes, multilateral institutions could push back. But they are constrained. They advise fiscal discipline, yes, but they

don't control political choices which are made and must be made by sovereign states .

Rajat Nag:

To me, the deeper issue isn't just about austerity or GDP—it's about the responsiveness of economic policy. Policies often continue not because they are still appropriate , but because changing them is politically difficult. And institutions, even multilateral ones, often lack the agility or the courage to declare when a policy has outlived its usefulness.

The 2008 crisis, for example, was largely a failure of due diligence in financial markets. Lending had become untethered from accountability. Banks were pushing loans not based on repayment capacity, but on short-term margins. Once the bubble burst, the entire system collapsed like dominoes.

So, yes, institutional reform is about structure but it's also about moral clarity. You need both economics and ethics. That's what gets lost when policy becomes overly politcised in the wrong hands.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Let's now move to the final segment of our conversation—your three-pillar framework. You've written that the state, the market, and the community must work in tandem for institutions to thrive. Could you walk us through that model?

Rajat Nag:

Absolutely. Think of society as a tripod. One leg is the state—responsible for governance and justice. The second is the market—driving innovation, efficiency, and production. The third is the community or civil society—where norms, values, and accountability are rooted.

These three need to co-exist, but more importantly, they need to balance each other. You don't want a Leviathan state that crushes liberty. You don't want unfettered markets dominated by monopolies or "robber barons." And you don't want a fragmented civil society, which descends into chaos or vigilante justice. Each pillar can go astray if left unchecked.

So the key is balance. When one pillar overreaches, the others must push back, and counterbalance. That's how you keep institutions supple, responsive, and grounded.

Amogh Dev Rai:

But here's a harder question—how do you make that work in the Global South, where democracy was overlaid after colonialism, rather than emerging organically? Western experts often fly in with checklists. Yet, even Sudan had elections. The forms of democracy don't always produce democratic outcomes.

At the same time, countries like China argue they have functioning institutions—even if they don't fit Western models. So where's the sweet spot? How should developing nations evolve?

Rajat Nag:

Very important question. The answer, in my view, lies in participation not labels. Call it democracy, call it something else but ask: do people have a voice in decisions that affect them? Is there transparency? Is there accountability?

Mechanisms must reflect local contexts. The principle of subsidiarity is key—take decisions at the lowest possible level of accountability. India's Panchayati system is a good example, despite its flaws. Copy-pasting institutions from elsewhere doesn't work. They must grow from within.

Amogh Dev Rai:

That connects to the trust deficit—another theme running through this conversation.

Do you think the erosion of trust in these three pillars is what's ultimately crippling democracies?

Rajat Nag:

Without a doubt. When the three travellers—state, market, society—stop trusting one another, cooperation collapses. Transparency fades. Cynicism takes root.

Sometimes, this mistrust is deeply historical. There are studies showing that in areas affected by the transatlantic slave trade, mistrust remains high even today—passed down generations. When people feel betrayed by institutions or leaders, they default to suspicion. And once trust erodes, rebuilding it is an uphill battle.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Which brings me to my penultimate question—how can nations today simultaneously plan for prosperity and security? Especially given the chaos around us, the breakdown of regional trust, and the erosion of multilateralism?

Rajat Nag:

We need to define security more broadly. It's not just freedom from external threat—it's freedom from fear. Fear of the police. Fear of the state. Fear of the feudal landlords. Fear of speaking up.

That kind of security—freedom from fear and injustice—is the foundation for prosperity. If people feel secure in the broadest sense, investment will follow. Growth will follow.

And that feeling of security comes fromrobust and inclusive institutions. From good governance. From predictable laws. From justice that is seen to be done.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Final question. Are you hopeful?

Rajat Nag:

I am. History teaches us that humans are resilient. We've survived wars, famines, financial collapses.

Institutions will evolve. Societies will adapt. The human species has always found a way to walk back from the brink. I believe we will again.

Amogh Dev Rai:

I sincerely hope you're right. Thank you so much for your time, and for this wide-ranging conversation.

Rajat Nag:

Thank you. ■

This interview has been edited for clarity.

State Identities in South Asia: A Contested Road

NAJEEB JUNG

South Asia is one of the most diverse regions in terms of religion, ethnicity, language and cultural practices. It includes believers of all Semitic and oriental religions. The history of state formation in South Asia is an interesting interplay of religion and politics. All states, except India and Nepal, have their own declared state religions. While in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Maldives, Islam is the state religion; Sri Lanka and Bhutan have declared Buddhism as their state religion. India, and lately Nepal, are declared secular states and have made provision for equal treatment of all religions in their constitutions.

Asian religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism originated in South Asia. The core of Hinduism is a Brahmanical world view, around which many other layers of beliefs – from nature worship to animistic practices – are arranged in concentric circles. Both Jainism and Buddhism developed as critiques of the hierarchical structure and practices of Brahmanical Hinduism. They mounted a serious challenge to Brahmanical Hinduism but failed to eclipse its hegemony completely as it underwent a transformation under the leadership of Adi-Shankaracharya.

Semitic religions arrived in South Asia very early due to the vibrant trade relations between South Asia and West Asia. Christianity reached South Asia as far back as the first century AD. It is believed that St Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ, came to the coast of Kerala and preached Christianity. Before the European colonial powers established their predominance on the western coast of India, Christianity had already emerged as a major religion there.

Islam arrived in South Asia in the 7th century. It was brought to the Malabar Coast as part of the trade and cultural interactions with the Arabs. The first mosque in South Asia (Cheraman Mosque) was constructed at Kodungallur on the Malabar Coast of Kerala in AD 629, when Prophet Muhammad was alive. Later, Islam spread to northern India as part of the interactions between Persia, Central Asia and South Asia. Islam had a tremendous influence on South Asian society. Similarly, Islam assimilated many local traditions, including the caste system prevalent in South Asian societies.

Religion and religious interpretations functioned as ideological cover and justification for kingdoms and empires. In the 'Ancient' period, Brahmanical Hinduism and Buddhism provided the necessary legitimacy for various power centres in the vast landmass of South Asia. The

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Gupta, Chalukya and Chola empires used Brahmanical Hinduism as a legitimising ideology for their respective empires. The Mauryas, especially Ashoka, the Kushan Empire and King Harshavardhana used Buddhism for the same purpose.

In the 'Medieval' period, Islam spread over to the Indo-Gangetic plains and established itself as the religion of the ruling elite. The Sultanate period witnessed many a tussle between the orthodox version of Islam and its more popular Sufi traditions. Many a time, the rulers took sides in this tussle according to the context and compulsions of political power.

Under Mughal rule, Islam gained prominence since the ruling elite belonged to it. At the same time, the peculiar context in which the Mughal Empire was located – majority Hindus ruled by a minority Muslim political elite – necessitated a kind of judicious balancing of both Hinduism and Islam. The lavish patronage of Hindu and Muslim religious elites and places of worship by the Mughal rulers was an example of this.

Considering the diversity of his subjects and the plurality of faiths among them, Emperor Akbar (1543–1605) tried to evolve a new creed called Din-i-Ilahi (Divine Faith), in which he wanted to combine all the virtues of existing religions. This effort by Emperor Akbar to create a new state-sponsored religion, devoid of dogma, encountered serious criticism from the traditional Ulema. Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1664) was at the forefront in opposing the syncretistic ideas of Emperor Akbar and his successor Jehangir. Shaikh Sirhindi accused Din-i-Ilahi of being an articulation of pantheism and a clear deviation from the monotheistic principle of Islam.

The tension between traditional Islam and the demand for a syncretistic tradition continued during the later Mughal period and was finally settled in favour of traditional orthodox Sunni Islam under the regime of Aurangzeb (1618–1707), the last of the great Mughals. Islam played an important role in the ideological state apparatus of the Mughal Empire.

In the Deccan region of South India, the Bahmani and Vijayanagar kingdoms also used religion in their statecraft. The Vijayanagar kingdom was created for the protection and uplift of the Hindu religion, and the Bahmani kingdom was ruled by Muslim rulers who strived for the spread of Islam. There were occasional wars between these neighbouring kingdoms, one of the reasons for which was their differing religious standpoints. Similarly, Islam played a major role in the establishment and day-to-day functioning of the Mysore State under Haider Ali and his son Tipu Sultan.

Till the colonial period, the diverse religious traditions coexisted on the South Asian landmass in a more or less peaceful manner. Empires and state formations that emerged and disappeared in South Asia in the pre-colonial period largely kept themselves away from intervening in the religio-cultural life of the people. This status quo underwent a radical change under colonialism. The Portuguese colonialists came to South Asia in the last decade of the 15th century with strong notions of the superiority of Western Christianity (Catholicism) and treated the people of South Asia as subordinates.

This attitude provoked all sections of people against them. The Portuguese attempts to completely change the liturgy, theological notions, cultural practices and administrative structure of the Syrian Christians in India through the Synod of Diamper in AD 1599 led to their resistance and the emergence of the Koonan Kurishu Satyam (Oath of the Leaning Cross) in 1653 at Kochi. This can be considered as one of the initial protests against the colonial powers.

Similarly, the Portuguese provoked the Muslims of South Asia too. The battles between the Portuguese and the Zamorin, the Hindu Raja of Calicut, supported by the Muslims, prompted Shaikh Zainuddin Makhdum of Ponnani to exhort Muslims

to wage a holy war against the Portuguese colonialists. It was one of the early examples of remarkable Hindu-Muslim unity against invading outsiders.

The religious pluralism of South Asian societies was not reflected in the politico-administrative structures to any great extent. This phenomenon was unintelligible to the various colonial powers that came to South Asia. The mercantile capitalist phase of colonialism in South Asia, up to the consolidation of British authority, was not very effective in destabilising this religious equilibrium. The limited interests of the early colonialists never demanded a serious intervention in the politico-cultural life of the people. But whenever they attempted to do so, it resulted in stiff resistance.

This scenario, however, changed under British colonialism. Unlike other colonial powers, the British wanted to establish their political power in South Asia. For this, they used all means at their disposal – from brute force to the construction of ideological cover – to legitimise their presence and hegemony over the politico-administrative structures in various parts of South Asia. Communalism, based on segregating religious communities as exclusive entities, became their major tool in dividing the unity of the people. The invention of communalism played a major role in creating the gulf between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia.

The First War of Independence in 1857, waged between the nascent British power and the united force of Muslim and Hindu feudal elites, was an eye-opener to the British. They realised that Hindu-Muslim unity of any sort was not in favour of the perpetuation of British rule. The strategy to divide the population on communal lines was the direct outcome of the experience of 1857.

British colonialism used the discipline of history and the conduct of census to develop a communal ideology. The classification of the history of the Indian subcontinent in religious terms – i.e. the Ancient (Hindu) period, the Medieval (Muslim) period, and the Modern (British/Christian) period – and the writing of textbooks based on this classification created divisions along communal lines. The juxtaposition of the 'glorious period' of ancient/Hindu India and the period of 'subjugation' under the medieval/Muslim rule created the expected effect. The implied logic in this historical narrative was that the British provided the balance between the distinct warring categories of Hindus and Muslims. This was projected as a justification for their claim to rule the Indian subcontinent.

The rise of the National Movement in India, since the launching of the Indian National Congress in 1885, was an attempt by the Indian elites to confront the colonial authorities. The radicalisation of the National Movement under Bal Gangadhar Tilak and others became a major challenge to the colonial authorities. The overt display and use of Hindu symbols as part of the National Movement alienated the Muslims from it. The formation of the All India Muslim League in 1906 was, in a way, a reaction to the pro-Hindu tilt of the National Movement under the militant Hindu nationalists. The colonial authorities, within no time, used the suspicion between the Muslims and Hindus to divide the National Movement. The prejudices and suspicion between the Hindus and Muslims led to the formulation of the idea of 'Muslim nationalism' in South Asia and the demand for the creation of Pakistan – the homeland of the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent – and finally resulted in the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947. Since then, the conflict between two religious communities in the pre-independence period has transformed into a conflict between two post-colonial nation states.

The formation of Pakistan is largely the outcome of the intertwining of religion and politics in a specific historic context. The only other example is the formation of

Israel, though in the same historic juncture. Pakistan was created as a state for the Muslims of the subcontinent. Its founding fathers did not conceive Pakistan as an Islamic state. Though Jinnah used religion to mobilise the Muslims and fight for a separate state for them, his vision was that of a secular state. But the tussle between secular leaders and those who wanted an Islamic state was reflected in constitution-making in the early stages. After the formation of Pakistan, the founding fathers realised that the only unifying factor in the otherwise diverse and plural Pakistan was Islam, and Islam alone. The sole dependence of the ruling elite of Pakistan on Islam became evident in the Objectives Resolution passed by the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 12 March 1949. The Objectives Resolution made Islam the cornerstone of statecraft and polity in Pakistan.

The assumption that Islam would ensure the unity of a diverse country like Pakistan crumbled when the country was dismembered into Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971. The formation of Bangladesh underlined the fact that religion cannot be the basis of nation-building. Instead of making this realisation a foundation for nation-building in the modern world, the ruling elite of Pakistan moved further towards Islam, which later led to the Islamisation of the state and polity of Pakistan under both democratic and military regimes.

Some leaders like Gen. Ayub Khan were dismissive of religion. But the cause of fundamentalist Islam has been championed frequently in Pakistan. Even the democratic parties championed it. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto succumbed to Islamic forces and gave in easily. It was during his period that subcontinental Islam started being replaced by an Arabised Islam. In the aftermath of the 1971 war, the ruling elites shunned deeper introspection into the real reasons for the creation of Bangladesh in favour of rewriting history. Pakistan rediscovered its religious, cultural and geographical proclivity towards West Asia.

Without a popular mandate and the compulsion to legitimise his rule, Gen. Zia ul Haq went about Islamising the Pakistani state and society in the 1980s. He espoused orthodox Islam and proposed an extensive restructuring of the country's key institutions and political processes in accordance with Islamic values. The Islam he championed was more the legalistic and orthodox version of Islam. The legal strictures against women, the evidentiary laws in cases of violence and rape, insistence on the wearing of the veil, and withdrawal from public life were far removed from the traditional Islamic practices of the subcontinent. He promoted a new brand of Ulema, the radical, militant kind. Until his advent to power in 1977, the Ulema still had a large number of genuinely pious, well-read, and highly respected religious scholars. He had them marginalised and replaced by the leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamaat-ul-Ulema Pakistan.

He used the Ulema and the religious parties in support of the US objectives in Afghanistan and prepared the ground for using them later against India in Kashmir and elsewhere. The perceived defeat of the USSR in Afghanistan further gave this burgeoning Islamic fervour a boost. Gen. Zia's Islamisation did not only have an impact on the state but did great damage to society. Islamisation under Gen. Zia was the material expression of state ideology and a legitimisation project. But now, the state is no longer the only patron of Islamic ideology, nor is the Ulema, with the development of a plurality of non-state associations like private educational institutions in the country. Gen. Zia's Islamisation did little to promote national unity. On the contrary, it rendered Islam into a divisive force, pitting secular against religious forces, Sunni and Shia, Muslim and non-Muslims. It is difficult to undo some of these social processes set in motion. Some

of these have developed vested interests in the perpetuation of the old order. The democratic regimes did not even bother to challenge them outright. Rather, they also championed the cause of fundamentalist Islam at times. The reason has been to undermine the opposition by making expedient alliances with Islamic groups to prolong their power.

The religious right and the Jihadis have become the biggest challengers to the state in Pakistan today. The religious right does not have much electoral support, but its influence and reach over the state apparatus is enormous. Gen. Pervez Musharraf was perceived to be liberal when he took over power, but his image took a beating within months when he reversed his decision to amend the procedure for registration of cases under the blasphemy law. Gen. Musharraf also did not exercise much autonomy from the religious forces. As Gen. Musharraf was not dependent on these Islamic groups for legitimacy and authority, he tried to challenge them but found himself severely constrained. In Pakistan's political culture, Islam will continue to be used in manifold ways for political ends. The Pakistani military establishment, till today, continues to use the religious groups for their strategic objectives.

The rise of the Taliban since 1994 in Afghanistan, and subsequently their increasing spread within Pakistan, is a grave cause for concern. Their establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan from 1996 till the end of 2001 was the manifestation of the kind of Islamic state they had to offer. Their ideology, based on the Islamisation of society at the grassroots level, is derived from the fundamentalist movement inspired by Shah Wallihullah and the Deoband School. The movement is puritanical and reformist, opposing all unorthodox practices. The enforcement of the Sharia is the main point of the Taliban's political agenda. It aims at building a theocratic state in which the Ulema will have the power to designate and control the government. It views competitive electoral politics as a source of fitna (division) within the Ummah (Muslim community). The Taliban's interpretation of the Sharia is extremely conservative. It condemns any attempts at itjihad (interpretation). They espouse a violent and intolerant interpretation of Islam. Their anomalous interpretation of Islam has emerged from an extreme and perverse interpretation of Deobandism. They now gravely threaten Pakistan's own stability. Unless the creeping Talibanisation in the NWFP and tribal regions is arrested soon, Pakistan may pay a heavy price. The Taliban cannot be fought with force alone. To undermine the growing influence of the Taliban, Pakistan needs to undergo an ideological battle. Pakistan's indigenous and rich tradition of Islamic spiritualism, popularised by great Sufi saints, needs to be popularised again.

The interplay of religion and politics has led to adverse consequences for the other states of South Asia as well. In India, Partition left a bitter legacy of a communal divide between Hindus and Muslims. The rise of Hindu nationalist movements, led by organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Jana Sangh, brought religious identity into greater political prominence from the late 1960s onwards. The Jana Sangh, which later became the Bharatiya Janata Party, developed around the ideology of Hindutva, which emphasises Hindu cultural and religious identity as central to Indian nationhood. This ideology envisions India as a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu state) and advocates for what it terms the cultural integration of all communities, including Muslims, into what it considers mainstream Indian traditions. During the 1980s, Hindu nationalist movements gained momentum. Their mobilisation centred around the Babri Masjid, an old mosque that Hindu groups claimed was built on the birthplace of Lord Ram, an important deity in Hinduism. The competing claims over this site became a

major point of contention. In December 1992, activists from the RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and Bajrang Dal brought down the Babri Masjid structure. This event triggered significant communal tensions and riots across various parts of India. These movements, through their interpretation of Hindutva, have established a notable political presence and continue to advocate for their vision of Indian nationalism rooted in Hindu cultural identity. This political development has created concerns within the Muslim community regarding their place and security in Indian society, leading to feelings of uncertainty about their status and belonging in the country.

The growth of these movements reflects broader questions about national identity, religious accommodation, and the balance between majority and minority interests in India's diverse democracy.

The Sikhs, the other major religious group in India, also passed through a troubled phase. In pursuit of political power, some Sikh political parties appealed to Sikh religious sentiments. A moderate movement for greater autonomy changed course to demand a separate state called Khalistan – a Sikh theocratic state, a vision of a state based on Sikh nationhood. The movement acquired a militant stance and launched a violent campaign for an independent state. The violence that followed was brutal and indiscriminate. Highly communal and selective mass killings were carried out to create a communal divide in the well-integrated Hindu-Sikh communities. On the one hand, the government dealt with the problem through a political package to address the Sikh demands for autonomy and political power, but on the other hand, the movement was crushed by strong counter-insurgency measures. Though there was an intense period of violence in Indian Punjab, the healing has been relatively swift, and religion is no longer a source of tension between the Sikhs and the Hindus.

Sri Lanka's devastating ethnic conflict also has strong undercurrents of the interplay between religion and politics. It has historical roots. The colonial administration gave privileged treatment to the minority Sri Lankan Tamils (Hindus), concentrated in northern Sri Lanka, over a period of time. This led to tremendous discontent among the majority Sinhala (Buddhist) population. In the post-colonial phase of Sri Lankan history, during the process of the indigenisation of political power, the majority Sinhalas established firm control over the administration and began discriminating against the Tamils. In order to legitimise the privileged treatment of the Sinhalas, they created a historical narrative in which Sri Lanka is depicted as a Sinhala-Buddhist nation always in conflict with Tamils – the outsiders.

The perpetuation of Sinhala-Buddhist communal ideology by the Sri Lankan state and civil society led to the ethno-religious conflict between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamils. The communal ideology also led to the victimisation of the Sri Lankan Muslims by both the Tamils and the Sinhalas. Religion, thus, has been a major factor in the destabilisation of the polity and social fabric of Sri Lanka.

The modernisation process in Bhutan led to the precipitation of ethno-religious conflict on a massive scale. The conflict between the Bhutanese state, dominated by the Ngalongs (Mahayana Buddhists), and the Lhotshampas (people of Nepali origin who are mainly Hindus) escalated. The state-sponsored ethno-religious conflict led to the expulsion of more than one lakh Lhotshampas from Bhutan.

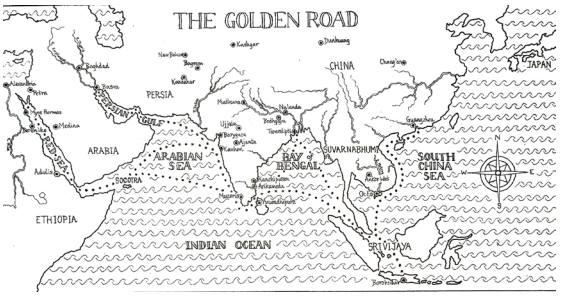
The situation in Bangladesh is also reflective of the general South Asian pattern of majority-minority conflict. The religious minorities in Bangladesh mainly consist of Hindus and Buddhists. The radicalisation of Islam has created many problems for the Hindus and the Buddhists, who are mainly tribals residing in the Chittagong Hill

Tracts. For long, the tribals of Chittagong waged an armed struggle against the Bangladesh state in order to protect their culture and religion.

Islamisation, assertive Hindu nationalism, and now Talibanisation stand in the way of the creation of modern South Asian states in search of peace, progress, and prosperity. The promotion of exclusive religious nationalism has divided the people and states. It has retarded growth and development and inhibited people from achieving their full potential. South Asia's religious diversity and its pluralist nature of society need to be protected. Religions can coexist harmoniously, as they have done historically. But the politicisation and radicalisation of religion are leading to greater communalisation of society and increasing the divide among religious communities. This has only weakened the state and nation-building process in South Asia. Time has now come to come together, find common ground, and aim for prosperity.■

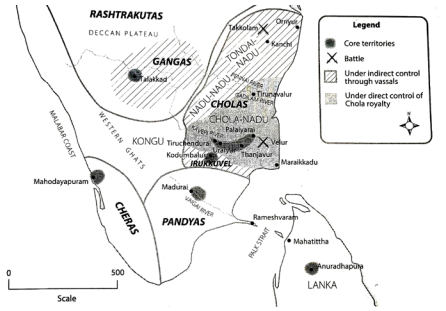
Monsoon Empires

KHUSHI KESARI



A map of overland and maritime trade networks

(Source: The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World by William Dalrymple)



Map showing core regions and influence zones of medieval dynasties; Chola vassal and family-ruled areas included

(Source: The Lords Of Earth And Sea by Anirudh Kanisetti)

Introduction

In the ancient world, seas functioned not as barriers but as channels that enabled cultural interaction, trade, and diplomacy. This was especially true in the Indian Ocean region, where coastal civilisations engaged in dynamic exchanges that shaped the historical trajectories of Asia and beyond. Within this interconnected maritime landscape, South Indian kingdoms emerged not only as regional powers but also as active participants in a wider Indian Ocean world. Through religious patronage, artistic exchange, architectural diffusion, and merchant networks, they projected what is now termed "soft power", a non-military form of influence rooted in culture, ideology, and diplomacy.

The term soft power, introduced by political scientist Joseph Nye, refers to the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or monetary inducement. Although originally applied to modern international relations, the concept is equally relevant to historical contexts where empires built influence without relying solely on military force. In this light, dynasties such as the Cholas, Pallavas, Pandyas, and Cheras employed religion, art, language, and commerce to extend their cultural footprint far beyond the subcontinent. Their influence reached Sri Lanka, the Maldives, the Srivijaya and Khmer empires, and several key port cities in Southeast Asia, creating legacies that lasted for centuries.

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Among these, the Cholas are particularly noted for their maritime expeditions, especially under Rajendra Chola I, who led naval campaigns across the Bay of Bengal. As noted by K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, these missions aimed not only to secure trade routes but also to assert cultural and political dominance. Even without military ventures, South Indian dynasties maintained an influential presence abroad. The Pallavas, for instance, spread Dravidian temple architecture to places such as Java and Cambodia, as documented by Craig Lockard. B. D. Chattopadhyaya highlights how the Cheras and Pandyas established robust trade networks and religious links through their coastal ports and mercantile patronage.

Understanding the cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies of South Indian kingdoms offers valuable insights for contemporary global affairs. In a world where influence increasingly depends on cultural affinity and shared history rather than force or wealth, it is timely to revisit these historical models. The ways in which these kingdoms extended their reach through religion, art, language, and commerce provide lessons in building respectful and lasting cross-cultural ties. This not only enhances our understanding of South Asia's historic role in global networks but also affirms the continuing relevance of culture as a tool of diplomacy.

Cultural Diplomacy in the Indian Ocean World

For centuries, the Indian Ocean has served as a cosmopolitan arena for the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural practices. In antiquity, South India's strategic location between the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal enabled its maritime kingdoms to engage in what may be described as early forms of cultural diplomacy.

Trade, Temples, and the Maritime Geography of Power

The geography of South India, with its extensive coastline, fertile river valleys, seasonal monsoon winds, and accessible natural harbours, made it ideal for maritime trade and cultural exchange. The Malabar and Coromandel coasts supported thriving port towns such as the Chola-linked Kaveripattinam, the Buddhist and commercial centre of Nagapattinam, the Pallava port of Mahabalipuram, and the Chera-affiliated Muziris, which also had trade ties with the Roman world. Each of these ports served as important nodes in wider networks that connected South India to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Egypt, the Roman Empire, Arabia, Persia, and Southeast Asia, as shown by scholars such as McLaughlin and Malekandathil.

The monsoon winds made long-distance sea travel more predictable, allowing South Indian merchants and emissaries to cross the ocean with relative ease. However, these ports were not merely economic centres. They also functioned as cosmopolitan zones where trade, diplomacy, and spiritual practice intersected. Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zones", these spaces became sites where diverse cultures engaged with one another, often within unequal structures of power.

Malekandathil points out that merchant guilds such as the Ayyavole 500 and Manigramam funded temple construction both within India and overseas. These temples were not just places of worship but also projected cultural authority and legitimacy. Many served dual purposes as financial institutions, housing treasuries, regulating transactions, and facilitating trust among traders. Rulers supported temple building not only for religious merit but also as a form of aesthetic and political strategy. Through architecture, ritual, and spatial grandeur, they signalled prosperity, piety, and refinement to local communities

and foreign visitors alike. The temple thus emerged as a key instrument of cultural diplomacy, communicating political identity and religious values to those arriving by sea.

By combining geography, commerce, religion, and politics, South Indian kingdoms established themselves as influential players in the Indian Ocean world. Their ability to sustain overseas influence lay not in military supremacy alone but in their deliberate use of culture to build bridges and command respect.

The Cholas: Naval Prowess and Transoceanic Prestige

Among the numerous South Indian dynasties, the Cholas best embodied the visions of cultural diplomacy and soft power in their elaborate and measured encounter with the Indian Ocean world. Under Rajendra Chola I in the early eleventh century, the Chola state initiated one of the most elaborate maritime expeditions of premodern Asia, a mission that stretched far beyond the limits of warfare. The 1025 CE attack on the Srivijaya empire in maritime Southeast Asia, even if habitually interpreted as an exhibition of naval belligerence, was equally a grand gesture of symbolic projection, announcing the Chola king's capability to exercise transoceanic dominion and reshape regional hierarchies from afar. As Anirudh Kanisetti contends, this intervention was an "immense leap towards the emergence of a world market," for it allowed Tamil merchant networks to expand into principal trading areas in Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, and Java. Merchant guilds like the Ayyavole 500 and Manigramam, well integrated into temple economies and cross-regional trade, set up settlements and bases all over the region and built shrines, issued Tamil and Sanskrit inscriptions, and infused South Indian artistic and religious motifs into local culture. These diplomatic interactions were not restricted to the Indian cultural realm; the Cholas also established diplomatic relations with imperial China and sent several embassies to the Song dynasty court, one said to carry a letter written on gold leaf, an icon of both elegance and power, as understood by T. Sen's work. These expeditions were not so much about transactional diplomacy but about showcasing royal charisma and cosmopolitan identity on a global platform. They represented a wider strategy whereby South Indian monarchs used the moral and material pre-eminence of their courts to sway distant partners, acquire trade concessions, and claim civilisational standing.

The Chola case, therefore, illustrates how maritime expeditions, temple patronage, mercantile networks, and ritualised diplomacy coalesced into a coherent and far-sighted policy of cultural outreach—one that embedded South India firmly into the connective tissue of the Indian Ocean world and left enduring marks on Southeast Asia's architectural, religious, and political landscapes.

The Pallavas: Architecture as Aesthetic Diplomacy

The Pallavas, although less geographically extensive than the Cholas, contributed to the construction of South Indian soft power in the form of architecture, religious patronage, and intercultural diplomacy. Under Narasimhavarman II (Rajasimha) and other rulers, the Pallavas commissioned great temples at Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram), including the Shore Temple and the rock-cut rathas, which not only functioned as religious hubs but as sea marks visible to approaching ships and acted as both sacred spaces and symbols of dynastic power. These temples were a demonstration of the rulers' ability to mobilise skilled labour, artisans, and material resources, and also indicate their mastery over coastal and commercial landscapes.

The iconography and architectural style used by the Pallavas, all their early Dravidian

styles, would eventually impact the temple forms utilised in Java, Cambodia, and other regions in maritime Southeast Asia, an indication of the portability and attraction of South Indian religious aesthetics. A. Kanisetti observes that the Pallava state also had diplomatic relations with Tang China during the 8th century.

One of the Chinese imperial court embassies famously carried exotic presents like a parakeet that could talk and leopard furs, earning titles and recognition for the Pallava king, a clear example of early diplomatic theatre aimed at presenting cultural sophistication and seeking prestige. These gestures of cross-cultural diplomacy complemented the Pallavas' active participation in the Sanskrit cosmopolis, wherein political legitimacy was expressed through shared aesthetic, religious, and literary codes.

As a result, Southeast Asian polities like the Khmer Empire and Srivijaya increasingly looked to Indian prototypes, in architecture, kingship, and temple rituals, drawing inspiration from the symbolic and material templates circulated by the Pallavas and their contemporaries.

The Pandyas and Cheras: Trade, Literature, and the Cultural Imaginary

While the Cholas and Pallavas concentrated on monumentalism, naval expansion, and imperial display, the Pandyas and Cheras pursued a more generalised exchange through commerce, patronage of literature, and intercontinental religious networks. The Cheras occupied key ports like Muziris and Kodungallur along the Malabar Coast, both pivotal to the Indian Ocean spice trade and familiar to Greco-Roman, Persian, and Arab traders. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, a 1st-century CE Greek travel account, called Muziris "the first emporium of India." Excavations of Roman amphorae, coins, and West Asian ceramics at places like Pattanam further attest to the area's high commercial energy. These ports were not only economic exchange nodes but also places of cultural and religious mixing, visited by multilingual and multiethnic trading communities.

The investment by the Chera court in the production and conservation of Sangam literature created a refined Tamil literary culture, whose conventions of poetry, discourses of morality, and symbolic terrain travelled with merchants and thus conditioned the aesthetic imagination of the Tamil-speaking diaspora. These works tended to celebrate seafaring life, virtue, and generosity, and were transported from the Indian Ocean by religious teachers, migrants, and mercantile agents, and thus added to what C. Ramaswamy describes as a "Tamilised cosmopolis" that resisted regional frontiers and inscribed Tamil identity into broader Indian Ocean circuits.

Likewise, the Pandyas, who were less expansionist in their ambitions than the Cholas, promoted long-term commercial and religious bonds with Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and even portions of the mainland Indian region. Their patronage of temple establishments not only legitimised dynastic power but also brought them into larger Buddhist and Shaivite religious networks that spanned maritime Asia. These interactions were underwritten by gift giving, temple donations, and the movement of religious specialists. Through these means, the Pandyas and Cheras did have a more nuanced, yet resilient presence in the Indian Ocean world — one powered not by naval battles but by cultural continuity, diplomatic trade, and the cross-cultural expansion of texts and men.

Merchant Guilds: Commerce as Cultural Conduit

Influential merchant guilds like the Ayyavole 500 (Ainurruvar) and Manigramam were not only economic actors but also agents of cultural diplomacy, serving as key go-

betweens in South India's integration with the broader Indian Ocean world. These guilds exerted significant autonomy, founded their temples and trade-posts, and sustained networks that linked them to both indigenous rulers and foreign powers. Inscriptions mentioning these guilds have been discovered in a broad geographic area — from Tamil Nadu and Kerala to coastal Sri Lanka, Kedah in the Malay Peninsula, and Barus and Sumatra in Indonesia — testifying to their trans-regional existence and lasting impact.

The Ainurruvar, specifically, worked as a general federation that included merchants, artisans, monks, and even military bands, usually in alliance with royal courts but protecting their interests as well. Their linkage with Brahmins, temple economies, and Shaivite traditions augmented their socio-religious validity and eased their incorporation into overseas cultural environments. The temples they sponsored — both within South India and abroad — functioned not only as religious centres but also as cultural ambassadors and custodians of shared memory. Their mastery of maritime logistics, shipping routes, and caravan security enabled them to exert significant leverage in trade negotiations and interregional diplomacy. As Kanisetti describes, these guilds were "agents of transformation", skilled at mobilising capital, mediating cultural exchange, and affirming South India's strategic and symbolic presence in the interlacing nodes of the Indian Ocean economy.

Enduring Imprints: Language, Religion, and Art

The long-term effects of South Indian cultural diplomacy are most strikingly visible in the architectural, religious, and linguistic imprints left across the Indian Ocean region, particularly in Southeast and East Asia. The diffusion of the Dravidian temple style, characterised by axial plans, vimanas, and intricate stone carvings, into monumental complexes such as Prambanan in Java and the Angkor temples in Cambodia attests to the enduring influence of Pallava and Chola architectural paradigms. These were not simply aesthetic borrowings but signalled a broader cultural aspiration by local rulers to affiliate with the sacral and imperial ideals embodied in South Indian models of kingship.

Inscriptions in Tamil and Sanskrit, Shaivite iconography, and temple plans with distinctively South Indian features continue to surface in archaeological contexts as far afield as Sumatra, Malaysia, and Vietnam, reflecting a sustained, though adaptive, cultural presence. In southern China's Quanzhou, Tamil Shaiva temples built by South Indian merchant communities, with bilingual inscriptions and finely carved images, are additional evidence of the widespread acceptance and incorporation of Tamil religious practices well into the 13th century, according to Risha Lee.

Achievements in these endeavours were a result of flexibility, rather than dominance. South Indian rulers, artists, and merchants integrated their practices with indigenous beliefs and systems and created hybrid forms by mutual understanding. South Indian features such as temple architecture, ritual practice, court ceremony, and even language were adopted and indigenised and became integral components of building local narratives and not foreign impositions. Thus, cultural diplomacy functioned not in the form of one-way transmission but as a two-way process of mutual adaptation and enrichment, whereby the Tamil and Dravidian world inscribed itself into the cultural memory of faraway polities while at the same time being remade by them.

Long-lasting Legacy

Rather than being stories of the past, South Indian kingdoms' cultural impact continues to shape Southeast Asia's symbolic and

social landscapes. Throughout Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Cambodia, there is a Tamil and general Dravidian presence in everyday practices, whether through architecture, language, ritual, or diet. Tamil-speaking populations, with more than 1.8 million in Malaysia and more than 200,000 in Singapore, still retain old Tamil traditions, as identified by the Department of Statistics Malaysia and the Singapore Department of Statistics. In urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur and George Town, there are examples of Dravidian temple architecture, celebrations such as Thaipusam, and dishes like dosa and sambar incorporated into national cultures without a trace of dislocation.

This cultural transfer can also be seen in material heritage throughout the broader region. Bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat, temples of Java, and ritual sites of Bali all bear witness to the architectural and iconographic styles introduced by the Pallavas and Cholas. In addition to architecture, living arts such as wayang kulit (shadow puppets), textile weaving, and temple dance show Indic influences passed down decades ago through interactions. Merchant guilds like the Ayyavole 500 served as conduits of commerce and culture, bequeathing inscriptions, endowments, and artistic traces from South India to Vietnam's coast and Thailand. Today, India's "Act East" policy and the diplomatic efforts of institutions such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) attempt to reignite these links by strengthening common civilisational bonds through language training, restoration of heritage, and cultural diplomacy.

What we find through this extended trajectory of interaction is a pattern of influence based not on conquest by force but on cultural borrowing and symbolic resonance. South Indian kingdoms like the Cholas, Pallavas, Pandyas, and Cheras inscribed themselves upon maritime Asia by means of art, religion, urbanisation, and merchant networks. Theirs is an inheritance of resonance, by which ideas traversed the sea not as edicts but as overtures. This soft power generated a common Indic idea that continues to shape the identities, rites, and architectures of Indian Ocean societies.

By acknowledging this, we are encouraged to reimagine the history of the Indian Ocean not as a story of encroaching empires but as a vibrant network of cultural flows and aesthetic conversations. For our world today, in which cultural diplomacy and soft power are again at the centre of global strategy, the lesson of South Indian kingdoms is one that lasts. They teach us that soft power, when based on mutual respect, shared values, and artistic abundance, is able to create legacies that defy time and geography. ■

Up the Drum Tower: The Confucian Comeback

DANIEL A. BELL

Confucianism is an ethical tradition propagated by Confucius (c. 551–479 bce). Confucius (Kongzi in Chinese) viewed himself as the transmitter of an older tradition that he tried to revitalize in his own day. He was born near present-day Qufu in Shandong Province (today, Qufu is an administrative region with about 650,000 inhabitants, among whom nearly one-fifth share the surname of Kong and trace their family ancestry to Kongzi). Confucius traveled from state to state—China had not yet been unified—aiming to persuade rulers of the need to rule with morality. He failed in his political ambitions and settled for the life of a teacher. His ideas and aphorisms were recorded for posterity by his disciples in the Analects. Confucius is often shown in dialogue with his students and he emerges as a wise, compassionate, humble, and even humorous human being. His most influential followers, Mencius (Mengzi in Chinese, c. 372–289 bce) and Xunzi (c. 310–235 bce), also had less-than-illustrious careers as public officials and settled for teaching careers in (what is now) Shandong Province.

Confucianism was suppressed in the short-lived Qin Dynasty (221–206 bce) by the self-proclaimed first Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang. During the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 ce), Confucius's thoughts received official sanction and were further developed into a system known as Rujia in Chinese (the term "Confucianism" is a Western invention; it is misleading because Confucius was not the founder of a tradition in the sense that, say, Jesus Christ was the founder of Christianity). Confucianism was the mainstream political ideology for much of subsequent imperial Chinese history until the collapse of the imperial system in 1911. The Confucian tradition is immensely diverse and it has been constantly enriched with insights from Daoism, Legalism, and Buddhism, and, more recently, liberalism, democracy, and feminism. But it has certain core commitments. The tradition is based on the assumption that the good life lies in nourishing harmonious social relationships, starting with the family and extending outward. The good life is a never-ending quest to improve oneself by study, rituals, and learning from other people (it's not easy: Confucius said he reached the stage when his desires conformed to what he ought to do at the age of 70, or the equivalent of about 105 years old today). The best life lies in serving the political community with wisdom and humaneness (仁 ren). In

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practice, it typically means striving to be a public official. Only a minority of exemplary persons (君子 junzi) can lead the best life because most people are too preoccupied with mundane concerns. The ideal political community is a unified state whose rulers succeed to power on the basis of merit rather than lineage. Public officials should aim to provide basic material well-being for the people by means such as a fair distribution of land and low taxation, and (then) try to improve them morally. They should rule with a light touch: through education, moral example, and rituals, with punishment as a last resort. Such ideas had a profound influence on the value system of public officials in Chinese imperial history; in the Ming and Qing dynasties, officials were selected by means of rigorous examinations that tested for knowledge of the Confucian classics (the Emperor was not selected by examination, but he was often educated in the Confucian classics). Once public officials assumed power, however, political reality often got in the way of humane rule and they often relied on "Legalist" harsh laws aimed at strengthening the state rather than benefiting the people.

The end of imperial rule seemed to signal the end of the Confucian tradition. Intellectuals and political reformers, whatever their political stripe, blamed the tradition for China's "backwardness" (with a few exceptions, such as the "last Confucian," Liang Shuming). From the May 4, 1919, movement onward, the dominant tradition was anti-traditionalism. The victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 seemed to deliver the final blow to Confucianism. Instead of looking backward to such "feudal" traditions as Confucianism, the Chinese people were encouraged to look forward to a bright new communist future. Such anti-traditionalism took an extreme form in the Cultural Revolution, when Red Guards were encouraged to stamp out all remnants of "old society," including ransacking Confucius's grave in Qufu.

Today, it seems that the anti-traditionalists were on the wrong side of history. Chinese intellectuals commonly view themselves as part of a culture with a long history, with Confucianism as its core. Aspects of Marxist-Leninism that took hold in China—the prioritization of poverty alleviation and the need for a politically enlightened "avant-garde" to lead the transition to a morally superior form of social organization— resonated with older Confucian ideas about the need to select and promote public officials with superior ability and virtue who strive for the material and moral well-being of the people. To the extent that China's experiment with communism has anything to offer to future generations, it can be seen as an effort to build on, rather than replace, older traditions. Hence, it should not be surprising that the CCP has moved closer to officially embracing Confucianism. The Confucian classics are being taught at Communist Party schools, the educational curriculum in primary and secondary schools is being modified to teach more Confucianism, and there are more references to Confucian values in speeches and policy documents. The opening ceremony of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, vetted by the Chinese Politburo, seemed to put an official imprimatur on the Confucianization of the party: Marx and Mao were gone, and Confucius was shown as China's face to the world. Abroad, the government has been promoting Confucianism via branches of the Confucius Institute, a Chinese language and culture center similar to France's Alliance Française and Germany's Goethe Institute. The Confucius Institutes have been controversial in Western countries, but they are often welcomed in other parts of the world and sponsor, for example, workshops that compare the relational view of the self in Confucian and Ubuntu ethics.

But the revival of Confucianism is not just government-sponsored. There has been a resurgence of interest among critical intellectuals in China. Jiang Qing, mainland

China's most influential Confucian-inspired political theorist, was first forced to read the Confucian classics in order to denounce them in the Cultural Revolution. The more he read, however, the more he realized that Confucianism was not as bad as advertised and he saved his intellectual curiosity for more propitious times.

Today, he runs an independent Confucian Academy in remote Guizhou Province and argues for a political institution composed of Confucian scholars with veto power over policies as well as a symbolic monarch selected from the Kong family descendants. His works, not surprisingly, have been censored in mainland China but that hasn't stopped the explosion of academic research inspired by the Confucian tradition, leading to a kind of reverse brain drain from the United States back to China. Tu Weiming, the most influential exponent of Confucianism in the West, retired from his post at Harvard to lead the Institute of Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University. He was followed a few years later by Roger Ames, the celebrated translator and interpreter of the Confucian classics: Ames retired from the University of Hawaii to become the Humanities Chair Professor at Peking University. The younger Confucian political theorist Bai Tongdong left a tenured job in the United States to become the Dongfang Professor of Philosophy at Fudan University.The cross-cultural psychologist Peng Kaiping, who carried out rigorous experiments showing that Chinese were more likely than Americans to use Confucian-style contextual and dialectical approaches to solving problems, left a tenured post at Berkeley to become dean of Tsinghua's School of Social Sciences. Notwithstanding increased censorship, such scholars are attracted by vibrant academic debates inspired by the Confucian tradition in mainland China. Periodicals such as Culture, History, and Philosophy (文史哲) and Confucius Research (孔子研究)—both edited by Shandong University's Wang Xuedian12—and websites such as Rujiawang provide prestigious channels for the dissemination of Confucian academic works. In the twentieth century, academic Confucianism had relocated to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States. Today, the center is shifting once again, back to mainland China.

These political and academic developments are supported by economic factors.China is an economic superpower, and with economic might comes cultural pride (not to mention increased funding for the humanities and higher academic salaries). Max Weber's argument that Confucianism is not conducive to economic development has been widely questioned in view of the economic success of East Asian states with a Confucian heritage. Unlike with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, there has never been an organized Confucian resistance to economic modernization. Quite the opposite: A this-worldly outlook combined with values such as respect for education and concern for future generations may have contributed to economic growth. But modernity also has a downside: It often leads to atomism and psychological anxiety. The competition for social status and material resources becomes fiercer and fiercer, with declining social responsibility and other-regarding outlooks. Communitarian ways of life and civility break down. Even those who make it to the top ask, "What now?" Making money, they realize, doesn't necessarily lead to well-being. It is only a means to the good life, but what exactly is the good life? Is it just about fighting for one's interests? Most people—in China, at least—do not want to be viewed as individualistic. The idea of focusing solely on individual well-being or happiness seems too self-centered. To feel good about ourselves, we also need to be good to others. Here's where Confucianism comes in: The tradition emphasizes that the good life lies in social relationships and commitment to the family, expanding outward. In the Chinese context, Confucian ethics is the obvious resource

to help fill the moral vacuum that often accompanies modernization.

In short, this mix of political, academic, economic, and psychological trends helps to explain the revival of Confucianism in China. But I don't want to overstate things. The Confucian comeback seems to have stalled of late. It's not just elderly cadres still influenced by Maoist antipathy to tradition who condemn efforts to promote value systems outside a rigid Marxist framework: As we will see (chapter 7), the Marxist tradition has been making a strong and surprising comeback and communist ideals increasingly set the political priorities and influence academic debates. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, liberal academics in China often look askance at Confucian-inspired defenses of social hierarchy and political meritocracy and blame Confucianism for China's authoritarian tendencies in the family and politics. Not to mention that Confucianism has yet to make a substantial impact among China's minority groups such as Tibetans and Uyghurs. So it's a huge mistake to equate Chinese culture with Confucianism.

That said, Confucianism's greatest impact—in terms of everyday social practices, people's self-identification, as well as political support—is strongest in Shandong Province, the home of the Confucian tradition. The license plates for the province start with the character 鲁 (Lu), the name of Confucius's long-defunct small state. Shandong Airlines has quotations from the Analects of Confucius above seats on its airplanes. Village leaders in the Shandong countryside teach Confucian classics to young children. The sociologist Anna Sun argues that the modern Chinese state's effort to promote Confucianism began in September 2004, during the celebration of Confucius's 2,555th birthday in Qufu.17 In imperial China, government officials were in charge of annual ceremonies to commemorate Confucius at the Confucian temple in Qufu, but the rites were discontinued after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. In September 2004, for the first time since the founding of the People's Republic, the state officially took over, with government representatives presiding over the rites, and the ceremony is now broadcast on national television. On November 26, 2013, President Xi himself visited Qufu and gave a speech that praised Confucian culture and criticized the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. He visited a Confucian academy and said that he would diligently read two books on the Confucian classics that were handed to him by the academy's director. In 2016, the government officially established the Academy for the Education of Virtuous Public Officials (政德教育学院) in Qufu, which provides education in the Confucian classics for mid-level cadres from the whole country. So it should not come as a big surprise that Shandong University hired a dean of political science and public administration largely on account of his scholarly writings on the contemporary social and political implications of Confucianism, even though the scholar is neither Chinese nor a member of the CCP. But how did I end up as a Confucian scholar in China, the reader may wonder? ■


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Writing on Snow: The Paradox of Governing the Arctic

MANASHJYOTI KARJEE

The Whales That Broke the Ice

On a frigid October day in 1988, Inupiat hunters near Barrow in Alaska found three grey whales trapped beneath the sea ice. As this news spread, an unlikely rescue effort unfolded. American and Soviet icebreakers, Cold War adversaries at that time, converged to carve a path for the trapped whales to open water. The world watched rapt as Inuit whalers, U.S. Coast Guard crews, and Soviet seamen worked side by side to save "Iceberg," "Crossbeak," and "Bonnet"; the names Barrow's children gave the stranded whales. This "tale of the whales" became an Arctic legend.

It was more than an animal rescue. It was a crystallisation of Arctic exceptionalism – the idea that at the High North, cooperation can overcome conflict even at the time when the world is divided into rival camps. The successful rescue spurred new channels of communication and trust between East and West, helping set the stage for the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy in 1991 and, eventually, the Arctic Council's founding in 1996. In popular memory, the Arctic came to be seen as a zone of camaraderie and common cause.

But the story of those trapped whales is also a parable. It offers a veneer of simple heroism and harmony, beneath which lies a far more complex mosaic of power dynamics. Today, as climate change intensifies melting of the polar ice and geopolitical interests sharpen in the region, the Arctic's governance regime faces tests unimaginable in the whale-rescue era. Great powers and Indigenous leaders, scientists and oil executives, all circle the same table. While the actors profess unity, they quietly advance their own visions.

The region's much-vaunted spirit of cooperation, its exceptionalism, remains. But it is increasingly a practised performance held together by subtle hierarchies, deft framing of issues, and norms that discipline behaviour without the need for open coercion. In what follows, we peel back the curtain on Arctic governance to see how power really works in this unique international arena.

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Beneath the Veil of Arctic Exceptionalism

From the fall of the Soviet Union until recently, the Arctic earned a reputation as a zone of peace, insulated from the disputes of lower latitudes. The Arctic Council was born in 1996 out of this optimistic spirit. The Arctic 8 (the U.S., Russia, Canada, Norway, Denmark (Greenland), Sweden, Finland, and Iceland) united in a forum expressly not about hard security, but about environmental protection and sustainable development. Over the years, ministers and presidents repeatedly declared the Arctic Council as proof that pragmatic cooperation can prevail over zero-sum logic. They point to joint research on climate change, coordinated responses to polar bear conservation, and landmark agreements like the 2011 search-and-rescue treaty – all achieved with consensus and without armed brinkmanship.

Yet even at the height of this cooperation-first narrative, the real picture was more nuanced. Arctic exceptionalism was in many ways a deliberate framing – a story the region's custodians told to themselves and the world to maintain stability. When Russian submarine MIR-1 planted a Russian flag on the North Pole seabed at a depth of 4,262 in 2007, media cries of a "new Cold War" in the Arctic rang out. Arctic diplomats responded not with sabres but with seminars. Within a year, all five Arctic Ocean coastal states met in Greenland to affirm that UNCLOS (the UN Law of the Sea) would govern territorial claims, pointedly cooling talk of conflict. Far from triggering a scramble, the flag incident spurred a burst of multilateral reassurance. Similarly, after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, many feared the chill of East–West relations would freeze Arctic cooperation. But at the Arctic Council's 2015 ministerial meeting in Iqaluit, Canada delegates doubled down on "the Arctic as a zone of peace" and renewed the exceptionalism narrative at the very moment it seemed most in peril.

These moves underscore a key insight: Arctic exceptionalism is not just an inherent regional trait but a carefully maintained veneer. The Council pointedly avoids discussion of security or sovereignty disputes. Diplomatic language is scrubbed of provocations. This doesn't mean rivalries vanish north of the 66th parallel. The power of exceptionalism lies in setting the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. When the United States, under the Trump administration, blocked any mention of climate change in the Arctic Council's 2019 joint declaration, the result was a diplomatic shock. For the first time ever, the Council ended without a consensus declaration. Arctic ministers publicly voiced "disappointment" and concern at this breach of decorum. The episode revealed that the code of cooperation could be strained by great-power politics. The Council itself did not break as all members agreed to keep working outside the declaration, implicitly disciplining the outlier by marking its obstruction as illegitimate. Arctic exceptionalism bent, but did not shatter. Beneath the polite smiles and group photos, power was quietly being exercised.

The Power of the Frame – Who Tells the Arctic's Story?

Power in the Arctic is often exercised not by fiat, but by framing the narrative. In Arctic diplomacy, words shape worlds. Arctic actors frequently toggle between portraying the region as exceptional and local ("what happens in the Arctic is best decided by those who live here") and as globally connected ("the Arctic is an affair of concern for the whole world"). This global vs regional framing battle came to a head during the observer debates. Arctic states and Indigenous groups often stressed the regional, insider-owned nature of Arctic

governance to gently push back against outside interlopers. Emerging powers like China, which called itself the "Near-Arctic state," countered by emphasising the global stakes of Arctic melting and international law. This implied they, too, deserved a say.

The regional frame prevailed in institutional terms (only Arctic states can vote in the Council), but global frames are welcomed when they bring resources or legitimacy (e.g., citing climate change as a global challenge to spur action). Arctic politics becomes a dance of framing: each actor amplifies the narrative that best serves its interests. This can be peace, sovereignty, sustainable development, or scientific urgency. These frames are not mere talk; they influence whose proposals gain traction.

When oil prices spiked in the 2010s, resource companies and some Arctic governments framed the Arctic as an economic frontier. This led to the creation of the Arctic Economic Council in 2015 to give business a louder voice. That framing – the Arctic as opportunity rather than sanctuary – was controversial, pushed strongly by Canada and oil interests, and quietly monitored by Indigenous and environmental groups wary of opening the floodgates. A shift in narrative can redistribute power. By legitimising corporate presence, the economic development frame changed the institutional landscape of Arctic governance. Additionally, the Arctic holds 22% of the world's undiscovered but recoverable resources. As the ice melts to give access to these resources, the power struggle in the Arctic theatre to access them would be a captivating watch.

From Drums to Declarations – The Rituals of Respect

The diplomatic rituals also reinforce certain frames. Consider the Arctic Council ministerial meetings, which conclude each two-year chairmanship. The host country typically stages cultural performances – an Inuit drum dance, a Sámi joik (traditional chant) – before dignitaries. This isn't mere pageantry. It's a ritual affirmation that Indigenous heritage is integral to Arctic politics. It reminds state officials that their authority here is morally constrained by much older, non-state forms of belonging. Yet, one might also observe how these rituals can be co-opted: a great power's delegate dutifully watches the dance, then signs a declaration praising Indigenous knowledge, all the while ensuring it aligns with their capital's interests. Such theatre, however sincere or cynical, is another performance of power. The form of respect must be paid, even if the substance is negotiable. Power hides in these details of protocol and narrative framing. Through them, Arctic governance remains what one scholar calls a "performance of competence" by its actors.

Arctic cooperation thrives not through raw power but through discipline embedded in norms and rules developed over decades of dialogue. While the Arctic Council lacks binding enforcement power, it commands influence through shared expectations and soft disciplining. Every decision must be agreed upon by all eight Arctic states and Indigenous Permanent Participants. Far from being a recipe for paralysis, this norm compels moderation and compromise. Another vital principle is that Arctic initiatives must benefit the entire region. Whether Russia proposes connectivity infrastructure or Canada champions biodiversity, states frame projects as multilateral. The practice of rotating chairmanship and ceremonial diplomacy ensures that even small states like Iceland or Finland can wield influence by managing process and mediating outcomes.

Expertise further reinforces this order. Scientific working groups produce authoritative reports. The 2004 Arctic Climate Impact Assessment defined the contours of political debate. Though they avoid overt advocacy, experts shape

negotiations by controlling information. Disagreements over the public role of science underscore its power: the one who drafts the findings often steers the agenda.

The Land Remembers – Indigenous Power and Moral Authority

> *the land*
> *is different*
> *when you have lived there*
> *wandered*
> *sweated*
> *frozen*
> *seen the sun*
> *set rise*
> *disappear return*
> *the land is different*
> *when you know*
> *here are*
> *roots*
> *ancestors*
> – Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, Sámi poet (from The Sun, My Father)

In these lines by the late Sámi writer Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, the Arctic emerges not as a void, a terra nullius to be conquered or managed. The Arctic is portrayed as a living entity suffused with memory, rhythm, and kinship. Such Indigenous perspectives offer a profound counterpoint to conventional notions of authority. In the Arctic governance mosaic, legitimacy is not solely derived from military might or economic GDP, but from belonging to the land itself. Indigenous peoples, whether Sámi, Inuit, Chukchi or Gwich'in, trace their authority in the Arctic to lineages far older than any modern state. Their worldview, embedded in language and art, treats the Arctic as home and teacher, not frontier or resource. This is why Indigenous organisations at the Arctic Council insist on the title Permanent Participants rather than observers. Their seat at the table is not a gracious concession by states; it is an assertion that they co-govern the Arctic by inherent right. An Inupiat elder once addressed a room of policymakers, saying: "We are not stakeholders. We are rights-holders." That simple reframing carries the weight of generations and the moral power to which states must listen.

Voice Without Veto – How Indigenous Diplomacy Shapes Rules

The inclusion of Indigenous voices has subtly reshaped Arctic power dynamics. This shifts the discourse from state interest to stewardship and responsibility. When debates emerged over Arctic fisheries or new shipping routes, Indigenous leaders invoked not only environmental data but lived experience and spiritual ties to Arctic wildlife, often slowing or stopping profit-driven initiatives. Such influence helped catalyse the 2018 Central Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement, a precautionary moratorium on fishing in newly thawed polar waters. This recognises Indigenous coastal knowledge and avoids the ecological disasters seen elsewhere. In the Arctic, might does not make right; legitimacy is earned through respect for land and people. Meanwhile, Indigenous leaders have mastered the art of engaging in global diplomacy, leaving a lasting mark on the Polar Code by lobbying for protections like banning waste in hunting zones. Though they lack formal votes, authority flows from credibility and voice. Their worldview forms the grout of Arctic governance, which

quietly binds the mosaic with ancestral wisdom and moral power.

The World Enters the Ice – Embedded Power Meets Global Might

Despite its cooperative image, the Arctic does not exist in a vacuum and is deeply entangled with global forums and power structures. While Arctic Council diplomacy tends to be embedded, marked by consensus and subtle influence, global institutions like the IMO or UNFCCC expose starker, more coercive power dynamics. The development of the Polar Code – a set of international rules for polar shipping – shows this contrast vividly. Arctic states, which are concerned about rising maritime traffic, spent years building research and consensus through the Arctic Council. But the Code itself had to be negotiated by over 170 members at the IMO, where powerful shipping nations and industry lobbies watered down several protections. Yet, the Arctic states' embedded power gave them leverage. Their unity and expertise helped push the deal through after two decades of effort, translating soft regional diplomacy and hard bargaining into global rules.

Climate change highlights similar contrasts. Within the Arctic Council, rivals like Russia and the US largely agree on the warming Arctic, thanks to shared scientific efforts and communities from Siberia to Alaska facing the effects. But at global climate summits like the UNFCCC, these same countries resume adversarial roles, disputing emissions targets, financial responsibilities and accountability, and hesitating to endorse aggressive global carbon cuts. Even so, Arctic diplomacy influences global outcomes. The Paris Agreement echoed Arctic Council science, and global black carbon pledges trace back to regional efforts.

A telling story of the Arctic Council's distinct governance style came after 2014, when Russia was isolated elsewhere due to Western sanctions. Remarkably, it remained an active Arctic Council member, cooperating on search-and-rescue and scientific initiatives. But this embedded, disciplined style of governance faces mounting pressure. Melting ice and economic interest are drawing in new actors, from Asian governments to global corporations, who wield growing influence but bear little institutional responsibility. Moreover, the Arctic Council lacks authority over security matters, a major gap as military exercises and posturing increase, such as Russia's Arctic Command and NATO's exercises in Norway. Without reforms, overlapping forums like the IMO and UN may create friction or weaken coherence.

The Arctic's governance model, a mosaic of cooperation and careful framing, has so far resisted the harsher dynamics of global politics. But to endure, it may require new institutional "tiles": stronger mandates, broader inclusion, and frameworks that better match rising geopolitical realities.

Cracks in the Ice – Can the Mosaic Hold?

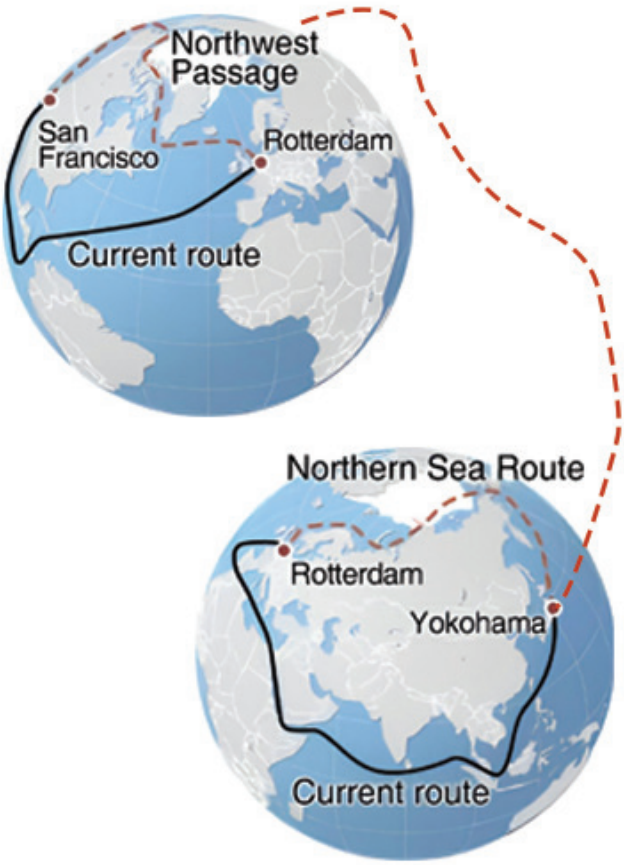
In August 2021, a pod of bowhead whales swam through the once-impassable and ice-choked Northwest Passage. This symbolises a rapidly transforming Arctic, which is unfortunately on its way to experiencing the first ice-free summer by 2040. But unlike past Cold War moments of cooperation sparked by shared awe or urgency, today's Arctic challenges like melting ice, industrial expansion and strategic rivalry demand not gestures but lasting governance. The Arctic Council has long offered that: a collaborative forum where even rival coast guards share rescue maps and Indigenous groups help shape global agreements. China,

too, played by the rules, invoking respect and cooperation to be heard.

Yet 2022 exposed the fragility of this exceptionalism. Russia's invasion of Ukraine froze the Arctic Council, shattering the illusion that geopolitics stops at the ice. Trust must now be rebuilt, not with platitudes, but through renewed norms and pragmatic diplomacy.

The Arctic mosaic endures because power is diffused, not absent. Not all voices weigh equally, but enough are heard to prevent domination. Its strength lies in disciplinary power: the quiet influence of norms, knowledge and shared narratives. Whether this balance holds depends on our willingness to keep tending the mosaic. Each act of cooperation. Each youth council or joint expedition is a tile reinforcing it.

The whales still swim. If humans keep listening to science, to each other, to the land; the Arctic may remain a stage for governance by consent, not coercion. A rare place where cooperation is not just a memory, but a daily practice! ■



With Arctic ice caps melting at a rate nearly four times faster than the global average, the region is expected to be seasonally ice-free by 2040, unlocking new trans-Arctic shipping routes.

The Northwest Passage and Northern Sea Route in the Arctic shorten global shipping by approximately 4,000 and 5,800 nautical miles respectively—cutting travel time by 10–15 days compared to traditional routes via the Panama and Suez Canals.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Is Space the Final Frontier?

ASHWIN PRASAD

"Whoever controls low-Earth orbit controls the near-Earth space. Whoever controls near-Earth space controls Terra. Whoever controls Terra dominates the destiny of humankind."

~ Everett C. Dolman

Historically, nations that effectively controlled the dominant strategic domain of their era gained a decisive geopolitical advantage. For the past few centuries, the arteries of global power flowed through the oceans. Command of the seas allowed nations to become empires by controlling trade, establishing colonies, projecting military strength, and amassing transcontinental wealth and influence. Today, space has emerged as this new strategic frontier. Its rise as a competitive geopolitical arena is driven by an increased reliance on its unique technologies and the nature of the domain itself.

Space – A Strategic Domain

The reliance on space is realised as national power through a suite of critical technologies providing global communication, Earth observation, and precise navigation and timing. These are technologies deployed in space that serve Earth. Satellites in orbit provide the invisible backbone for global civilian and military communications. Emerging internet megaconstellations are rapidly expanding access and transforming communication during modern conflicts. Furthermore, Earth observation from space is used for military surveillance and resource monitoring. It underpins informed decision-making across diverse areas, including border security, maritime operations, climate action, and disaster response. Equally crucial are space-based positioning, navigation and timing services. They enable a vast array of applications—from missile strikes and commercial flights to banking transactions and smartphone GPS navigation.

This profound dependence on space technology is often unseen. Its fundamental importance makes it a potent geopolitical lever. It is critical to both economic prosperity and military effectiveness, blurring the lines between civilian and military use cases. For instance, a satellite equipped with synthetic aperture radar for weather monitoring in the Pacific can equally serve to track military vessels in the South China Sea. Similarly, a rocket designed for space launches fundamentally

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employs the same core technology as an intercontinental ballistic missile. “

> *The step from a V-2 type rocket to a satellite launching vehicle is a relatively small one. The same powerful motors, the same guidance systems, the same engineering know-how are involved.”*
>
> - Wernher von Braun

This dual-use nature fosters a competitive rather than cooperative dynamic in the space sector among nations. Collaboration is evident in scientific missions. The James Webb Space Telescope is a joint effort by the space agencies of the US, Europe and Canada. Cooperation thrives in such missions since the benefits of shared scientific discovery outweigh national competitive interests. This rarely extends into strategic areas. Some bilateral sale and exchange of space-based services across borders is permitted. The transfer of core technology, components, or the outsourcing of manufacturing is not. Consequently, supply chains for space are typically regionalised within the borders of spacefaring nations and their most trusted partners, splitting the world into rivalrous alliances.

In this competitive realm, the ensuing space race is not just a race between the leading spacefaring nations like the US and China. It is a gold rush to develop space-based infrastructure and control precious orbital resources. Occupying enough of an orbit is akin to blockades that deny access to adversaries—a modern analogue to controlling sea lanes. Contrary to popular belief, the usable pie of space around Earth is limited. Despite the vast distances, a few narrow rings around the Earth make for productive satellite orbits. These orbits are getting crowded. Reports from 2024 indicate that there are over 10,000 satellites orbiting Earth. Just ten years ago, it was 1,000. The carrying capacity of these orbits is limited. Every subsequent satellite will find it harder to access the same orbits. The access to desirable orbits diminishes. It has to deal with a more congested environment. It has to invest in more complex and expensive launches and collision avoidance gear to offset the higher risk of collisions. It also has to coordinate more with other satellite operators.

Humanity’s dependence on space will only increase. These conditions create an incentive for existing space powers to launch as many satellites as soon as possible. They will control the majority of the space assets and consolidate power. When developing nations begin to participate more in space activities, they will find it increasingly challenging.

> *“Unlike interplanetary space, Earth orbit would compare to a proximate, crowded and contestable coastline and a littoral environment, rather than a vast, remote, distant and expansive ocean.”*
>
> - Bleddyn E. Bowen

The Major Space Powers Today

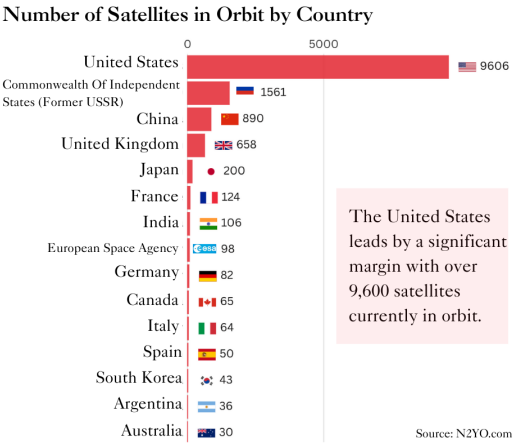
Space technology, and therefore power, does not stem from a singular innovation but rather an intricate integration of multiple disciplines. These include propulsion for launch systems, material sciences for spacecraft enduring extreme speeds and heat, communication systems for antennas and data throughput, advanced cameras and sensors for Earth observation, and sophisticated software for data processing and utilisation. For that reason, a nation’s ability to best leverage space for its strategic interests hinges on its proficiency across these verticals and its capacity to integrate them.

Many nations have acquired capabilities in some of these technological areas, qualifying them as spacefaring. However, only a select few have mastery over all requisite technologies and are able to integrate them to undertake space missions independently. This comprehensive, end-to-end capability is what truly confers the status of a space power on a nation.

Several factors contribute to the lead these nations maintain. Among these, indigenous space launch and transportation capabilities are critical differentiators. Fewer than a dozen entities can independently launch rockets into space. This group includes the USA, China, Russia, Japan, India, Israel, Iran, North Korea, and South Korea. Notably, only the US has operationalised reusable launch capabilities, while China, India, Russia, Europe, and Japan are at various stages of developing similar technologies. This reusability means US rockets can return after launch and be reused for subsequent missions. Reusable rockets greatly reduce launch costs and turnaround times, allowing the US to launch more frequently and extend its lead in the space race.

The tangible outcome of this end-to-end capability is the number of satellites a country deploys. Thus, the quantum of operational satellites can serve as a rough proxy for a nation's space power. By this metric, the US, China, and Russia currently own and operate the highest number of satellites. The US has the largest number of satellites, with China rapidly expanding its orbital assets in competition. Russia maintains strong space capabilities, largely stemming from its Cold War-era experience. However, sanctions have restricted its access to international trade, talent, and technology. The expansion of its operations in space lags behind that of the US and China. It is a space power in decline.

A significant portion of these national satellites serve military purposes. The number and sophistication of dedicated



military satellites reflect a nation's investment in space for defence. In contemporary military doctrine, space-based assets are central to modernisation and operational effectiveness.

Conflict in Space

> *"We have a saying in the space business, 'Satellites don't have mothers.' You can't hug it. You can't touch it. You can't hear it, you can't love it. It's hard for the average person to understand just how reliant their life is on space."*
>
> - John W. Raymond

This pervasive, albeit often intangible, reliance on space for military, economic, and societal functions—particularly when coupled with competitive rather than collaborative technology supply chains—makes space assets prime targets during conflicts between spacefaring nations.

Effectively, every nation on Earth is space-adjacent. Outer space, by common definition, begins at the Kármán line, merely 100 kilometres above Earth's surface. This is not a distant frontier accessible to a select few; it is a domain that directly overlays every country, making all of humanity immediate neighbours to this critical environment. As nations undertake space

activities in pursuit of their economic and security goals, space is becoming congested, contested, and competitive.

There is an advantage to be gained by sabotaging or disrupting an adversary's space assets. While the direct loss of human life from such actions might be minimal, the collapse or malfunction of space systems can have cascading and devastating consequences for a nation's infrastructure, economy, and security. Future conflicts between major powers will inevitably involve a space dimension.

Nations have pursued several avenues to develop counter-space capabilities. These include Earth-based systems such as directed energy weapons (DEWs), cyber-attacks targeting space infrastructure, and anti-satellite (ASAT) missiles. They also encompass space-based threats like co-orbital anti-satellite systems (which can manoeuvre close to and interfere with or destroy other satellites) and dedicated kinetic kill vehicles. Electronic warfare (EW) techniques, such as signal jamming and spoofing, alongside cyber-attacks, are often employed as "grey zone" tactics, falling below the threshold of overt armed conflict.

Direct-ascent anti-satellite (DA-ASAT) missiles are typically ground-launched weapons designed for "hit-to-kill" interception of satellites. The development and testing of destructive DA-ASATs date back to as early as 1959. Countries with sufficiently advanced ballistic missile programmes possess the foundational technology to develop DA-ASATs. The US, Russia, China, and India have all showcased such capabilities through destructive tests. Several other nations are believed to possess the technical prowess for latent or unproven DA-ASAT capabilities.

While non-kinetic attacks can be highly disruptive, kinetic attacks such as DA-ASATs are physically destructive—not only to their intended target but also posing a broader threat to all space assets. They generate significant orbital debris: uncontrolled fragments travelling at hypervelocity. Collisions involving this debris can trigger a chain reaction, generating further debris and exponentially increasing the threat to operational satellites and future space missions. Ironically, the nations possessing DA-ASAT capabilities are often those with the most significant orbital assets, giving them much to lose from widespread debris proliferation. Nevertheless, an escalating conflict between space powers could lead to the widespread use of such weapons, jeopardising the space environment for all nations and potentially rendering certain orbits unusable for generations—a scenario often referred to as the Kessler Syndrome.

The issue of the weaponisation of space and its potential hazards for the global economy and security prompted the development of international space law. The cornerstone of this consensus is the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, along with its subsequent agreements and conventions. Formulated during the Cold War, its provisions reflect the geopolitical and technological context of that era. While a primary goal was to prevent the weaponisation of space (specifically, the stationing of WMDs in orbit) and promote peaceful uses, its effectiveness in addressing contemporary challenges is increasingly debated. For instance, while it prohibits national appropriation of celestial bodies, it offers limited guidance on the commercial exploitation of space resources—a rapidly emerging field. Furthermore, its enforceability is hampered by the inherent opacity of many space operations and the difficulties in attribution and verification. It primarily holds states accountable, yet the modern space landscape is increasingly characterised by the prominent role of private commercial entities, posing new regulatory dilemmas.

Private Entry into Space

The defining feature of the contemporary space era is the increasing role of private corporations in space activities. During the Cold War, the space sector—heavily influenced by national security imperatives—operated as a state-controlled endeavour managed by national space agencies. Nations maintained monopolistic control. Private players were relegated to component manufacturing. To galvanise public support, justify spending, and attract scientific talent, governments also pursued high-profile, symbolic missions to the Moon and other celestial bodies.

In the current landscape, such symbolism coexists with an increasingly substantive and indispensable reliance on space technology throughout the civilian economy and society. The proliferation of the internet and the growth of the digital economy have fuelled an insatiable demand for space-derived data and services, leading to a rapid expansion in the scale and scope of space operations.

Governments have also recognised that their military capabilities are dependent on assured access to and control over orbital assets. This, in turn, is determined by the ability to rapidly deploy, augment, or replace space infrastructure at scale. Traditional government-led agencies, often operating as monopolies, face challenges in terms of cost-efficiency and speed. There is a growing consensus that a vibrant, competitive, and decentralised industrial ecosystem is essential to meet these demands. This strategic shift—from largely secretive, state-run programmes to an emphasis on scalable, commercially driven solutions—marks the 'third space age'.

Today, private companies routinely design, manufacture, and launch rockets, conduct Earth observation, and deploy and maintain global satellite internet megaconstellations. In response to these developments, governments worldwide are liberalising their space sectors and actively encouraging private enterprise. National space policies, notably in countries like the US, explicitly champion this commercial-led approach. India has also recently embraced this paradigm, enacting reforms to enable greater private sector participation in its national space endeavours.

India's Evolution in Space

India stands among the nations that made foundational investments in its space programme early in its development. Over decades, it cultivated indigenous technological capacities, achieving an independent, end-to-end spacefaring capability. Historically, this expertise resided almost exclusively within the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), which functioned as the nation's sole entity for space development and operations. Any entity seeking space-based services typically procured them from ISRO or foreign providers.

The Indian space reform was a policy response to political, economic, social, and security imperatives. Recognising that the space technology sector cannot achieve the necessary scale and strength under a single organisation, India undertook liberalisation of its space sector. This policy evolution, coinciding with the dynamic growth of the global space market, has catalysed the emergence of over 200 space start-ups within the country since the reforms were initiated. Various private Indian firms are now delivering both commercial and defence-relevant space technologies and services. Present and forthcoming national space infrastructure projects are designed to harness private sector capabilities alongside ISRO's expertise. India's space economy holds a 2% share of the global market, with a current valuation of USD 8.4 billion. Considering India's space technology capabilities, this is lower than its potential. The reforms seek to leverage

private participation and growth to scale the economy to an estimated USD 44 billion by 2033.

Space technology occupies an aspirational position within Indian society, and ISRO is widely celebrated as a national asset. This broad public esteem translates into robust political will, which has historically ensured consistent funding and support for the long-term objectives of the Indian space programme. This trend will likely continue.

Space has emerged as the 21st century's paramount strategic domain. The profound reliance on space-based technologies for economic prosperity and national security, coupled with their inherent dual-use nature, has fuelled a geopolitical contest. Established space powers like the US and China vie for dominance. The development of counter-space capabilities, alongside the limitations of existing international governance mechanisms, heightens the risk of hazard and conflict. The Indian political will and technological prowess in the space sector, and its selective legal-regulatory alignment, situate it uniquely amid the tussle between great powers for space dominance and make it a pivotal regional actor. India's space programme is both a driver and a product of global strategic competition.

> *"Earth is the cradle of humanity, but one cannot live in a cradle forever."*
>
> - Konstantin Tsiolkovsky ■

The Churn in the Indian Ocean: India & Middle Powers

POOJA BHATT

Introduction

The question of who will enforce the rules in the oceans remains a contested and complex topic of discussion, especially during intensifying great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Traditionally, global maritime governance has been anchored in international law, namely the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which sets out legal norms for navigation, limits, right and duties of states in various delimitation zones (such as territorial seas, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zones and high sea).

However, the growing major power competition, especially between the United States and China, has challenged this rules-based order. The US promotes freedom of navigation and open sea lanes, while China asserts expansive maritime claims, particularly in the South China Sea, backed by military and infrastructural assertiveness. Amid this, regional institutions in the Indo-Pacific, like ASEAN, IORA, and initiatives like the Quad, seek to uphold cooperative norms and collective maritime governance. But lack the institutional efficiency and enforcement capacity to manage disputes independently. Thus, ocean governance in the Indo-Pacific is currently shaped by a tense interplay of legal norms, power politics, and regional multilateral efforts, with no single actor in uncontested control.

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), embedded within the broader Indo-Pacific, has emerged as an interesting zone of geopolitical and normative contestation. It acts as the artery of global commerce and energy flows, and a site of competing strategic interests and normative frameworks.

As great power rivalries intensify in the Indo-Pacific region, namely between the United States and China, India and other middle powers have sought to assert influence through norm-making and norm-shaping mechanisms. However, this endeavour is fraught with historical legacies, structural limitations emerging from financial, bureaucratic and similar issues, institutional inertia, and regional asymmetries in power and interests.

This paper focuses on the scope, limitations, and challenges faced by India and other middle powers in norm-making and

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shaping in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The IOR is a geographical subset of larger geostrategic Indo-Pacific construct. The IOR historically has remained connected through trade, culture and human intercourse, bringing several similarities in countries sitting across oceans. Norms are one such sameness.

Institutionally, it traces the historical evolution of India's normative diplomacy from Panchsheel, the Bandung Conference, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to contemporary efforts at regional institution-building. It emphasises that power is integral to norm entrepreneurship and assesses how regional institutions, especially ASEAN, BIMSTEC and IORA, navigate the delicate balance between inclusivity, sovereignty, and great power dynamics. Finally, the paper proposes institutional strategies for making regional norms and architectures "administration-proof", that is, resilient to political flux and grounded in continuity and governance.

China Redux

India's normative engagement in the international system predates its current role in the Indo-Pacific.

The Panchsheel Agreement (1954) between India and China articulated five principles of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence. These ideals laid the groundwork for India's subsequent global diplomacy, emphasising decolonisation, peaceful dispute resolution, and sovereign equality.

The Bandung Conference (1955) reinforced this normative stance, bringing together Afro-Asian states to challenge the bipolar Cold War order. India played a prominent role, advocating for a world order based not on coercive alliances but on cooperation and justice. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), inaugurated in 1961, institutionalized this ethos. While NAM lacked formal enforcement mechanisms, it advanced an alternative vision of global order that privileged dialogue over domination and development over deterrence.

However, these early normative frameworks had limited material backing. Despite their moral appeal, they were often undercut by global power dynamics and India's limited capabilities. Nonetheless, they created a vocabulary of values such as sovereignty, equality, and faith in multilateralism that India continues to invoke in contemporary Indo-Pacific diplomacy. Some of the continuing regional norms are:

1. Sovereignty and Non-Interference continue to be a foundational norm, especially emphasised by countries in South and Southeast Asia. It underpins mutual respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Rooted in post-colonial experiences and reflected in ASEAN's diplomatic culture, this norm remains central to regional cooperation.

2. Freedom of Navigation and Overflight -Derived from UNCLOS, this norm ensures that ships and aircraft of all countries can move freely through international waters and airspace, that is beyond 12nm territorial seas from the coastline. It is particularly emphasised by the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia, and contested by China in parts of the South China Sea through freedom of navigation operations or FONOPs.
3. Peaceful Resolution of Disputes is another key norm, the preference for diplomacy and dialogue over the use of force. Regional institutions like ASEAN, IORA, BIMSTEC and even the SCO support mechanisms for negotiation, consensus-building, and the peaceful settlement of disputes.

4. Inclusivity and Multilateralism are other regional norms that many Indo-Pacific countries advocate for to build inclusive regional frameworks that avoid bloc politics. This includes promoting ASEAN centrality, involving small and middle powers in regional decision-making, and opposing exclusive security pacts that divide the region.
5. Sustainable Development and Blue Economy reflect the regional aspiration of the Indo-Pacific countries, several of which are coastal, small and island states. A newer but growing norm is the emphasis on sustainable use of ocean resources, marine conservation, and equitable development of coastal communities. This is evident in IORA's focus areas and India's SAGAR vision.
6. Rules-Based Order refers to the upholding of international law, especially UNCLOS, WTO rules, and norms around cyber and digital governance. Middle powers like India, Australia, and Japan often use this concept to counter unilateralism and coercion.
7. ASEAN Centrality has come to be a strong norm in the broader Indo-Pacific, particularly among Southeast Asian countries. It refers to the central role of ASEAN in regional architecture. This ensures that ASEAN remains a hub for dialogue and norm-setting, rather than being sidelined by major power rivalries.
8. Connectivity and Regional Integration is another emerging norm that is taking shape in the form of infrastructure development, economic integration, and people-to-people ties are widely accepted, though they come with contestation over standards, debt sustainability, and strategic alignment—especially in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Power and Norm-Building

Norm-making is not a neutral or purely ethical endeavour; it is intrinsically tied to power. As constructivist international relations scholars have argued, norms are not only shaped by shared values but also by strategic interests and material capabilities. In the Indo-Pacific, the capacity to institutionalise norms, whether through freedom of navigation, rules-based order, or maritime security, depends on power projection, legitimacy, and diplomatic influence.

For India and other middle powers such as Australia, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea, the challenge lies in balancing normative aspirations with strategic realism. These states seek to promote a multipolar Indo-Pacific order based on openness, inclusivity, and multilateralism. However, they must do so in an environment that is increasingly polarised by U.S.-China rivalry, and where norm diffusion is often conflated with power alignment.

India's emphasis on a "rules-based international order," "Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative" (IPOI), Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine and the recent MAHASAGAR vision reflect its desire to craft a regional security and development architecture that upholds shared norms. Yet, norm diffusion without power reinforcement risks rhetorical dilution, especially in a contested neighbourhood marked by China's assertiveness and institutional fragmentation.

The Role of Institutions: Relevance, Upgradation, and Reform

Since the issue of power has come to be central to norm-making, shaping, and building within regional institutions, different countries based on their status and

capabilities view their engagements with multilateralism differently. Major powers often view institutions as instruments to project influence, shape rules to align with their strategic interests, and legitimise their leadership in the region. Middle powers, on the other hand, see institutions as platforms for coalition-building, norm diffusion, and balancing between great powers without direct confrontation. They act as norm entrepreneurs, promoting values such as inclusivity, multilateralism, and regional stability. Small and Islands States (SIDS) primarily value institutions for the normative protection they offer—preserving sovereignty, enabling voice, and mitigating asymmetries of power through consensus-based frameworks. Consequently, while all actors participate in regional institutions, their expectations and approaches vary significantly based on their relative capabilities and strategic needs.

Norm-building in the Indo-Pacific cannot be divorced from regional institutions. However, institutions must evolve to reflect changing power realities and normative priorities. Many existing architectures, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), BIMSTEC, or the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), amongst others, suffer from limited mandates, bureaucratic inertia, and under-resourcing.

To remain relevant, these institutions must be able to adapt in three ways. Firstly, align themselves with current geopolitical realities (e.g., climate change, maritime security, digital connectivity). Second, upgrade their governance mechanisms to enable quicker decision-making. And third, diversify membership and enhance functional specialization to remain effective. The Indian Ocean Region has seen some success in this direction, especially with ASEAN's centrality in broader Indo-Pacific dialogues. Institutions like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), while not Indian Ocean-specific, have played critical roles in embedding norms of dialogue, peaceful dispute settlement, and consensus-building.

However, ASEAN's strength, consensus and inclusivity are also its limitations. Its non-confrontational approach and the principle of non-interference often result in a lowest-common-denominator outcome, which impedes collective responses to pressing issues like South China Sea militarization or cyber threats.

ASEAN and Normative Regional Architecture: Strengths and Complications

Noted scholars have rightly argued emphasis on ASEAN as an indispensable actor in regional norm-making is well-founded. ASEAN's ability to convene and its normative influence, through mechanisms like the ASEAN Way, have shaped regional expectations about diplomacy, sovereignty, and inclusivity.

ASEAN has successfully created a platform for middle powers and great powers to engage without coercion, preserving regional autonomy. Its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) has become a reference point for regional engagement, embedding principles such as non-aggression and peaceful dispute resolution.

However, ASEAN also faces complications such as its internal divisions and varying strategic alignments dilute consensus; Its institutional weakness makes norm enforcement difficult. Furthermore, it influences is limited within the sub-region of Southeast Asia.

Thus, while ASEAN's normative value is significant, it cannot alone uphold a coherent regional architecture. Middle powers and like-minded states must support ASEAN-led mechanisms while also creating mini-lateral groupings such as the Quad, which can operationalise norms in more

focused domains (e.g., maritime security, critical infrastructure, digital governance).

Institutional Resilience: Making Norms' Administrative Proof'

One of the major challenges in sustaining regional norm-making is political volatility and administrative discontinuity. Governments change, priorities shift, and alliances evolve. Hence, regional institutions must be designed to be "administratively independent", referring to being insulated from the whims of political cycles.

Therefore, the regional institutions can be made resilient in the following ways: Firstly, by embedding norms into treaties and charters, rather than relying on informal consensus. Secondly, creating technical and bureaucratic sub-committees that maintain operational continuity. Third, ensuring civil society and private sector participation, which can act as stabilising forces. Fourth, developing mechanisms for creating institutional memory and carrying out and implementing policy-relevant work.

By institutionalising norms in administrative frameworks, states can ensure that regional governance does not unravel with leadership changes. This is particularly important in issue areas such as maritime safety, disaster response, and trade facilitation, where long-term coordination is critical.

India's Multilateral Approach: Scope and Constraints

India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific is shaped by its identity as a civilizational state, a developing economy, and an aspiring global power. It is on the leadership to decide whether it wants to play its role in upholding norms as a norm maker, shaper or upholder for championing values of sovereignty, non-interference, inclusivity, and development-led security.

Having said that, India faces multiple constraints. While India is a rising economic power, it still faces resource limitations constrain its ability to fund large-scale regional initiatives or offer public goods at the scale China does. It's a contested neighbourhood, including tensions with Pakistan and China, that distracts from broader Indo-Pacific outreach. India's slow bureaucratic processes and absence of a centralized Indo-Pacific strategy dilute its normative clarity.

To address these, India must prioritise regional issues in its multilateral engagements, such as energy security, climate change, digital standards, and supply chain resilience. Presently, New Delhi seeks partnership with like-minded middle powers (e.g., Japan, Australia, France, Indonesia) to create issue-based coalitions. Similarly, it is enhancing its diplomatic and institutional capacity by training regional specialists and investing in multilateral institutions. India's IPOI and SAGAR initiatives offer potential platforms for such engagement, but they need clearer mandates, resource allocation, and partner buy-in.

Supply Chains and Normative Geoeconomics

Building resilient supply chains that can withstand crises and disasters is another important area of concern. The COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical disruptions (such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and U.S.-China tech wars) have foregrounded the importance of norm-based supply chains. The economic dimension of norm-building is becoming critical, especially as countries seek to de-risk their economies without reverting to protectionism. Instead of seeking purely commercial aspects of supply chains, they must remain tethered to human-centric needs, values, and aspirations.

India has an opportunity to position itself as a champion of transparent, resilient, and fair supply chains, particularly in sectors like pharmaceuticals, rare earths, and digital services. Initiatives like the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) with Japan and Australia underscore this pivot.

However, navigating widening norm-based issues, from data localisation to labour standards, requires India to harmonise domestic policy with global standards and enhance regulatory coherence. This remains a work in progress.

The Way Ahead for India

Today, the Indian Ocean is increasingly subject to geopolitical contestation, rivalries between the U.S. and China, China's expanding maritime presence, and emerging minilateral frameworks such as the Quad. In this context, regional institutions serve a stabilising normative function. They promote inclusive multilateralism in contrast to exclusive strategic blocs. Norms emphasise developmental issues, such as climate adaptation and blue economy, which resonate with the Global South. Further norms uphold norms of sovereignty and non-interference, helping smaller states maintain agency.

For India, these institutions offer a platform to exercise normative leadership. Through SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), MAHASAGAR, the Indo-Pacific Oceans' Initiative, and its active role in IORA and BIMSTEC, India seeks to foster a cooperative maritime order grounded in mutual respect, economic development, and shared security. However, to succeed, India and its partners must invest in institutional capacity, norm internalisation, and people-to-people exchanges.

Maritime security dialogues, cultural diplomacy, academic exchanges, and blue economy collaborations are crucial to translating normative ideals into practical outcomes. As regional institutions like IORA, BIMSTEC, and ASEAN grow in relevance, they must draw upon this history to shape a resilient and inclusive future. Through shared norms, these organisations can ensure that the Indian Ocean remains not a zone of zero-sum competition, but a common space of cooperation, opportunity, and mutual growth. ■


Mogadishu
(Muqdisho)
Kismayu
Mombasa
es Salaam
Masoko
Mtwara
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Victoria
Praslin
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Desroches
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Medical Monopolies & Inverted Payoffs

SHIPRA AGARWAL & SHIVANI SINGH

The Rise of GLP-1 Drugs

The past decade has revolutionised pharmaceutical markets, clinical practices, and public health discourse due to the emergence of GLP-1 receptor agonists. A class of medications used to treat type 2 diabetes and obesity, most prominently Ozempic, Wegovy, Mounjaro and Zepbound, these drugs have become multibillion-dollar assets for pharmaceutical giants such as Novo Nordisk and Eli Lilly

GLP-1 medications have drawn attention for intense competition, regulatory scrutiny, and growing concern over monopolistic practices. In late 2024, U.S. sales alone exceeded USD 71 billion, and a USD 470 billion market is estimated by 2030. Behind this surge lies a complex and advanced patent system that allows these companies to maintain exclusive control over these drugs long after the expiration of the original patents on their active ingredients.

The Patent Landscape of GLP-1 Drugs

The core pharmaceutical compounds in GLP-1 drugs, semaglutide and tirzepatide, are no longer novel in themselves. What is novel is the way companies have layered these drugs with device patents, new formulations, dosage variations, and use-case extensions. Semaglutide, for instance, which forms the basis of both Ozempic and Wegovy, is protected by a thicket of patents. As of 2024, there were 154 approved U.S. patents and over 320 filed applications involving semaglutide. The vast majority of these do not concern the primary drug itself but rather the way it is used or administered. This approach has allowed companies to extend control of the drug beyond the typical 20-year limit, with some now protected through to 2042. A similar strategy has been pursued by Eli Lilly with tirzepatide, filing 53 applications and securing 16 patents, with primary protections until 2036 and additional patents extending exclusivity up to 2041. In India, semaglutide, the active drug in Wegovy and Ozempic, goes off patent in March 2026. This relatively short span

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of protection places more onus on Novo Nordisk to move quickly and secure market share before generics enter. The launch of Wegovy in mid-2025 is therefore a well-timed entry, particularly since Eli Lilly's Mounjaro had already reached Indian shores in March 2025.

Patent Layering in Practice

A recent study published in JAMA provided a comprehensive assessment of how patent layering functions in practice. Across ten GLP-1 receptor agonist products approved between 2005 and 2021, manufacturers listed a median of 19.5 patents per drug, with over half of these protecting delivery devices rather than active ingredients. These include injector pens, auto-injectors, and other mechanisms that complicate generic replication. The median expected duration of market protection from the time of FDA approval was 18.3 years, substantially longer than the 12 to 14 years observed for most top-selling drugs, and the highest reported for any drug-device combination to date.

Despite several generic companies filing to challenge these patents, none have managed to gain FDA approval for a generic GLP-1 receptor agonist. More and more companies are taking advantage of the pleiotropic, or multifunctional, nature of GLP-1 medications to gain further patents based on newly identified therapeutic applications. Although semaglutide was first approved for blood sugar control, research presented in Nature Medicine and JAMA Psychiatry during early 2025 has demonstrated its ability to lower cardiovascular risk, reduce alcohol cravings, and treat conditions such as drug-induced pancreatitis and cognitive impairment. These findings have created new fronts for patent applications, as companies seek to guard these secondary uses with indication-specific patents. In effect, each successive therapeutic application becomes permission for a re-extension of the patent, a practice that not only expands the market but also protects it from competition under the pretext of medical innovation.

Legal Strategies to Maintain Monopoly

Legal strategies have also served to further fortify these monopolies. Both Novo Nordisk and Eli Lilly have pursued lawsuits aggressively against generic firms, as well as unlicensed compounders and telehealth providers. In 2024, Novo Nordisk settled confidentially with firms including Mylan, Apotex, and Sun Pharmaceuticals, resolving suits on major patents such as U.S. Patent No. 10,355,462. While the terms remain undisclosed, it is likely that these settlements included market entry delays and royalty agreements, tactics consistent with post-Actavis industry practice.

Lawsuits have also targeted unauthorised compounders who offer cheaper, compounded versions of semaglutide and tirzepatide. In some cases, these products were found to lack the active ingredient entirely or contain dangerous impurities. In August 2024, the FDA received over 300 reports of adverse events related to compounded semaglutide, raising public safety alarms that simultaneously reinforced brand-name firms' market positions. The game of exclusivity does not end with lawsuits or drug patents.

Power of Pharma Companies: Rewarding Investors

The economic consequences of this patent strategy are significant. In 2024, more than 80 percent of Novo Nordisk's U.S. sales and almost 50 percent of Eli Lilly's consisted of GLP-1 drugs. Meanwhile, shareholder dividends continually exceeded investment in research. Novo Nordisk

invested 41 percent more in dividends and share buybacks than in R&D between 2020 and 2024, while Eli Lilly's USD 15 billion share buyback plan and dividend increases highlighted the emphasis on returns to investors over increased access to treatment.

Shareholders have rewarded them richly. Since the initial GLP-1 launches, Novo Nordisk and Eli Lilly's combined market capitalisation has risen by almost USD 700 billion, almost a tenfold increase from their total GLP-1 sales to date. In fact, semaglutide alone generated over USD 29 billion for Novo Nordisk in 2024, accounting for 70 percent of its global revenues, an extraordinary concentration of value in a single therapeutic class.

Access is Unequal: Global Perspective

GLP-1 receptor agonists, widely recognised as a game changer by many studies, face major global access and affordability challenges. Disparities are driven by economic, geographic, and systemic factors that limit their equitable distribution across populations.

Obesity, once treated only through lifestyle modifications, now has pharmacological options, though not without efficacy and safety concerns. It is one of the most pressing global public health challenges, projected to affect over 1 billion people by 2030, according to the World Obesity Federation's 2025 Atlas. The prevalence of obesity has risen significantly not only in high-income countries but also in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). GLP-1 receptor agonists such as semaglutide and tirzepatide represent a shift in the management of obesity, blood pressure, and glycaemic control, and are associated with anti-inflammatory effects and reduced cardiovascular risk. Semaglutide has also been suggested as a transformative drug for non-surgical treatment of obesity, serving as an alternative to bariatric procedures by reducing appetite, prolonging satiety, and slowing digestion.

Pricing Power and Profit Maximization

Despite their clinical promise, GLP-1 drugs remain prohibitively expensive for most patients, often exceeding USD 1,000 per month. In 2025, an analysis by Dr Steven D. Pearson and the Institute for Clinical and Economic Review (ICER) examined the challenges and potential solutions for ensuring equitable access to GLP-1 drugs for obesity treatment in the United States, where nearly 40 percent of adults living with obesity are potential users of these medications. Although the annual cost has declined from USD 1,000– USD 1,166 to around USD 666– USD 750 per month, it remains unaffordable for a large portion of the patient population, exacerbating inequalities in access. Recent manufacturer programmes offer discounts to uninsured patients, reducing the out-of-pocket price to around USD 499 per month. However, even at reduced costs, drug makers continue to earn substantial profits and delay generic competition.

Isabella Backman from Yale estimated that biosimilar versions of GLP-1 drugs could cost between USD 0.75 and USD 72.49 per month. Yet, due to limited competition, unregulated pricing, the influence of pharmaceutical managers, and surging demand, the U.S. retail price remains as high as USD 968.52.

The Insurance and Cost Dilemma: Global Disparities

Despite their therapeutic potential, these medications are disproportionately accessible to wealthier, urban, and well-insured

populations. In the United States, the GLP-1 retail price remains above USD 1,000 per month. While access to GLP-1 drugs is already limited within the U.S., the global discrepancy is even starker.

Health insurance coverage in the United States excludes GLP-1 weight-loss drugs under Medicare Part D, and only 13 state Medicaid programmes offer coverage. As a result, 69 percent of American adults do not have insurance coverage for these medications. Even among the privately insured, prior authorisation requirements often force patients to pay out-of-pocket. The effects are not only financial but also profoundly unjust.

By contrast, GLP-1 drugs for diabetes are covered under Germany's statutory health insurance, with new obesity guidelines encouraging broader reimbursement. In Japan, the Ministry of Health has approved semaglutide for diabetes treatment under the universal health insurance system, offering subsidised access with co-payments as low as 30 percent. While high-income nations continue to debate cost and coverage, low- and middle-income nations face a different reality altogether.

Developing nations experience much more limited access to essential medicines. However, obesity and diabetes are on the rise in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where around 75 percent of people with diabetes and a large share of the global obese population reside. While some manufacturers offer discounted prices, these are not universally available. In India, for example, obesity has more than tripled, with current figures showing that 24 percent of women and 23 percent of men are obese, according to NFHS (2019–21). Data from the WHO Global Health Observatory (2024) also indicates a rising incidence of diabetes. India now has over 101 million people living with diabetes as of 2023, yet approximately 71 percent remain untreated.

In the face of this mounting burden, GLP-1 drugs remain largely out of reach. Many people are unaware that these therapies even exist. The main barrier is cost, which ranges between ₹10,000 and ₹20,000 per month. Additional challenges include the absence of generic alternatives, limited insurance coverage, and a general patient preference for oral medications over injectables. Currently, GLP-1 drugs are not covered by most health insurance companies in India due to their classification as lifestyle or weight-loss drugs rather than as essential treatments for diabetes or obesity. Even when included, they are rarely reimbursed. Addressing these barriers could significantly expand access. While Novo Nordisk currently dominates the Indian market, the anticipated expiration of key patents between 2026 and 2027 is expected to lower prices and improve equitable access.

The situation is even bleaker in least developed countries (LDCs), where obesity and diabetes are rising rapidly but remain underdiagnosed and undertreated. According to WHO data, more than 60 percent of deaths from diabetes occur in LMICs. In sub-Saharan Africa, the prevalence of adults with diabetes is expected to double by 2045, yet fewer than 20 percent are currently diagnosed. The availability of GLP-1 receptor agonists in these countries is practically non-existent. No major donor programme includes these medicines as a priority, and global health aid still focuses predominantly on infectious diseases. Unlike with HIV/AIDS drugs, which benefited from compulsory licensing and pooled procurement initiatives, no such mechanisms have been created for diabetes or anti-obesity biologics. In this vacuum, GLP-1 therapies remain the preserve of wealthy nations and elite populations in middle-income countries.

Price and Access Differences for GLP-1 Drugs

Despite being a high-income country, only about 1.3 percent of U.S. adults living with obesity have received prescriptions for GLP-1 receptor agonists. Racial disparities are evident: Black and Hispanic adults, who have higher rates of obesity, are less likely than white patients to be prescribed GLP-1 drugs, even after adjusting for health insurance. Limited insurance coverage and provider bias both exacerbate these inequalities in the U.S.

In contrast, countries with government price controls—such as the UK, Germany, France, Australia, the Netherlands, Canada, and Japan—offer these drugs at lower prices and with broader access. For example, Wegovy costs approximately USD 280 per month in Germany and is covered by insurance for eligible patients. In the United States, the same medicine is priced at USD 1,300, nearly five times higher. In Japan, Ozempic costs around USD 169 per month and is included in the national health insurance scheme. These price controls and public health coverage contribute to higher prescription rates in Germany and Japan compared to the U.S.

While the United States leads in medical innovation, its high prices and limited coverage are widening access inequalities. Eli Lilly has attempted to undercut Novo Nordisk by offering Zepbound at USD 399 for uninsured patients, but such discounts are neither universal nor sustainable.

According to Peterson KFF data, significant global price disparities exist for GLP-1 weight-loss treatments. For instance, Ozempic and Rybelsus are priced at USD 936 in the U.S., while they are available for just USD 87 in Australia and USD

Weight-Loss GLP-1 Drug Prices: U.S. vs World

	Ozempic (semaglutide, injection)	Rybelsus (semalglutide, tablets)	Wegovy (semaglutide, injection)	Mounjaro (tirzepatide, injection)
Australia	$87			
Canada	$147	$158		
France	$83			
Germany	$103		$328	
Japan	$169	$69		$319
Netherlands	$103	$203	$296	$444
Sweden	$96	$103		
Switzerland	$144	$147		
United States	$936	$936	$1349	$1023
United Kingdom	$93			
India	$729 (imported)	$150		$378

Source: Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker

83 in France. Similar disparities exist for other drugs. These differences raise important concerns about affordability and equitable access, underscoring the need for policy reforms and more transparent pharmaceutical pricing strategies.

The economic and social burden of unequal access to GLP-1 medications is significant and will likely lead to lost productivity. Poorly managed diabetes and obesity reduce workforce participation and increase long-term healthcare costs due to complications such as heart disease and kidney disorders. The World Health Organization recognises access to essential medicines as a crucial lever to improve public health and reduce health disparities.

Pharmaceutical manufacturers that benefit from publicly funded research, such as grants from the NIH, must balance profitability with availability and accessibility. Access delays during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early 2000s, and again during the Covid-19 vaccine rollout in 2020, showed how high-income countries monopolised supply while LMICs waited years for access. This pattern must not be repeated for obesity and diabetes, which affect millions globally. Prices should be adjusted according to national income levels, with lower costs in LMICs to improve access.

Policy, Pricing, and Systemic Reforms

Even after patents expire, the technical complexity of manufacturing GLP-1 drugs remains a formidable barrier to generic entry. As biologics, these drugs require advanced production infrastructure, strict quality control, and sophisticated drug delivery systems. Manufacturing a single generic version of semaglutide or tirzepatide may cost USD 2 to USD 3 million, excluding the additional expense of clinical trials. Clinical development accounts for nearly 80 percent of total costs, despite ongoing innovations in AI and robotic technologies.

Indian pharmaceutical companies, such as Dr Reddy's Laboratories, are developing generic portfolios of GLP-1 receptor agonists. However, their launch timelines are aligned with patent expirations across different jurisdictions, beginning in China and Brazil before possibly reaching India and the United States later in the decade. India represents a vast and underserved obesity market, with 13 percent of adults living with obesity, according to the World Obesity Atlas, 2025. Novo Nordisk and Eli Lilly are racing to build brand loyalty through prescriber-focused marketing. Due to India's ban on direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs, these companies have invested heavily in disease awareness campaigns to build credibility among physicians. At the same time, a shadow black market has emerged, with affluent urban consumers sourcing GLP-1 medications from abroad ahead of their official launch.

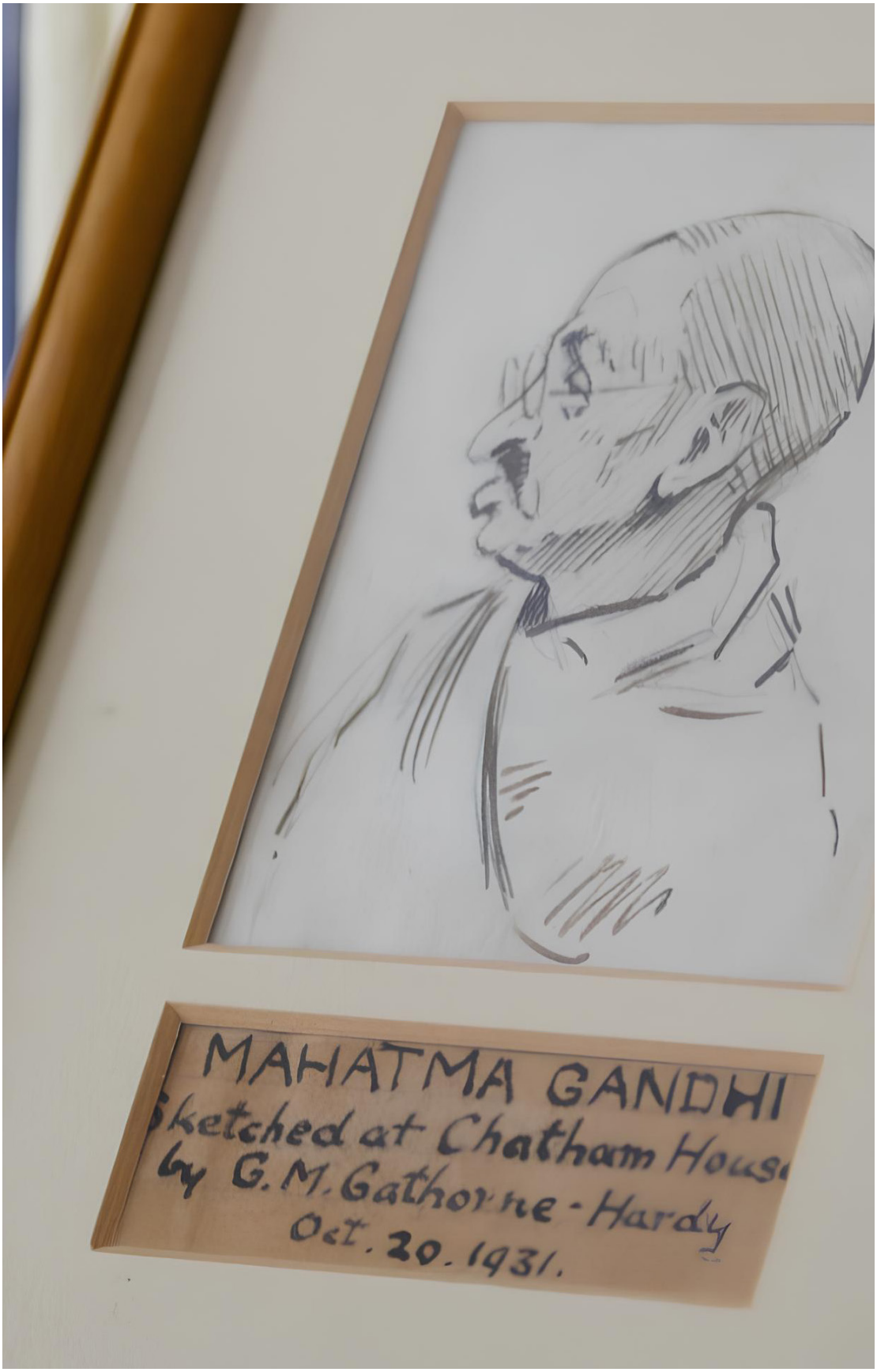
This scenario has led to growing calls for urgent reform. Recommendations from organisations such as I-MAK, and academic work published in JAMA, have proposed concrete measures. These include overhauling the patent system by tightening novelty and non-obviousness standards, streamlining post-grant review to cancel low-quality follow-on patents, expanding insurance coverage to classify obesity as a disease under Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurers, and promoting generic competition through simplified FDA pathways, compounded alternatives, and public-sector pharmaceutical manufacturing. Collaborative efforts between the FDA and USPTO, and scrutiny from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, indicate that policymakers are aware of the issue. However, meaningful reform has been slow.

The story of GLP-1 drugs is not only one of scientific innovation and therapeutic promise. It is also a story

about how invention becomes monopoly, and how monopoly is translated into market power that limits access, inflates prices, and deepens inequity. A blend of aggressive patenting, legal manoeuvring, financialisation, and market segmentation has turned GLP-1 therapies into a case study in 21st-century pharmaceutical capitalism. Whether regulators, lawmakers, and civil society can break this model remains uncertain. If they fail, GLP-1 drugs may become just another class of life-saving medicines that prioritise shareholder returns over patient wellbeing.

This international disparity highlights a troubling trend. As obesity and type 2 diabetes increasingly affect the global population, access to the most promising treatments remains restricted. Pharmaceutical companies continue to maximise profits through patent extensions, market segmentation, and tiered pricing, while the world's poorest populations are excluded from the benefits of medical progress. The result is not just a missed opportunity for disease prevention, but a widening gap in global health equity. If left unaddressed, GLP-1 drugs may become a cautionary tale of medical advancement that systematically leaves behind those most in need.

GLP-1 medications symbolise both progress and persistent inequality. Governments could issue compulsory licences to permit the production of generic GLP-1 drugs before patent expiration. Countries might also negotiate directly with manufacturers to secure lower prices based on national income, using bulk purchasing as leverage. A compulsory mandate for broader insurance coverage that includes weight management alongside diabetes could reduce financial barriers for patients. Ultimately, prices should be cost-effective and aligned with long-term public health outcomes rather than short-term market dynamics. Such an approach would support both innovation and equitable access. ■


MAHATMA GANDHI
Sketched at Chatham House
by G.M. Gathorne-Hardy
Oct. 20. 1931.

from the archives.

The Future of India

MAHATMA GANDHI

Mahatma Gandhi spoke at Chatham House meeting in London in 1931 while participating in the Second Round Table. The following Speech was published in Journal International Affairs.

"You were good enough to say that I have spared from my busy time a few moments to address a gathering under the auspices of this Institute. I must confess that I seize every opportunity I can of coming into touch with British public opinion and putting before them the purpose of my mission. I have therefore come before you quite selfishly, and I hope that the words I speak to you this evening will find a lodgement in your hearts. At the end of what I have to say I should like you to cross-examine me and ask me any questions you may like to put. I have found by experience that that is the only way of removing the mists of misunderstanding. I have noticed that the greatest stumbling-block in my way is the hopeless ignorance of the true facts of the situation, through no fault of yours; you belong to one of the busiest nations in the world, you have your own problems, and at the present moment this great island of yours is going through a crisis such as you have never had to face within living memory. My whole heart goes out to you in your troubles, and I hope that you will soon be able, with your marvellous energy, to cut a way out of them. No wonder, however, that, preoccupied as you are, you find no time to study the problems that affect a distant land like India. It is therefore a matter of keen pleasure to me that so many of you have found time to come here and listen to what I may have to say. I only feel grieved that many of you who are listening to my voice are unable to find accommodation in this room. With these preliminary words, I plunge into my subject. In order to give you a description of the future of India as I conceive it, I shall tell you in as few words as possible what India is at present. India is a sub-continent by itself, nineteen hundred miles long, fifteen hundred miles wide, with a population of roughly 350 million. Of these about 210 million are Hindus, 70 million are Mussalmans, 3 million are Sikhs; there is also a fairly large Indian Christian population, and a very small European or, more correctly speaking, English population. Numerically it is insignificant, but, as you know, it enjoys a position of privilege and influence unsurpassed, belonging as it does to the ruling race. We have within this population our own Hindu-Muslim-Sikh

problem, or, as it is called, the problem of minorities. I will not go into the problem as it affects other minorities, nor will I take up your time by airing my views with regard to these minorities, but one minority I may not omit, the unhappy untouchables, a word which is a standing reproach to the Hindus of India who form the majority of the population. Untouchability is a curse upon Hinduism, and I have no hesitation in saying that, if untouchability is not rooted out of Hinduism, Hinduism must perish. The time has come when any system, no matter how hoary and ancient it may be, must stand the light of day, must be able to stand fierce criticism, and if Hinduism harbours untouchability, it has no place on this earth. I am glad to tell you that Congress has made the removal of untouchability an integral part of its programme, and under the inspiration of Congress there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young Hindu reformers who have dedicated their lives to the removal of this blot upon Hinduism and upon India. These young men and women are reaching a hand to these untouchables in a variety of ways. We are digging wells for them, opening schools for them, building new temples for them and opening up old temples for them. We are giving to twenty-five thousand untouchable women, if not more, work in their own homes. We have introduced them to spinning-wheels. We have found for several thousand untouchables their old occupation of rough weaving, which had died out owing to the competition of modern manufactured cloth. This meant that they had taken either to scavenging or to some other occupation, because of their inability to earn their livelihood from this noble hereditary occupation of weaving. Thanks to God and to the efforts of these young reformers, several thousand untouchables have thus recovered their old occupation of rough weaving. There are several families who were heavily indebted and who now are not only free from debts but have laid by a decent sum. One family I can recollect has laid by what in India a very respectable sum for a poor family two thousand rupees. This family is in demand all over India as teachers, because both husband and wife are accomplished weavers and conscientious and skilled workers. You can imagine how much self-respect they must have gained, owing to their being wanted as teachers and not as scavengers and treated almost as a plague. That is a very important minority, important in the sense that it deserves all the sympathy and all the aid that can be given to it. I have not a shadow of doubt that this untouchability is going very fast, and if, through God's grace, India comes to her own as a result of the deliberations of the Round Table Conference or otherwise, you will find that untouchability has gone forever. But I have not yet finished my description of India as it is. What is this 350 million population doing? More than eighty-five per cent of this population is engaged in agriculture and is living in seven hundred thousand villages, dotted over the vast surface that I have described. There are some villages in India which have a population of not more than a hundred souls; there are, again, villages which have a population of as many as five thousand. Now Indian agriculture depends very largely it has to upon its precarious rainfall. In parts of that subcontinent, like Cherapunji, you have a deluge of rain, as much as 600 inches. In other parts, like Sind and Central India, for example you have hardly 5 inches. And then, often, it is not equally distributed. Agricultural holdings are anything between one acre, or three quarters of an acre, and two and a half acres. I think, taking province by province, in no province are the holdings, on the average, more than two and a half or three acres per head. I am open to correction, but I think I am not far out, and there are thousands upon thousands who have less than one acre, and again tens of thousands who are absolutely landless, and who are therefore living in India as serfs, one might almost say as slaves. It cannot be called a

state of legal slavery, but it is really a state bordering on slavery. This population, because all the rainfall is concentrated within two, three, four or five months at the outside, lives without any continuous occupation for nearly six months of the year. In some places where there are double crops, the absence of occupation extends over a period of four months, but, roughly speaking, you may say that these agriculturists of India are without any constant occupation for half the year that being so; there is deep and ever-deepening poverty among the masses. The average income of the people for the whole of India is two pence per day. If the average income of these 350 million people is two pence a day and in calculating this average the wealth of a few millionaires is included you will have no difficulty in understanding that there are tens of thousands of people who do not even earn two pence per day. The result is that nearly one-tenth of the population is living in a condition of semi-starvation. They have no more than one meal per day, consisting of stale chapati and a pinch of dirty salt. There is no such thing as bread. They do not know from year's end to year's end what milk is, or even skimmed milk; they do not know what butter is; they do not know what oil is; they never get green vegetables. That is the condition of the vast mass of sunken humanity in India. I have now to tell you what should be, and, if the Congress had its way, would be the future state of India. I have not filled in the picture with the cities because the cities do not make India; it is the villages which make India. Nor have I put in the princes; the princes also have a portion of these villages, and the life of the villagers in British India. If there is any difference, and there is some, it is a difference of degree and in no sense a difference of kind. Princes will come and Princes will go, empires will come and empires will go, but this India living in her villages will remain just as it is. Sir Henry Maine has left a monograph. The Village Communities of India, in which you will find the author saying that all these villages were at one time, and are to a certain extent now, self-contained "little republics". They have their own culture, mode of life, and method of protecting themselves, their own village schoolmaster, their own priest, carpenter, and barber, in fact everything that a village could want. There is certainly today no kind of government to be seen in the villages, but whatever their life is, these villages are self-contained, and if you went there, you would find that there is a kind of agreement under which they are built. From these villages has perhaps arisen what you call the iron rule of caste. Caste has been blight on India, but it has also acted as a sort of protecting shield for these masses. But I must not take you into the intricacies of this caste system. What I am trying to give you is as faithful a picture as possible of India as it is at present. I must also not detain you with the impress that British rule has left on India, what that rules is today and what it accounts for. I have dwelt upon that at other meetings and you have some of the literature; but you have no literature on the future of India. I could not possibly have given you a picture of the future unless I had given you this background. If I tell you more about this peasantry of India, you will not now be surprised. The Congress has made it an article of faith that the test of its work and its progress shall be the measure of its becoming a predominantly present organization, and we have set for ourselves this rule, that we shall not consider any interest in India which is in conflict with the fundamental well-being of this eighty per cent of the population. Then, what should the government of that population be? The foremost thing that the future State of India would look after would be the economic welfare of these masses. You will therefore have no difficulty in coming to the conclusion that, then, this Government is going to find some occupation or these idle six months of the year for the peasant. That should really be the primary concern of any person who undertakes this gigantic task. By

a process of elimination, we have come the conclusion that for this homogeneous population you must have one predominant occupation. You must have an easy occupation; you must have tools for that occupation that can easily be made in the villages, and the product of the village industry must be capable of being consumed by the villagers. I you can give some occupation which will answer all these tests, you will have a process of production and distribution, self-contained and without any other intermediary having to be resorted to. Such an occupation was the ancient occupation of hand-spinning and hand weaving. I will not now take you through the history of how it was destroyed. But you find that, due to the Congress, the Spinners' Association is penetrating as quickly as it cans the thousands of villages of India. We have in this manner penetrated two thousand villages. This occupation has nearly doubled the income of the villagers. You will understand what two pence added to two pence means to a poor man; it means, I suggest, a fortune. You will then take all the occupations necessary in connection with cotton, from hand-spinning and hand-weaving to printing, dyeing and washing. When you take into consideration all these occupations, it does govern the income of the people, and when we have done that, we have given these people a little bit of hope and courage and have put a little lustre into their eyes. If you walked with me in the villages of Orissa, you would see walking death throughout the length and breadth of that thrice-afflicted land. You see specimens of humanity, not voluntarily but compulsorily, mere skin and bone without any flesh on their limbs. If we give them this occupation, we put into them new life and new hope. But the activity of the new State will not stop there. These people are living in utter ignorance of sanitation and we have to look after the hygienic conditions. So we try to introduce the hygienic methods of Dr. Poor, who has written a volume on village hygiene. Briefly speaking, it consists of turning human excreta into manure. The Chinese people are the greatest people of the earth in the knowledge of the use of these human excreta, and Dr. Poor says the Chinese were his teachers in discovering the economic treatment. We are trying to do two things to add to the wealth of the nation and to the health of the nation and if we teach the people this method of treating human excreta, the result will be that we shall rid ourselves somewhat of the plague of flies, and sterilize to some extent the poisonous mosquito– not fully, I know, but it is in the right direction. Then we must give them some medical assistance in his malaria ridden country. India suffers from many diseases, but malaria is essentially a disease induced by want. It is not to be driven away by simply giving the villagers packets of quinine. Quinine is essential, but it is useless unless you can give them some milk of some fruit, as their digestive apparatus is not capable of taking anything else. So we are trying to give them some simple medical aid where we can. I am not trying to give you an idea that we have already done this, but I am talking of the future State, not as a visionary but as a practical man. We have tried this on a small scale, and if I can multiply this activity through the aid of the future State, you will understand what India can be without a vast outlay. We give this medical aid, not through the very expensive methods that the Western doctors teach us, but we revive our own ancient treatment. Every village once had its own medical man. You may say he was a quack and that he was extremely ignorant of the elementary principles which govern this little body of ours; all which is very true. But all the same he was a man who could give them some comfort, and, the occupation being hereditary, where he was not dishonest man, he really served an efficient purpose. If you give him this elementary knowledge of hygiene, which is preventive medicine, and teach him this simple way of curing the people of malaria, you have gone a very long way. What I am telling you today is a thing

that was approved by the Surgeon-General of the Bombay Presidency. When he came to see me whilst I was lying in the Sassoon Hospital, he was discussing it with me, and I told him, "Your English methods are too expensive for this poor country, and if you want to treat a village through your method, it would take two or three centuries." He agreed and said, "What would you do?" So I told him my plan. That does not finish the picture. We have the education of this future State. I say without fear of my figures being challenged successfully, that today India is more illiterate than it was fifty or a hundred years ago, and so is Burma, because the British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the beautiful tree perished. The village schools were not good enough for the British administrator, so he came out with his programme. Every school must have so much paraphernalia, building, and so forth. Well, there were no such schools at all. There are statistics left by a British administrator which show that, in places where they have carried out a survey, ancient schools have gone by the board, because there was no recognition for these schools, and the schools established after the European pattern were too expensive for the people, and therefore they could not possibly overtake the thing. I defy anybody to fulfil a programme of compulsory primary education of these masses inside of a century. This very poor country of mine is ill able to sustain such an expensive method of education. Our State would revive the old village schoolmaster and dot every village with a school both for boys and girls, Then, although British people have spent millions in completing some irrigation works, we claim that their progress in that work has not been as quick as it might have been. The military railways, which have done some good, no doubt, in transporting goods from one place to another, have done nothing of what irrigation would have done. These irrigation schemes were and are really too expensive to cover the whole of India. We have, however, our own ancient method of irrigation: deep-well irrigation in some parts, in other parts well irrigation that is not deep well. I must confess my ignorance of this, but an Englishman, who is trying experiments in intensive agriculture, and who is now here, was telling me that he had been working in the poet Tagore's village. It was Mr. Elmhurst who really gave life to that village experiment, and owing to if they were opening canal irrigation. The works which did not require any skill other than that produced in those villages. He tells me they have compelled the Government to recognize the superiority of this method. I am simply giving you the evidence that this man gave to me about this canal irrigation, but I do know that there are ancient methods of irrigation compatible with the capacity of the people. I have told you what we would do constructively, but we should have to do something destructive also. Otherwise, we should not be able to carry on, because this India today is ill able to afford the revenue that is being forced from it from year's end to year's end in order to support an insupportable weight of military and civil expenditure. The military expenditure takes 62 crores an enormous sum for this country whose average income in two pence a day. Compare that with the military expenditure of any country on earth, and you will find that India is groaning under a weight that is insupportable. We should immediately set about restoring the scales, and if I could possibly have my way, we should get rid of three quarters of the military expenditure. If we really succeed in demonstrating that we have won our freedom through non-violent means, the people of India will not require much argument to convince them that non-violence will also enable them to retain their freedom. Congress does not fear the bugbear of Afghan invasion, or invasion from Japan, certainly not invasion from Bolshevik

Russia. Congress has no such fear whatever, and if we understand the lesson of non-violent non-co-operation, then no nation on earth can bend us to its will. If the nation simply learns one single English word and we have a similar expression in our Indian languages also we can simply say, "No", and it is finished for any invader who casts hungry eyes on India. We are convinced that we do not need the arms that India is carrying. For civil expenditure I must give an instance which I have given at several meetings. Here the Prime Minister gets fifty times the average income; the Viceroy in India gets five thousand times the average income. From this one example you can work out for yourselves what this civil expenditure also means to India. India cannot support this service, however efficient and able it may be. It is quite likely that, if I could send medical experts to every village in India, we should have no disease whatever, but since we cannot afford medical experts for every village in India, we have to be satisfied with quacks that we can get in our own villages. No country on earth can possibly live beyond its means; it can only take such services as it can afford to pay for. If I want strawberries and cream for every villager, I know it is a day-dream and I should be an idiot if I wished to give them to every villager. Well, I tell you that this military and civil expenditure is strawberries and cream. I cannot possibly deal out this food for my people. I have very nearly finished my picture; if you find vacant spots, please remind me and I shall fill them by answering your questions." ■


UNTIL DEBT
TEAR US APART

Why We're Getting Poorer

with Cahal Moran

Cahal Moran is a behavioural economist, author, and public thinker. A visiting fellow at LSE's Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science, he co-authored The Econocracy, hosts Unlearning Economics on YouTube, and writes on inequality, choice architecture, and pluralist approaches to economic debate.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Welcome, Dr. Cahal Moran. You're the author of Why We're Getting Poorer and also a well-known YouTuber. I think you gave up the thrill of academia to do full-time YouTube, which, if I'm honest, is very dry and very boring.

Before we dive into the book and the mess that is the economy, why don't you introduce yourself?

Cahal Moran:

Sure. I run a channel called Unlearning Economics. Before that, I was in academia. I studied economics at Manchester and stayed on for my master's and PhD. My thesis was in behavioural economics.

Then I moved to London to work at the London School of Economics in the behavioural science department. I've always been interested in interdisciplinary work — economics, psychology, biology. But I arrived in 2019, and six months later we were in lockdown. Research was frozen. Courses were suspended. I suddenly had a lot of time. So I started a YouTube channel in early 2020. It did well enough that I eventually went full-time. I also wrote this book in parallel.

I still have a visiting fellowship at LSE, which means I write papers — just very slowly, even by academic standards.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Your timing was impeccable. I also ended up in economics after wandering through political science and theoretical ecology. Both of us were shaped by the 2008 crisis. That's when we came of age, intellectually speaking.

What struck me about your book is that it responds not just to COVID, but to the long shadow of 2008. You started writing right after the pandemic?

Cahal Moran:

That's right. I finished the manuscript in late 2023. But 2008 was always there in the background. Many of us turned to economics out of confusion, not enthusiasm. We wanted to understand what had just happened. That disillusionment stayed with us.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Why are economists increasingly sidelined from policymaking? If you look at what's being implemented — in Washington, Beijing, New Delhi, or London — most of it would make any serious economist cringe.

Cahal Moran:

It's a great question. My channel is called Unlearning Economics for a reason. A decade ago, I co-authored a book called The Economic Crisis: The Perils of Leaving Economics to the Experts. So I've been critical of the profession for a long time.

Before 2008, economists were riding high. Inflation targeting, free trade, and competition policy were lifted straight from textbooks and implemented with confidence. But those models had blind spots. They

ignored inequality, power, and class struggle. Economists became too focused on technical models and too dismissive of distributional impacts.

After the 2008 crash, many people lost trust. During the Brexit campaign, for instance, most economists supported Remain. Yet politicians like Michael Gove declared that "people have had enough of experts." That sentiment resonated.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And yet, post-WWII, economists were seen as central to nation-building. India's Planning Commission had economists in top roles. By the 1990s, the shift to Chicago-style thinking was well underway. Now we have behavioural models replacing institutional planning — and still, trust in economists is declining.

Cahal Moran:

Exactly. And while many mainstream economists today are right in their analysis, their credibility is shot. I'm not anti-expert. Quite the opposite. We need more experts — economists, scientists, public thinkers. But they can no longer assume public trust. That has to be rebuilt.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Let's get to the core question: why are we getting poorer?

Cahal Moran:

Because the economy is no longer designed with the average person in mind. I divide the problem into two parts.

First, the economy is uneven. Inequality is massive. We have billionaires consolidating wealth and entire communities being left behind.

Second, it is dysfunctional. Entire sectors simply do not work. Take housing. It's a crisis almost everywhere. Soaring prices, unaffordable rents, poor living conditions — even relatively wealthy people are struggling. The essentials — housing, food, healthcare — take up more and more of people's budgets. Since I finished the book, we've seen supply chain shocks, tariff-induced inflation, and now the threat of recession. People are feeling this, every day.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And still, policymakers remain obsessed with GDP. A number that was invented during wartime for very specific reasons has become a proxy for human welfare.

Cahal Moran:

Exactly. Simon Kuznets, who helped develop GDP, warned that it wasn't meant to measure well-being. But it's easy to use. Economists have built entire models around it. Politicians use it to justify their records.

Yes, GDP growth can bring material benefits. But it doesn't solve political division or environmental collapse. The United States has had decent growth and yet it remains deeply polarised.

Amogh Dev Rai:

One of your sharpest chapters critiques billionaire logic. Elon Musk, for instance, has become a kind of myth. Governments everywhere try to lure companies like his, hoping jobs and growth will follow. But does that actually work?

Cahal Moran:

Not really. This idea that attracting billionaires or big corporations will fix our economic problems is mostly a mirage. In the UK, you see it all the time. We roll out the red carpet for big investors or hedge funds, but the returns to society are minimal.

And Elon Musk is the perfect example of how strange this system has become. He's a billionaire whose companies rely heavily on public subsidies — for things like electric vehicles or space launches. Yet he's held up as the ultimate self-made man.

I think billionaires are the logical endpoint of a system that's lost its purpose. They

hoard capital, dominate markets, and shape public narratives — often without scrutiny. And governments, rather than confronting that power, have become deferential to it.

Amogh Dev Rai:

It's not just billionaires either. You write about the outsourcing state — McKinsey, Deloitte, KPMG. These firms are now designing and running huge parts of government.

Cahal Moran:

Yes, Mariana Mazzucato and Rosie Collington call it the "consultancy state." Instead of investing in in-house expertise, governments now contract out entire functions to consultants. These firms are expensive, often ineffective, and sometimes even end up rewriting the rules they're supposed to follow.

It's not about individual failure. It's structural. Public services are hollowed out. The same civil servants who once designed policy are now doing similar work — just via private contracts and at twice the cost.

And then you have privatised infrastructure like Thames Water. It delivers poor service, pollutes rivers, and still pays out dividends. Eventually the state steps in, because it can't afford to let the taps run dry. But by then, the damage is done.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Let's pivot to behavioural economics — an area you know well. Nudges were supposed to be a smarter, cheaper way to solve problems. Yet somewhere along the way, nudging became a kind of excuse for not doing anything substantive.

Cahal Moran:

That's right. Nudging was framed as this neutral, cost-effective tool. But it has been used politically — especially in the UK — to justify inaction. I often cite an article co-authored by George Osborne and Richard Thaler. They said nudges were attractive because there was no room left for "activist government." That's telling.

The quiet part was being said out loud. Nudges allowed governments to appear innovative while pursuing austerity. And the evidence for their effectiveness is mixed. In many cases, the behavioural effect is marginal. Yet they get treated like silver bullets.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And they avoid structural questions entirely. You can remind someone to save more, but that doesn't fix stagnant wages or unaffordable housing.

Cahal Moran:

Exactly. Behavioural science can be valuable — but not when it's used to replace moral and political judgment. We've become obsessed with "what works," but we rarely ask what's right.

We've also imported a lot of methods from medical research — especially randomised controlled trials. RCTs can help identify what interventions work at the margin. But not everything can be randomised. You can't A/B test a national health service. Some policies require vision and commitment, not just experimental evidence.

Amogh Dev Rai:

In India, too, this obsession with RCTs has shaped a whole field of development economics. But in reality, the biggest changes — electrification, employment guarantees, ration systems — didn't come from nudging. They came from organising and politics.

Cahal Moran:

Exactly. The world didn't get better because of clever tweaks. It got better when people demanded it.

Amogh Dev Rai:

There's a moment in the book where you use football to explain how efficiency becomes

a kind of trap. The most "efficient" clubs are not the most meaningful ones. They're often disconnected from their communities.

Cahal Moran:

Football is the perfect metaphor. Look at clubs like Manchester United or Chelsea. They are massively profitable, but ticket prices are up, fan loyalty is down, and local engagement is hollowed out.

In contrast, the German Bundesliga has the "50+1" rule. Supporters retain majority control. Tickets are cheaper. Clubs are rooted in their communities. The German model shows that you can run a great league without selling your soul.

We have let efficiency become the only thing that matters. But in football — and in healthcare, education, even science — meaning matters more. People don't just want services that function. They want institutions that represent them, that they feel part of.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And those things — meaning, solidarity, trust — don't show up on spreadsheets.

Cahal Moran:

No, they don't. But they're essential. And if we forget that, we end up with systems that are technically efficient but socially empty.

Amogh Dev Rai:

So what do we do instead? What's the alternative to all this efficiency talk?

Cahal Moran:

We need more participation. Not just in politics every five years, but in workplaces, in local decision-making, in the way public services are designed and delivered. I use the term "demos" in the book to describe this. It's about creating small spaces where people have real agency.

It can be something as simple as joining a credit union or a housing co-op. It can be participating in a local school board or community council. These actions may seem small, but they rebuild trust. They make people feel heard again.

People are not apathetic by nature. They become apathetic when they feel powerless. Participation reactivates that sense of ownership. And once people start to feel they can make a difference, they begin to care again.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And yet most people are shut out of meaningful participation. Public services are shaped by experts or outsourced to private firms. Local councils are underfunded. Consultations are tokenistic. So even if people want to engage, they don't know where to begin.

Cahal Moran:

Exactly. The institutional pathways are broken. And the language of regulation has become technocratic. In the UK, you have regulators for everything — Ofcom for communications, Ofwat for water, Ofgem for energy. But they are all set up to be "independent." In theory, that means free from political interference. But in practice, it means free from accountability.

They don't answer to voters. They don't answer to Parliament in any serious way. And they are often captured by the industries they regulate. So you get the worst of both worlds — no democratic control, and no effective enforcement.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Let's take Thames Water again. A private company controls access to drinking water, regularly fails to deliver, pollutes the rivers, and yet still pays dividends to shareholders. At some point, shouldn't the state step in?

Cahal Moran:

It should. And not just in water. Infrastructure like transport, energy, housing, and healthcare should have some form of democratic control. That doesn't

always mean full nationalisation. It could be municipal ownership. It could be user cooperatives. It could be public trusts with citizen oversight.

The point is not to go back to a 1970s model of bureaucracy. It's to find modern ways of embedding democratic values into essential services. We need to move beyond this idea that regulation is just about tweaking incentives. It has to be about power. Who gets to decide. Who benefits. Who is accountable.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Do you see anyone doing this well?

Cahal Moran:

One example is Lina Khan in the United States. She's the chair of the Federal Trade Commission and wrote a famous paper called "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox." She argued that the traditional way we measure market harm — through consumer prices — is outdated. It misses the broader concentration of power.

Amazon might offer cheap prices, but it dominates logistics, retail, advertising, and cloud computing. It can shape the entire economy. Lina Khan has tried to update antitrust law to reflect that. She's still facing resistance, but at least she's making the argument.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And that's what's missing from most regulatory systems — the willingness to confront concentrated power. Whether it's in Big Tech, infrastructure, or finance, the regulators seem more interested in appearing neutral than in actually changing anything.

Cahal Moran:

Exactly. And neutrality becomes complicity. The real role of public institutions should be to protect the commons — the systems and services that everyone relies on. That requires courage. It requires judgment. And it requires being on the side of the public, not just managing market outcomes.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Which takes us back to a very old idea. That the economy should serve society, not the other way around.

Cahal Moran:

Yes. That's the foundation. But somehow it's become radical to say that.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Your book is called Why We're Getting Poorer, but it's not just about decline. There's also a thread of hope in it. Not optimism for the sake of it, but a belief that things can be different. Where does that come from?

Cahal Moran:

It comes from history, really. Things have changed before. In the post-war years, the UK built the NHS, expanded education, created council housing, and improved public health. None of that was inevitable. It was political. It came from people organising and demanding better.

Even more recently, you can find reasons for hope. Public health interventions have worked. Access to vaccines, basic nutrition, sanitation — these things have saved millions of lives. People are not powerless. When they act together, they can move the world.

And even inside the capitalist system, there are pressure points. People can boycott companies. They can campaign. They can push back against platforms and billionaires. It's not always visible, but it's there.

Amogh Dev Rai:

But to act, people need a different story. Right now, the dominant narrative says that poverty is the result of laziness or bad choices. That anyone can succeed if they try hard enough. It's the logic of self-help books and startup culture.

Cahal Moran:

Yes, and it's not just inaccurate. It's damaging. That narrative isolates people. It turns poverty into shame. But poverty is not about individual failure. It's the product of systems that are structured to benefit a few at the expense of many.

Most people already know that something is off. They know they're not paid fairly. They know public services are worse. They know housing is unaffordable. What they often lack is a coherent story about why. And without that story, it's hard to build solidarity.

Amogh Dev Rai:

That's why billionaires like Elon Musk are so compelling. Not because people believe in their politics, but because they offer a story. Musk says he's going to take us to Mars. That sounds bold. It makes people feel like something exciting is happening.

Cahal Moran:

Exactly. Musk is a storyteller. And even though his promises are often empty, the narrative is powerful. Progressives need to understand that. You can't just offer better spreadsheets. You need a vision that inspires people.

We need to be able to say that a fair economy is possible. That we can build decent housing, provide universal healthcare, ensure clean air and water, and offer meaningful work. These are not wild ideas. They are completely achievable with the resources we have.

Amogh Dev Rai:

And maybe we should stop waiting for permission. So much of policymaking now is stuck in a holding pattern. People say we can't act until there's more evidence, more data, more trials. But some things are worth doing because they're right.

Cahal Moran:

That's it. Not everything can be measured. Not everything needs a cost-benefit analysis. If a policy helps people live with dignity, that should be enough.

We have spent years narrowing our idea of what is possible. We've let markets set the terms. But the economy is not some natural force. It's a human creation. It can be reshaped.

Amogh Dev Rai:

So where do we begin? If you were to give a reader one practical step, something they could do today, what would it be?

Cahal Moran:

Start small. Join a tenants' union. Talk to your neighbours. Show up to a local council meeting. Participate in something collective. It doesn't have to be grand. Just find a place where your voice matters.

And then, as you grow in confidence, ask harder questions. Who owns your workplace? Who controls your rent? Who decides what your community looks like? Once you start asking those questions, the world opens up. You realise that a better future is not just imaginable. It's buildable.

Amogh Dev Rai:

Thank you, Cahal. This was a brilliant conversation. And Why We're Getting Poorer is not just a diagnosis — it's an invitation. To think more clearly. To act more collectively. And to believe that another economy is possible.

Cahal Moran:

Thanks, Amogh. I really enjoyed this. ■

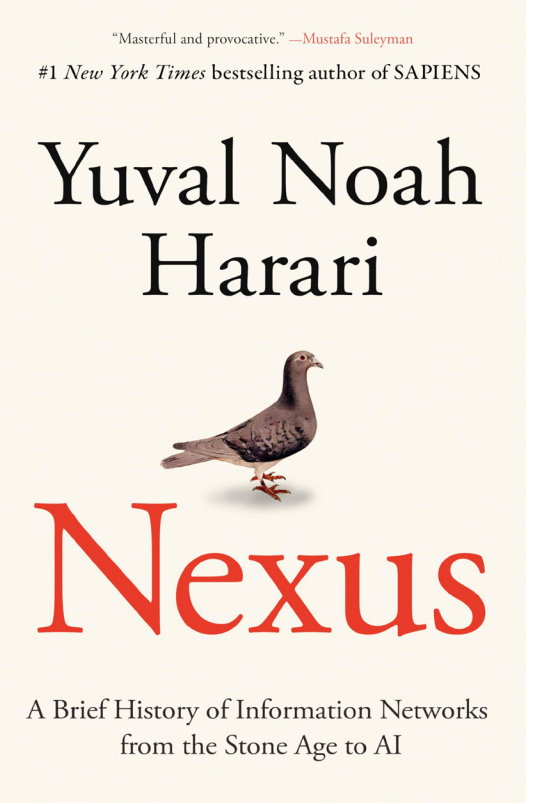
This interview has been edited for clarity.

book review.

Poulami Saha

Yuval Noah Harari, in his book Nexus, delves into how the evolution of technology has changed the fundamentals of human existence. Harari says technology is not just a tool that humans have created, but an active force that shapes human societies, communication systems, and even our consciousness. The book explores the relationship between humans and information throughout history, starting from ancient myths to present-day artificial intelligence (AI).

In this book, Harari narrates how information networks have always shaped human societies by connecting people and boosting advancements—be it in the form of religious texts, political agendas, or digital algorithms. Throughout history, key technological milestones such as the Agricultural Revolution, the Cognitive Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution have driven humanity to new stages of power and societal organization. Harari believes that these advancements are not just responses to human needs, but also act as agents that move societies forward. These eventually help reshape relationships, environments, and even the way humans think or act. However, he also warns that today's rapid advancements in AI can pose unprecedented existential threats. Harari explores how the exchange of information can shape truth, power, and the future of humanity. With the help of historical analysis and contemporary insights, he showcases the power of information.



Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI by Yuval Noah Harari, Fern Press, 2024

History has its examples where people have used information to create stories to shape realities. In a modern-day context, this can sound like 'reel vs real.' Such 'refurbished information' can sometimes be for good, but often creates manipulation. The book starts by examining humanity's long history of creating information networks—for example, the role of religious texts, myths/taboos, and bureaucratic systems in connecting people and shaping societies. These networks have allowed humans to cooperate on a mass scale. As the saying goes, 'communication is the key to success.' The same applies when it comes to our evolutionary success. But on the other hand, information can sometimes be moulded and misused. To explain this further, Harari says that information is not synonymous with truth.

Humans have been using narratives since ancient times to create meaning in life and promote communication. From religious texts such as manuscripts to political ideologies like communism, narratives have shaped human behaviour by connecting people with similar beliefs. Harari outlines the importance of such stories in organizing societies. For example, our old teaching system—the gurukul—where learning was done through storytelling and narratives. The author also emphasizes that these narratives include self-correcting mechanisms. He gives the example of amendments in modern democracies, which help societies adapt to changing times. Without such mechanisms, societies can become rigid and oppressive. He compares the inclusion of change in democracies with authoritarian regimes, where it is all about one-man rule. Harari draws a comparison between democratic information networks and dictatorial ones. The former thrives on debate and correction, while the latter promotes controlled information and rigidity. To give a wider perspective, Harari reflects on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. He explores how political campaigns used data mining and psychographic profiling to create personalized ads that played on voters' emotions, thus influencing the final electoral outcomes. The key issue lies in whether humans still possess the will in an era where algorithms make decisions for us. This calls for an ethical restructure. The loss of free will, along with the ethical concerns about the potential for manipulation, needs a serious rethinking of how data and algorithms should be used in society.

He further argues that if algorithms can shape, predict, and even manipulate our behaviours, then they could ultimately strip us of our originality and basic human rights. The ethical implications of AI's role do not stay limited to how this can shape human decisions but also go beyond individual cases. This can even create challenges to the very notion of freedom and autonomy in a technologically driven world.

As the first major leap in human information networks came with the invention of documents, this allowed for more complex bureaucratic systems. Harari highlights the role of these early bureaucracies in shaping civilisations. He also compares them to today's AI-driven information systems. He highlights how AI is reshaping the way societies function. However, AI has the potential to make autonomous decisions, but documents do not. This can raise serious concerns about inequality, micro-surveillance and even control. Harari warns that AI could affect democracy, promote misinformation and even lead to digital totalitarianism in extreme cases.

Today, the rapid evolution of technology, especially with the rise of automation powered by artificial intelligence (AI), has led to the risk of losing one's identity. With digital advancements, new threats such as digital footprints and micro-surveillance in the name of KYC have arisen. In this digital era there is no such information about us which has not been shared digitally. For the most part these pieces of information are being used for our safety, but there are several incidents where such data has been misused. To add to this, with AI feeding on our digital data, digital scams have risen. You can also consider the cases of identity theft and deepfake videos. It has also resulted in widespread anxiety regarding job displacement.

Harari draws a comparison between the fear felt by workers during the Industrial Revolution and the modern-day fears of workers whose jobs could be at risk due to AI and automation. This fear, however, focuses not only on economic survival but also connects to the psychological aspect of humans. He shows the example of the Luddites from the 19th century who feared the loss of their social identity and sense of purpose. All thanks to the rise of machines and the birth of modern-day workers, who now share a similar dread about becoming

useless or stagnant. As machines continue to take over tasks usually performed by humans, society needs to confront not only the economic challenges of automation but also the existential crisis it has high chances of creating.

Moving on, this dilemma forces humans to redefine their relationship with work and productivity, thus raising essential questions such as the role of humans in a future dominated by machines. He gives the example of Facebook's role in spreading misinformation during the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. Harari explains that during this 'digital war' algorithms fuelled hate, resulting in violence. AI is revolutionising the way societies function, just like the early Industrial Revolution transformed economies. However, Harari also shows concern about the speed of this transformation and its impact on human democracy. He also adds on the impact of AI on human autonomy. He warns of an AI-driven surveillance state, where governments and corporations can monitor citizens at all times through algorithms that predict and manipulate behaviour. This is compared with the way early dictatorships controlled information. This was the key to maintaining power during those times.

He further warns that self-driving cars, autonomous weapons, and algorithms that govern financial and legal decisions all present ethical challenges. He says these must be addressed. Harari highlights that societies need to create transparent systems, prioritising human welfare. He also highlights the risk of creating a "useless class" of people displaced by automation, thus raising questions about our life's purpose and its meaning in a world dominated by machines.

As we continue to be dominated by machines and artificial intelligence, Harari explores the fundamental question: 'What is the role of a human?' in this society. One of the most pressing concerns in Nexus is the growing influence of algorithms and data-driven systems in shaping human behaviour and decision-making. Harari paints a chilling picture of a world where algorithms not only predict and manipulate human actions but also serve as unseen forces guiding choices in everything from politics to consumer behaviour. With machines capable of outperforming humans in many fields, the meaning of human identity and the purpose of life are being called into question. Harari writes about potential future developments, such as digital footprints, genetic modification, and AI-powered neuro devices. All these developments have the power to impact human identity.

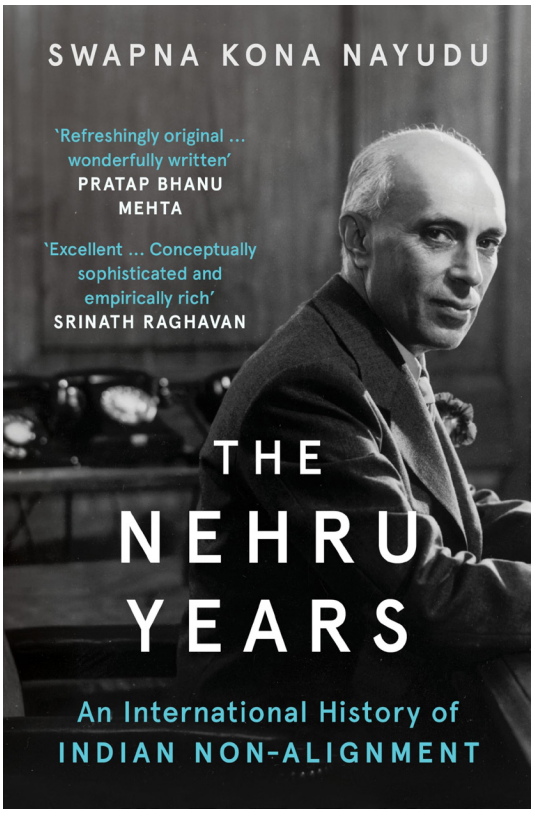
However, he also warns that these advancements in technology can promote inequality and create greater divides between those who have access to such technologies and those who do not. This means that humans deprived of high-tech facilities might become victims and face unfair treatment. Harari also urges us to focus on the ethical and moral dilemmas posed by advancements in genetic modification and bioengineering. For example, the advent of technologies such as CRISPR and the possibility of designing genetically modified humans. In simple words, the creation of a high-tech and advanced human is no longer confined to the realm of science fiction we usually see on screen or in films.

In a nutshell, Harari's call to action is for humanity to find a balance between technological progress and the preservation of values. This is what makes us human. We have the power to judge and balance between the good and the bad. From building relationships to expressing creativity, we can create a meaningful life that coexists with technology and the natural world. ■

book review.

Unnati Gusain

Swapna Kona Nayudu's The Nehru Years offers a compelling and meticulously researched exploration of India's foreign policy—specifically non-alignment—under former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Non-alignment refers to a foreign policy approach adopted by newly independent countries, particularly during the Cold War, which sought to avoid formal alliances with either of the two major power blocs: the United States (capitalist West) and the Soviet Union (communist East). In this book, the author aims to decipher the intricacies of non-alignment and how India, under Nehru, played a significant role in establishing it. Moreover, she delves into the complexities and nuances of a policy that has often been misunderstood or oversimplified. At the very beginning of the book, Nayudu challenges the conventional view of non-alignment as mere neutrality or a passive stance between the US and Soviet blocs. Instead, she presents it as a proactive and principled approach to international relations, rooted in India's anti-colonial ethos and its aspiration for a more equitable global order. Drawing from extensive archival research, the author examines India's diplomatic engagements in four critical international crises: the Korean War, the Suez Crisis, the Hungarian Revolution and the Congo Crisis. Through these case studies, Nayudu illustrates how Nehru's vision of non-alignment was both ideologically driven and pragmatically executed, often navigating complex geopolitical terrains.



The Nehru Years: An International History of Indian Non-Alignment by Swapna Kona Nayudu, Juggernaut, 2025

The book delves into the philosophical underpinnings of Nehru's foreign policy, highlighting the influences of thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. Nayudu argues that non-alignment was not just a strategic choice but also an ethical commitment to peace, sovereignty and anti-imperialism. This perspective is particularly evident in the chapter titled "A Lonely Furrow," where she discusses how Nehru's ideas were shaped by India's colonial experience and its desire to forge an independent path in global affairs. In this chapter, she emphasises that Nehruvian non-alignment reflects a synthesised interpretation of the ideas of both Gandhi and Tagore. However, Nehru did not merely merge their perspectives; he selectively adopted what he considered most valuable from each, leaving out the rest based on his own judgement.

This becomes even more evident as the book progresses. While discussing the events of the Korean War in 1950, Nayudu highlights that, although Tagore and Gandhi challenged Asian nationalism primarily for an Indian audience, Nehru took on a more active global role, significantly contributing to the resolution of the conflict.

Although Nehru collaborated with other non-aligned nations in pursuing peaceful solutions during these crises, it was unmistakably India that took centre stage, driven largely by Nehru's own stature and influence as a respected global leader.

Nayudu also offers a nuanced exploration of the internal contradictions within Nehru's vision of non-alignment, exposing the gap between principle and practice. Nehru's foreign policy, though rooted in idealism, was frequently shaped—and at times compromised—by the pragmatic demands of geopolitical crises and national interest. This tension is clearly illustrated in India's differing responses to the Suez and Hungarian crises. While India openly condemned Western aggression in the Suez, it responded with noticeable restraint during the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Nayudu attempts to reconcile this disparity, but the asymmetry remains clear. India's emerging strategic alignment with the Soviet Union made a strong rebuke of Moscow diplomatically inconvenient. The justification that silence was necessary to preserve diplomatic channels for peace, what many see as a hallmark of Nehruvian diplomacy, has since been adopted by his successors. It continues to serve as a convenient diplomatic tool, as evidenced during the Ukrainian crisis.

Equally compelling is Nayudu's analysis of Nehru's comparatively cautious engagement with Africa. Unlike his more confident posture in Asia, Nehru appeared uneasy navigating the complexities of post-colonial African identity, particularly its racial dimensions. Although he took a strong stand against apartheid in South Africa, he struggled to grasp how deeply issues of race permeated the continent's broader political landscape. He showed little interest in promoting a pan-African political vision, revealing the limits of his internationalist aspirations.

One of Nehru's most enduring contributions, however, lies in India's long-standing commitment to United Nations peacekeeping. Nayudu traces this trajectory from its early days, when India deployed unarmed troops as neutral observers, to more active roles, including armed but non-combative missions. This culminated in India's participation in the Congo, where peacekeeping evolved into a full-scale military intervention to alter the balance on the ground. This shift in India's role, from passive observer to active stabiliser, underscores a fascinating and often overlooked aspect of Nehru's legacy, one that merits deeper exploration.

All in all, this book offers a much-needed and insightful re-examination of non-alignment theory, shedding new light on how independent India navigated the post-war international order. With conceptual depth and a wealth of empirical detail, Swapna Kona Nayudu brilliantly weaves together strands of intellectual and international history. The in-depth research makes this book essential reading for anyone seeking to understand Indian foreign policy or the broader dynamics of the decolonisation era. ■

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