Gen Z takes power in Nepal

A ‘seatbelt’ moment for AI and social media

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Democracy Asia

May 2026

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In the Philippines, a feud between two powerful dynasties has erupted into a high-stakes political crisis. Vice President Sara Duterte faces impeachment that could derail her ambitions, while her father, former president Rodrigo Duterte, stands trial at the International Criminal Court over his deadly drug war. Their alliance with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has collapsed into open rivalry.

Beyond the drama lies a deeper test. Whether Duterte's trial delivers accountability—or the feud simply entrenches dynastic power—will shape the future of governance in the Philippines.

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We begin this month with the remarkable tale of in-fighting between past, present and a possible future president of the Philippines as the Marcos family appear to be at war with the Dutertes. Former President Duterte is imprisoned in the Netherlands, waiting for the International Criminal Court in the Hague to proceed with the trial of the former president for crimes against humanity allegedly committed while he was head of state. Meanwhile his daughter Sara, the current vice president with ambitions to become president, is facing impeachment in the Philippines after falling out with President Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos whom she accuses of kidnapping her father. Jonathan Miller, author of a biography of Rodrigo Duterte, tells the story.

Following an election in March, the former rapper and mayor of Kathmandu, Balendra 'Balen' Shah, has formed a government in Nepal from well-educated members of Gen Z, a shock for a country used to monarchists, communists and members of the traditional Nepali Congress being in charge. This is the most youthful government the country has ever seen. We don't hear much from Central Asia, that corner of the continent that used to be part of the Soviet Union, and it would not be unkind to say that its five countries are still adjusting to being independent nations in their own right and learning to 'swim with the democratic tide'. Our report this month tells how the people's vote to amend the constitution in Kazakhstan could ease the previously uncomfortable process of transition from one president to another.

> "From dynastic feuds in the Philippines to Gen Z reshaping Nepal, this month shows how power struggles and political renewal are unfolding side by side across Asia—against the backdrop of war and economic strain."

Amid so much turmoil in the world, it is a good moment to reflect on how democracy is exercised in different ways across Asia with the musings of a former BBC foreign correspondent, while another article looks at the organisations which assess what makes a good democracy.

We raise questions about the future of the Quad, a security grouping linking India and Japan with the United States and Australia. Nor can we ignore the current war at the western end of the continent involving the United States, Israel and Iran – and, in another theatre, Israel and Lebanon. A significant consequence of that war has been to restrict the flow of fuel, fertilisers and other goods from the Persian Gulf causing major difficulties for most countries in Asia. We report on the war, its impact on China and, in Business, its economic fallout across Asia. Business also looks at recent legal moves on social media – what its author calls the 'seatbelt' moment for Big Tech.

Finally, this month's Bookshelf takes a look at a book which charts how Europe and Asia were drawn together in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the former continent's taste for Asian spices. I have a personal interest in this story, so I shall say no more.

Nicholas Nugent
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The Iran conflict

The US and Israel continued air and missile strikes against Iran, while Iran retaliated with attacks on oil and gas facilities in Gulf states. A two-week ceasefire, later extended, brought a temporary pause in hostilities and enabled face-to-face talks in Islamabad, while representatives of Israel and Lebanon met in Washington following a separate ceasefire agreement.

The focus of the conflict shifted to control of the Strait of Hormuz. In response to Iran's blockade, the US blockaded Iranian oil exports from Kharg Island and other terminals. The disruption led to fuel shortages, higher prices and rationing across Asia, while airline stocks fell sharply as flights were cancelled due to shortages of aviation fuel.

The Asian Development Bank announced a financial support package to help member countries mitigate the economic and financial effects of the conflict. Sri Lanka, where fuel rationing was already in place, was first to access this support.

US-China

President Trump announced plans to visit China on 14–15 May to meet President Xi Jinping, a trip postponed from late March due to the Iran conflict. It will be the first visit to China by a US president in almost ten years. President Xi is expected to make a visit to Washington later in the year.

China-Taiwan

The leader of Taiwan's opposition Kuomintang Party (KMT), Cheng Li-wun, made a historic visit to China, where she was received in Beijing by President Xi Jinping. She visited the tomb of the party's founder, Sun Yat-sen, in Nanjing and pledged to promote reconciliation between Taiwan and the mainland.

Myanmar

Five years after the coup that ousted Myanmar's civilian-led government, the country's parliament elected the coup leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, as president. In connection with New Year celebrations in April, more than 4,000 political prisoners were released, while Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, 80, had her 27-year prison sentence reduced by one-sixth.

Vietnam

Parliament elected Communist Party leader To Lam as president and former central bank governor Le Minh as prime minister. One of the key challenges facing the new leadership will be managing tensions with China over competing claims in the South China Sea.

Indonesia

Three Indonesian soldiers were killed while serving with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

India

Elections are being held in late April and early May in the states of Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu and the union territory of Puducherry. Counting will take place on 4 May.

Sara Duterte and President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., once allies in a powerful political tandem, are now locked in a bitter feud that has plunged the Philippines into a high-stakes dynastic power struggle.

Clan warfare in the Philippines takes on an international dimension

The International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Dutch city of The Hague has announced it will go ahead with the prosecution of Rodrigo Duterte, a former president of the Philippines, on three counts of crimes against humanity relating to the war on drugs, Duterte's signature policy as president. Jonathan Miller, who has been following the saga, reports.

Imagine a screenwriter plotting the narrative arc of a political thriller, riddled with bizarre twists and a warren of shocking subplots, rich with intrigue and the promise of blood-drenched prequels and sequels. The chief protagonist is a serving vice president, a celebrity politician with big ambitions, riding high in the polls. But she has a problem. In a fit of rage, she'd threatened to kill her nemesis, the current president, scion of a dead dictator, and faces impeachment.

Meanwhile, in a jail cell half a world away, her ageing father, a former president himself, faces trial too: on charges of mass murder. She defends her legacy and – taking a leaf from his playbook – warns of a 'bloodbath' if her impeachment goes to trial. If it does and she is convicted, her presidential ambitions will be thwarted.

But this is not the fictional storyboard of a blockbuster drama. This is real, and it's playing out in the Philippines, whose 118 million people are hooked on this suspense-ridden political theatre.

It's a couple of years now since the nepo 'dream team' alliance between Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos (who is known as BBM) and Sara Duterte – which was, frankly, shaky from the outset – imploded and two of the country's most powerful dynasties went to war. BBM's first act of political vengeance was brutal, in the Shakespearean tradition. In March last year he handed over his predecessor, Sara's father, to the International Criminal Court. Rodrigo Duterte was a wanted man, on account of the killing spree he allegedly unleashed during his bloody war on drugs. (By contrast, one of Duterte's first acts as president was to order the rehabilitation of BBM's father,

Ferdinand Marcos senior, who plundered US$10 billion from national coffers, describing him as 'the best president the Philippines ever had.') Infuriated by Marcos junior's brazen act of betrayal, Sara Duterte branded her father's extradition a 'kidnap'.

bloodbath. He claimed the Philippines had become a narco-state and said that the 'slaughter' of those he deemed responsible was the only way to end a 'national methamphetamine pandemic'. On the campaign trail, he said

The International Criminal Court in The Hague is considering whether to proceed with the prosecution of former president Rodrigo Duterte over alleged crimes against humanity linked to his war on drugs. Photo: AP Photo/Peter Dejong

This gloves-off battle royale between the two ruling clans has relegated Duterte senior's fate to that of a political sideshow. For Duterte's detractors and the families of victims, the showdown in The Hague represents their stab at justice and accountability, an outcome long-denied them back home.

Less than halfway through his six-year term, police revealed that the death toll had already topped 29,000, the largest loss of civilian life in South-East Asia since Pol Pot's rule in Cambodia. For the ICC, Duterte is a prize catch. Some say 'a prosecutor's dream'. We are about to find out whether that is the case.

Rodrigo Roa Duterte is among a rare breed of politicians who deliver on promises made. Exactly ten years ago, as he set his sights on Manila's Malacañang Palace in the run-up to the 2016 presidential poll, he pledged a

'God will weep if I become president' and threatened to dump the bodies of so many drug dealers in Manila Bay that the fish would grow fat feeding on them. He promised to fill the funeral parlours.

Duterte won by a landslide and so began a Latin America-style dirty war across the archipelago. Fear and violence were the favoured tools for imposing law and order. Death squads were the hallmark, as they had been during Duterte's eight terms as mayor of the southern city of Davao.

He was a shameless populist authoritarian who told his electorate that vigilante justice was the only viable way to exterminate the 'vermin' of the drugs trade. He revelled in the nickname 'Duterte Harry,' after Clint Eastwood's shoot-first-ask-questions-later cop, 'Dirty' Harry Callahan.

During his reign of terror, masked killers on motorbikes stalked the country's slums, responding to the president's dog-whistle rhetoric. Within six months of his taking charge, more than 7,000 people had been shot dead. Human Rights Watch called Duterte's first year in office 'a human rights calamity'. In just one year, three times as many Filipinos were killed than in a decade under Ferdinand Marcos senior. Dozens of lawyers, human rights defenders and journalists were gunned down but most of the dead were the urban poor, some linked to drugs, some not.

Rodrigo Duterte built his political brand on hardline rhetoric and promises of a violent crackdown on drugs, a policy that now places him at the centre of an international legal battle. Photo: EPA

Scores of children were among those killed. Their deaths were dismissed by the president as 'collateral damage'. He basked in high approval ratings.

Unlike previous occupants of Malacañang, he spoke the gutter language of the poor and had the bearing of a hoodlum. He loved guns and girls and motorbikes. Filipinos swooned at what they called his 'gangster charm'. He was, as one former Philippine congressman put it, 'a fascist original'.

So, if Duterte goes to trial, will the charges stick? The prosecution has lined up star witnesses including a death squad super-grass, at least one assassin-turned-whistle-blower, survivors, priests and a deep throat former senior cop. Its problem is that there is no single order signed by the former president in which he commissioned an actual killing.

Nicholas Kaufman, his Israeli lead defence counsel in The Hague, accuses the prosecution of 'cherry-picking' quotes from Duterte's speeches to present a narrative of 'murderous intent'. He claims the speeches were taken out of context.

The ICC warrant for his arrest asserts 'reasonable grounds to believe that Mr Duterte is individually responsible as an indirect co-perpetrator for the crime against humanity of murder'. The crimes of which he stands accused date back to 2011,

Families of victims of the Philippines' brutal anti-drug campaign mourn loved ones, many of whom were from the urban poor and killed in controversial police operations or vigilante-style attacks. Photo: Reuters

when he was mayor of Davao City, and continue to 16 March 2019, when Duterte pulled the Philippines out of the ICC. The Rome Statute, on which the court is founded, requires that the prosecution demonstrate that Duterte 'made an essential contribution to the commission of those crimes'.

In power, Rodrigo Duterte liked to project an image of invincibility. Even now, he retains a fanatical fan base among Duterte die-hards back home who hanker after the good old days when there was 'law and order.' But he has had a year to confront his demons and has sought to present himself as diminished and defeated as he sits in Scheveningen Prison, the ICC detention unit, with convicted war criminals for company.

According to Kaufman, his lawyer, he maintains 'I've never murdered anyone'. The defence counsel quoted Duterte's final instructions to his team. He said: 'I was a faithful servant of the people and that is how I wish to be remembered. I have now accepted my fate and I realise that I could die in prison'.

Now held at the ICC detention unit in Scheveningen, Rodrigo Duterte faces the prospect of trial as prosecutors attempt to link his rhetoric to thousands of killings.

Jonathan Miller, formerly a foreign correspondent for Channel 4 News in the UK, is now a freelance investigative journalist. He is author of a biography of Rodrigo Duterte, *Duterte Harry*, which may be used as evidence in any trial. Duterte's counsel described the book as 'trashy, scurrilous pulp fiction'.

Prime Minister Balendra Shah, a symbol of Nepal's generational political shift, leads a youth-driven government promising reform and accountability.

Gen Z takes power in Nepal

Nepal celebrated its new year last month (April) by welcoming a youth-led government from the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), which won a near supermajority in March's election. Kunda Dixit reports on a mood of cautious optimism among Nepalis that the new government will bring a fresh start for the country.

Nepal's new cabinet is unusually well qualified, with ministers drawn from diverse professional backgrounds including economics, engineering, research and journalism, many holding postgraduate degrees. This is the best-educated government Nepal has ever had, and it has gotten right down to work. The first Cabinet meeting last week approved a 100-point blueprint for time-bound delivery based on better governance. It targets a 7% annual GDP growth rate, and doubling the size of Nepal's economy to $100 billion by 2031.

After a decade of conflict, chronic political instability, corruption and lack of accountability, Nepal sits on a mountain of problems. Anger over a lack of jobs, corruption and poor delivery fuelled the Gen Z protests last September that toppled the coalition government, paving the way for an early election.

With nearly 60% turnout, the RSP secured 182 seats in the 275-member lower house of Parliament, just two short of a two-thirds majority. The legacy parties were trounced — Marxists, Maoists and monarchists all lost badly. The electoral tsunami swept away both good and bad politicians, though the new faces will also have to prove themselves. On balance, Nepalis seem pleased the old lot was ousted.

The RSP's ambitious blueprint must address entrenched structural problems to create jobs, boost investor confidence, and clean up the bureaucracy. That is already a formidable task, but the Balendra Shah government has plunged headlong into an economic and energy crisis caused by the Israeli-American war on Iran.

Nepal relies heavily on imported petroleum, much of it sourced via India from the Persian Gulf. Nearly 2 million Nepali migrant

workers are employed across West Asia, and remittances from the region are vital to the economy. The jobs and income are now in jeopardy because of the conflict. The government has raised the price of petrol and diesel, announced a two-day weekend, restricted official fuel use and curtailed travel as part of emergency austerity measures. The price of aviation turbine fuel at Kathmandu airport has been doubled, just at the start of Nepal's trekking and mountaineering season.

The RSP was elected on an anti-establishment platform, but is now itself the establishment. In its first weeks in office, it has put former prime minister K P Oli and his home minister Ramesh Lekhak behind bars for the massacre of youth protesters outside Parliament on 8 September. Businessmen and officials allegedly involved in corruption have also been arrested.

Home Minister Sudan Gurung even summoned the Swiss ambassador to find out about the Swiss bank accounts of politicians. Gurung says he is just following up on his campaign promise to curb corruption and improve service delivery.

The Rastriya Swatantra Party secured a near two-thirds majority in Nepal's Parliament, sweeping aside traditional political parties. Photo: Reuters

Prime Minister Shah cuts an enigmatic figure: always dressed in black, wearing Ray-Ban shades, and saying little. He has carefully cultivated a persona of someone who is a do-er, not a talker. He rarely speaks to the press and has recently reduced even his social media communication.

The prime minister has appointed his buddies in an almost all-male kitchen cabinet, adding investigative journalist Deepa Dahal, who exposed corruption in high places in the previous coalition, as an adviser.

Balendra Shah's reticence and reclusiveness is seen by supporters as a sign that he is different from the previous tried, tested and failed politicians. But there is also criticism that as prime minister the public has a right to know what he is up to, and what his plans are. There are also questions about Shah consulting astrologers and numerologists to time his swearing-in ceremony on 27 March.

Prime Minister Shah has kept tight control over the military by keeping the Defence Ministry, letting his trusted Home Minister Gurung handle the police. And there appears to be a tussle within the party over who should control the intelligence bureau. One vocal critic on social media, researcher Dovan Rai, detects authoritarian tendencies in the man. 'We need strong institutions, not strongmen,' she says.

As a rapper, 'Balen' Shah sang lyrics in support of the underdog, and lashed out at officialdom. This Robin Hood image helped him get elected mayor of Kathmandu, where his record was a mix of progress and high-handedness. But he also had

Youth-led protests against corruption and unemployment triggered the political upheaval that brought down the previous government. Photo: AFP

Nepal's former prime minister K P Oli is escorted by police following his arrest in Kathmandu. Photo: Reuters

an impulsive and erratic side, posting bizarre late-night tweets like one in which he wrote: ‘Fuck America, Fuck India, Fuck China’ – drawing comparison with the American president – but deleted it a few hours later.

After India’s Narendra Modi put up a map of pre-colonial ‘Akhanda Bharat’ in Parliament in New Delhi that included Nepal, Mayor Shah hung a map of Greater Nepal on his office wall that includes territory lost to British India after the 1816 war. Such ultra-nationalism may not sit well with Nepal’s giant neighbours.

On the eve of his swearing-in as prime minister, Shah released a rap song on YouTube titled ‘Jai Mahakali’ with nationalistic lyrics evoking the bravery in battle of the Gorkha conquest in the 18th century and the founding of Nepal as a nation-state.

Officials in New Delhi and Beijing do not seem to know what to make of Shah, while there has been praise from Nepal’s Western donors about the way the country righted the ship of state after last year’s September Storm, held a quick election, and allowed Nepalis to vote decisively for generational regime change.

The three old parties that have taken turns ruling Nepal for the past 20 years underestimated the public rage that fuelled the RSP victory. The Nepali Congress (NC) tried to bring in a younger leadership, but could not win over voters in time. The former Maoist guerrilla commander Pushpa Kamal Dahal won a seat, but his Nepali Communist Party suffered an ignominious defeat. Balendra Shah challenged the UML’s K P Oli in a duel and brought him down in his own stronghold. But none of the three seem to have got the message of the election — that they must reform or perish.

Nepal’s political shift echoes youth-led movements in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, but the real challenge now is governance: reviving the economy, creating jobs and managing regional relations.

But the RSP must also be wary of Nepal’s chronic tendency for internal infighting. Prime Minister Balendra Shah is the reason the RSP won such a huge majority, but it is led by Rabi Lamichhane who is also ambitious and would like to be prime minister one day. So far, the two have kept their differences in check. But will this uneasy cohabitation last?

Nepal’s relations with neighboring India remain sensitive as nationalist rhetoric resurfaces in domestic politics. Image AI generated

Kunda Dixit is the publisher and former editor of the *Nepali Times* newspaper in Kathmandu.

Victims of trafficking remain trapped inside KK Park on the Myanmar–Thailand border, where scam compounds persist as part of a sprawling, protected network of criminal operations. Photo: Reuters

How scam centres control Myanmar

A major problem facing Myanmar's military leader Min Aung Hlaing, now rebranded as the country's civilian-style president, is to take control of the myriad 'scam centres' - illegal operations that run online fraud schemes such as phishing, fake investments and scam romances. Despite efforts by the country's army, Myanmar's scam economy has not been dismantled but is instead dispersing, adapting, and embedding itself more deeply across conflict-hit borderlands, as Nyein Chan Aye reports.

When Myanmar's army dynamited the buildings in the notorious KK Park compound on the Thai-Myanmar border late last year, the operation looked to international observers like a breakthrough. Workers fled and buildings were damaged. The regime claimed a major crackdown. But on the ground, the wider scam economy barely stopped.

The persistence of scam operations is a reality for Min Aung Hlaing, the general who seized power in Myanmar's 2021 coup and recast himself as president in April after tightly controlled elections in December and January. One of the first tests of his new administration is whether it can dismantle scam networks protected by local militias closely aligned with the regime, rather than simply staging crackdowns for show.

The Myawaddy region, in Karen State in southeastern Myanmar, sits across the border from western Thailand's Mae Sot. It is not simply a border town. It is part of a conflict-affected belt where militias, traffickers, criminal brokers, business fronts, and state-linked actors overlap. Even when raids happen, the underlying power structures and illicit activity often remain largely unchanged.

Why did the raids not work?

A March report from the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) notes that scam centres are not a single model, but a highly adaptable phenomenon: large compounds, small offices, houses, and dispersed nodes form the same criminal ecosystem. Local sources confirm this trend. Aung Min, a businessman near the Myawaddy–Thai border, said the KK Park clearance scattered many

workers from China, India, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Africa who then spread across the region. 'Scamming isn't limited to big buildings; it now operates on smaller scales,' he said.

The demolition of the KK Park complex was presented as a major crackdown, but the broader scam economy quickly adapted and dispersed across the region. Photo: The Global New Light of Myanmar

A recent visitor to the Three Pagodas Pass area, another border crossing between Karen State and Thailand, described persistent activity. 'These businesses are still going on,' he said speaking anonymously for his safety. He noted that many Chinese were present and that Starlink devices – a vital resource for online scams – were visibly in use, with armed escorts. Officials from the DKBA, a Karen armed group in the area, denied that new scam-related facilities are being built, claiming Chinese-backed projects are tied to local industry. But residents disputed this, saying Chinese-built sites are heavily guarded and hard to access.

This persistent cycle helps explain why headline crackdowns haven't worked. According to GI-TOC's mapping, scam centres are easily replicated and relocated, and are often embedded in broader networks. As a result, shutting down a single site rarely undermines the underlying business model. Jason Tower, senior expert at GI-TOC, was blunt. Myanmar military actions on the Thai border since October 2025, he said, were 'largely performative' and failed to disrupt China-linked scams. The military focused on publicized actions, like attacking selected compounds and destroying equipment. 'Scam syndicates simply moved elsewhere.'

Since November, Tower said, over a dozen new scam compounds have emerged in Karen State, often in remote areas 5–10 kilometres from the border. Others have appeared further inland, including in places under more direct military control. Large compounds remain active along the Thai border, but some operations have expanded into clandestine sites. 'The scam syndicates have over 50 compounds along the border,' he said, 'and dozens of secret locations to move to during raids.'

Who really runs these operations?

GI-TOC's latest mapping shows that many large Southeast Asian scam operations are run by China-linked criminal networks that collaborate with local elites and groups. Local armed actors and political patrons protect them. In Myawaddy, the US Treasury has named the Karen National Army (KNA) – formerly the Border Guard Force under Saw Chit Thu – as a central enabler of cyber scams, human trafficking, and smuggling.

Tower was more direct: 'Transnational organized crime groups from China run the scam centres,' he said. They build facilities, set up management, provide technology, manage laundering, and organize recruitment. But in Myanmar, they

Soldiers stand next to Starlink satellite internet devices as they seize KK Park online scam center in Myawaddy township, Karen State, Myanmar. Photo: The Myanmar Military True News Information Team/AP

work with the KNA/BGF, the DKBA, and corrupt elements in the state. That distinction matters. These militias are not neutral; they are longtime allies of the Myanmar military and part of the armed structure the junta relies on to control Karen State and form part of a key trade route to Thailand. Saw Chit Thu even received an honorary title from Min Aung Hlaing in 2023, showing that one of the area's most prominent scam-linked militia leaders was not an outsider, but a decorated ally.

This local dependence helps explain why even international and regional pressure, especially from China, has limits. Hunter Marston, an adjunct fellow with the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Southeast Asia programme, told me that Chinese pressure remains 'probably the number one factor' behind regional crackdowns. He also sees Beijing's priorities broadening. Now that Min Aung Hlaing acts as if he has a popular mandate to govern, Marston said, what matters most to him is not only security but also economic recovery.

Local militias and armed groups play a central role in protecting scam operations, highlighting the deep entanglement between organized crime and conflict actors. Photo: Reuters

'I think what will serve his political interests and legacy is restarting and growing the country's economy,' Marston said. Min Aung Hlaing, he argued, needs economic success to justify the coup, and 'needs China for that'. Scam centres still matter, but as part of a larger calculation: if they badly damage Myanmar's image or if 'China is breathing down your neck' the regime will be forced to act.

A similar pattern is now visible in Cambodia where, as Marston notes, Chinese pressure has helped drive a tougher response, while Tower argues recent high-profile extraditions and legal changes show action can come when the political cost becomes too high. Yet, Tower is sceptical in the context of Myanmar. He believes the new regime may keep using scam crackdowns as a bargaining chip—performative actions for legitimacy and recognition that avoid underlying business issues. As he put it, 'The scam centre problem in Myanmar will not be resolved until the current crisis in the country is resolved'. He added that the junta's controversial election and its civilian-style transition 'does absolutely nothing to advance change.'

Min Aung Hlaing faces mounting pressure to curb scam networks while balancing economic recovery, political legitimacy, and reliance on key allies such as China. Photo: Reuters/File Photo

Nyein Chan Aye is Washington DC-based Burmese journalist who writes on Myanmar, China and regional affairs. He previously worked for the BBC and Voice of America.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev waved to supporters during an event in Astana marking the approval of Kazakhstan's new constitution in a referendum. Photo: Akorda/Handout

Kazakhs vote for change in stage-managed referendum

On 15 March Kazakhs voted by a substantial majority for constitutional changes which some see as an exit strategy for President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who is seeking political closure on the instability that embroiled the country in 2022. Chris Rickleton reports.

Journalists habitually refer to Kazakhstan, the world's ninth-largest country by territory, as 'sandwiched' between two even larger ones, Russia and China. But Moscow and Beijing will not be the only ones watching 72-year-old career diplomat President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's next move.

On 15 March, more than 87% of voters in the Central Asian country backed a new constitution promoted by Mr Tokayev, after a constitutional commission drafted the document in less than three weeks. The referendum result strengthens the hand of Mr Tokayev for the remainder of a term he has suggested will be his last, as he eyes a controlled exit from a turbulent presidency.

In a 30 March opinion for the *National Interest* publication, Tokayev said that he 'personally worked on every word of the text' of the new basic law. The next micromanaged political event will be elections to the new, unicameral parliament, or Kurultai, in August.

Kazakhstan, a landlocked country of 20 million people that runs 3,000 kilometres east to west, declared independence from the Soviet Union in December 1991. Kazakhs, a Turkic Muslim people, account for over 70% of the country's population. Ethnic Russians are the largest minority with about 15%, down from nearly 40% at the time Soviet power began to crumble.

Since then, the authoritarian government has leveraged vast mineral wealth to give countries near and far a stake in its stability. Kazakh crude, mostly exported via Russia, accounts for roughly 12% of European Union oil imports, while the list of shareholders in consortia controlling the giant oil fields Tengiz, Kashagan and Karachaganak read like a Who's Who of the global oil industry. Already the world's largest uranium producer, Kazakhstan is now seeing competition intensify

over its critical minerals, as Chinese and American firms vie to develop some of the region's largest tungsten deposits. The unstated aim has long been to prevent any one country from gaining undue influence.

Mr Tokayev claims his constitutional reforms are designed to prevent the political system's long-term domination by any one man. For more than three decades, the political course was set by Nursultan Nazarbayev. Mr Nazarbayev, now 85, became president when Kazakhstan was still under Moscow's control. By the time Nazarbayev handed the office to Mr Tokayev in 2019, he was constitutionally enshrined as 'Elbasy', meaning 'Leader of the Nation' in Kazakh. He was also the new 'lifelong' chair of the country's Security Council – where the new head of state was a mere seat-holder – chairman of the ruling party in a country without an opposition. Mr Tokayev, in contrast, was derided by one Europe-based regime opponent as 'furniture' that could be set aside.

The balance of power between the two men shifted decisively in January 2022, when unrest that began with peaceful protests over

Kazakhs voted overwhelmingly in favour of constitutional changes in a tightly managed national referendum. Photo: gov.kz

a fuel price spike in the oil-producing but economically depressed west of the country spiralled into chaos, concentrated in the former capital Almaty, leaving at least 238 people dead. Although many took to the streets to protest inequality and corruption, a split in the security elite appeared to prompt more violent mobilisations. During a prolonged internet shutdown, Mr Tokayev announced to the nation that he had been the victim of a coup attempt. Mr Nazarbayev resigned from all his posts soon after the bloodshed, declaring his backing for Mr Tokayev. His relatives were dismissed from powerful and lucrative positions, with one nephew even spending time in jail.

Kazakhstan's strategic position between Russia and China shapes its political balancing and global significance.

A Soviet-trained diplomat, Mr Tokayev served twice as Kazakhstan's foreign minister, once as its prime minister, and from 2011 to 2013 as under-secretary of the United Nations in Geneva. He speaks fluent English and Mandarin in addition to Russian and Kazakh, although like many Kazakhs raised in the country's largest city Almaty, his Russian is stronger.

Mr Tokayev continues to acknowledge his predecessor's achievements. These include the construction of the futuristic capital, Astana. Mr Nazarbayev's decision to relocate the seat of government 1,000 kilometres north from leafy, mountain-hemmed Almaty in the 1990s is often interpreted through the lens of geopolitics. Other than Almaty, the ethnic Russian population is mostly located in the north of the country, closer to the 7,644-kilometre border with Russia. As Astana grew, and with a state programme supporting relocation, more ethnic Kazakhs moved from south to north. Yet some Kazakhs fear that there are still parts of the north where the ethnic Russian demographic could be exploited by Moscow in a Ukraine-style scenario that Russian pundits and lawmakers are fond of threatening.

Deadly unrest in 2022 marked a turning point in Kazakhstan's political balance, reshaping Tokayev's authority. Photo: Yerlan Dzhumayev/TASS

While the Kazakhstan-Russia relationship is generally close, it has been trickier since the Kremlin launched its full-blown war against Kyiv in 2022. Astana's neutral stance on the war and its accommodation of Western sanctions have emboldened Vladimir Putin's proxies in Russia's media space, who cast Tokayev as an ungrateful ally. Kazakhstan's historic unrest broke out a month before the invasion started.

A more militaristic Russia has made the relationship with China more important. Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke about his Belt and Road Initiative for the first time abroad during a speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana in 2013. In September 2022, Mr Xi made Kazakhstan his first foreign visit after the pandemic and pledged to 'categorically oppose any force' interfering in the country's affairs.

Mr Tokayev has also established a good rapport with US President Donald Trump, joining Kazakhstan to Mr Trump's Gaza-focused 'Board of Peace' as well as the Abraham Accords linking Israel with its Arab neighbours during Mr Trump's first term. At a Washington summit featuring Mr Trump, Mr Tokayev and four other Central Asian leaders last year, Mr Tokayev hailed his host as a statesman 'sent by heaven to return common sense' to United States policy. Less than a week later, Mr Tokayev was in Moscow meeting Putin, where he described Russia as a neighbour sent by God.

Some of Mr Tokayev's critics argue that his intention is to channel Mr Putin by using the incoming constitution as a pretext to seek a new mandate. That seems unlikely. Mr Tokayev has invested political capital in a change to the basic law introduced nearly four years ago that makes the office subject to non-renewable seven-year term, a restriction that remains in force.

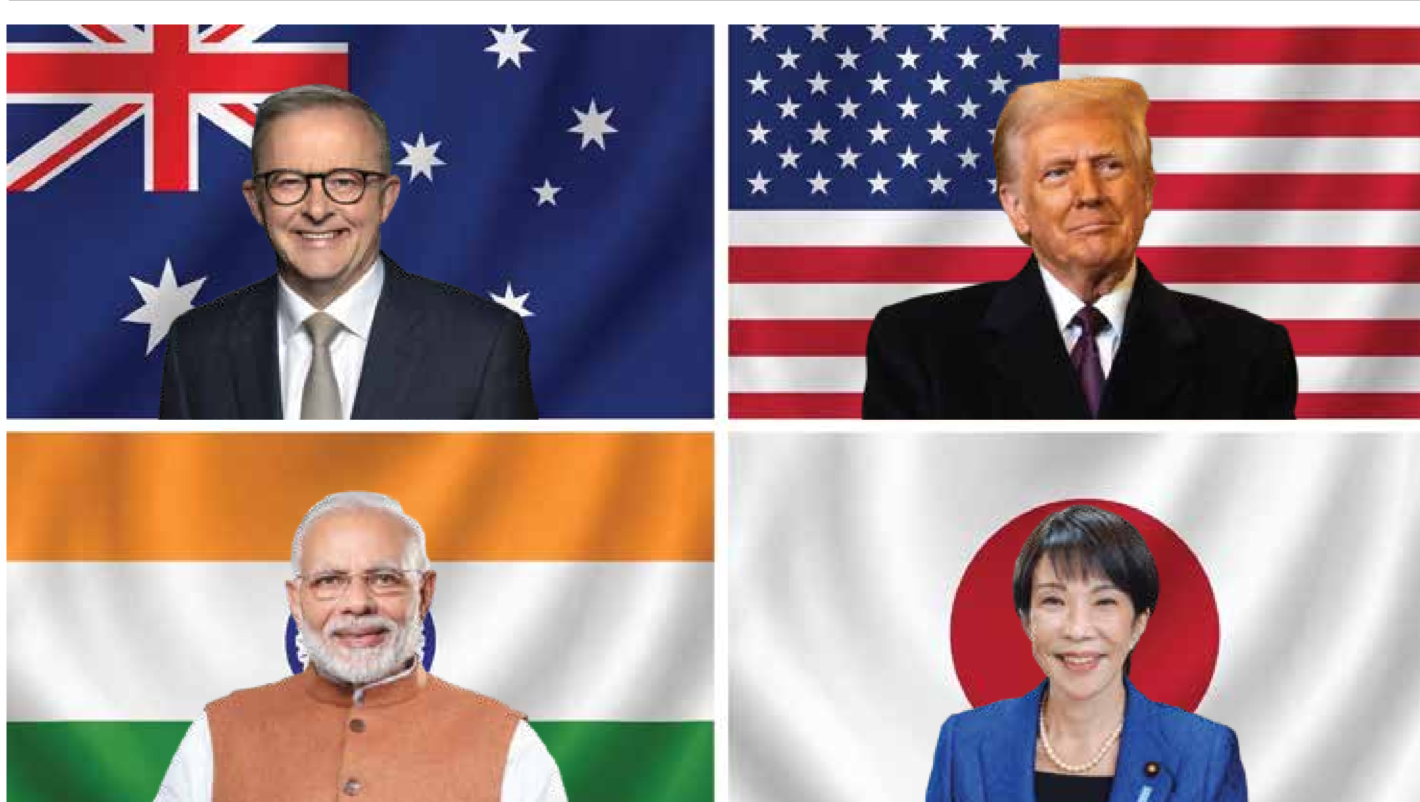
Beginning a third term while championing a constitution that restricts further leaders to one term would smack of the exceptionalism Tokayev claims Kazakhstan is moving away from. At the same time, the constitution strengthens presidential authority over key appointments, provides the office with multiple pretexts to dissolve the Kurultai and allocates the head of state emergency lawmaking powers in such an event. So, a democratic shift therefore looks unlikely.

This leaves another managed leadership handover as the most probable scenario, perhaps closer to when Mr Tokayev's term ends in 2029.

It would be difficult to manage it worse than last time.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev with former president Nursultan Nazarbayev, whose long dominance the new constitutional reforms seek to move beyond. Photo: Akorda.kz

Chris Rickleton was a correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty from 2022-2025 and was previously AFP's Central Asia correspondent based in Almaty.



Leaders of the Quad nations — Anthony Albanese, Donald Trump, Narendra Modi and Sanae Takaichi — represent a strategic partnership now facing renewed uncertainty amid shifting US policy signals.

What future for the Quad?

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, is an informal strategic grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the US aimed at countering China's growing military power and influence in the Indo-Pacific. Its leaders have not met formally for some time and, as Rahul Bedi reports from Delhi, the organisation is under strain following President Donald Trump's disparagement of its three other members.

India's foreign secretary, Vikram Misri, made a visit to Washington in April focused on reinforcing India–US strategic, defence and commercial ties. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio is expected to travel to Delhi in May with India exploring the possibility of convening a meeting of Quad foreign ministers during the visit, while internal divisions – sharpened by President Trump's conduct – continue to cast doubt over the grouping's cohesion and long-term durability.

India wants to use the Quad association to stabilise its bilateral relationship with the US amid enduring geopolitical frictions. The last foreign minister-level Quad engagement, which took place in Washington in July 2025, was aimed at restoring continuity and momentum within the quadrilateral framework. It was expected to be followed by a summit in Delhi last November attended by all four Quad leaders, including President Trump, but the meeting ultimately did not materialise, marking a further setback for the grouping.

Indian security and diplomatic sources indicated that Tokyo has broadly backed efforts to accelerate Quad consultations, reflecting its continued interest in sustaining the grouping amid China's growing regional assertiveness. This comes despite Trump taunting Japan to 'step up' in support of Washington's objectives in the ongoing Iran conflict, particularly with regard to maritime security, by providing protection to critical energy routes in the Strait of Hormuz. The US president has portrayed Japan in deprecating terms as benefiting from US-led security guarantees, while remaining hesitant in its willingness to assume greater operational

responsibility – whether in mine-sweeping operations in the besieged Strait of Hormuz, undertaking naval escort duties, or contributing to wider security roles.

India–US diplomatic engagement remains central to sustaining the Quad, as New Delhi seeks to stabilise ties with Washington amid rising geopolitical friction.

Tellingly, Trump invoked the memory of Japan's December 1941 attack on the US navy at Pearl Harbour during an interaction with Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi at the White House in March. When asked by a reporter why Tokyo had not been informed in advance of the US strikes on Iran on 28 February, he said that surprise had been an essential element of the attack, adding that Japan, more than most countries, should understand this. He then remarked pointedly: 'Who better to understand surprise than Japan—why didn't you tell me about Pearl Harbor?', directing his comment at the visibly unsettled Japanese prime minister.

Australia, on the other hand, while concerned at China's expanding military footprint in the Indo-Pacific, has adopted a more cautious stance. Security officials and those familiar with Quad developments said that Canberra's reticence reflected 'heightened sensitivities' over President Trump publicly singling out Australia for 'under-contributing' to US military and naval efforts in the Iran campaign, including maritime operations to secure the Strait of Hormuz.

Donald Trump meets Sanae Takaichi at the White House, where remarks referencing Pearl Harbor underscored growing unease within the Quad.

Similar strains are also evident in the India–US dimension of the Quad equation, with Delhi not immune to Trump's caustic rhetoric. While this has been more indirect, with the US framing the relationship between Delhi and Washington in transactional and trade-centric terms, it has undermined the strategic convergence that has defined bilateral ties over the past two decades and adversely impacted recent Quad cooperation.

It is in this context that Misri's US visit assumes significance, less as a routine diplomatic engagement but more as an effort to stabilise a relationship that remains central to the Quad at a moment of growing uncertainty in the evolving global and regional security order. These concerns also echo within large segments of India's strategic and naval community, which constitutes a critical pillar in operationalising the Quad framework.

'Through his actions and statements during the ongoing Iran conflict, Trump has significantly eroded the Quad's cohesion,' said a two-star Indian Navy veteran associated with the framework during his service years, declining to be

Strategic waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz have become focal points of tension, exposing divisions among Quad members over military responsibilities.

named as he was not authorised to speak on sensitive matters. Such behaviour, he added, reflects what many within military and diplomatic circles acknowledge, has revived serious doubts among Quad members over whether the US remains a reliable and steadfast anchor for such long-term multilateral security arrangements.

Originating in humanitarian coordination among the Australian, Indian, Japanese and US navies as first responders in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the Quad was formally articulated in 2007, lapsed soon after under Chinese pressure, and resurrected in 2017 amid growing concern over Beijing's expanding military footprint in the region.

Thereafter, it has functioned as a flexible, non-treaty alignment centred on consultations, joint naval exercises, like 'Malabar' hosted by the Indian Navy, and cooperation in maritime security, critical and emerging technologies, including coordinated vaccine production during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such flexibility, long considered one of Quad's key strengths, is now being tested, and its ability to absorb internal shocks – notably unpredictable US policy signals – is also coming under increasing strain.

Alongside this, the same set of factors that have rendered the Quad increasingly tenuous are also beginning to undermine AUKUS, a 2021 trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US, that emerged as a more structured and consequential long-term defence and technology partnership. Aimed at deepening military and technological integration, AUKUS is centred on enabling Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered attack submarines or SSNs, alongside cooperation in advanced domains like cyber networking, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and undersea and network-centric warfare capabilities. Unlike the Quad's looser consultative architecture, AUKUS depends on sustained political commitment, a great degree of industrial coordination and high levels of strategic trust among its members.

However, these foundations too have been largely unsettled by

Warships participate in the Malabar naval exercise, a key operational pillar of Quad cooperation in maritime security and interoperability.

Trump's conduct amid the ongoing Iran conflict, particularly the UK's reluctance to join US–Israeli-led military action, underscoring emerging strains within the AUKUS framework.

These criticisms cut across both the Quad and AUKUS, signalling a troubling shift in US posture in which partners are increasingly treated less as autonomous actors and more as followers, expected to align closely with US presidential military preferences.

Anthony Albanese, Prime Minister of Australia; Joe Biden, then President of the United States; and Rishi Sunak, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, announce the AUKUS submarine partnership, a cornerstone defence pact now facing uncertainty amid shifting US strategic priorities. Photo: White House

Looking ahead, the Quad's durability – amid broader strains also affecting AUKUS – will depend on three factors: managing disagreements, especially those linked to President Trump and US global actions, Washington's ability to rebuild trust through a more predictable and consultative approach and the willingness of India, Japan and Australia to take greater initiative and reduce dependence on US leadership.

Without such recalibration, the Quad risks becoming a loosely coordinated arrangement lacking strategic clarity, cohesion, and geopolitical heft in the Indo-Pacific.

Based in Delhi, Rahul Bedi reports on defence policy, military affairs, and security dynamics across South Asia for international military publications and news outlets.

Tehran under threat during US–Israel strikes, a war with no clear victor but mounting regional consequences. Photo: Reuters

The war nobody is winning

The Iran war may be drawing to a close but with no clear conclusion, let alone any clear winner. The initial focus by the US and Israel on the country's political leadership and its nuclear fuel has shifted towards control of the Strait of Hormuz. Beyond the combatants themselves, non-oil producing nations in Asia who get most of their fuel from the Gulf have been the main losers, as Nicholas Nugent reports.

In early April the leader of a 250-year-old nation threatened a 2,500-year-old civilisation that he would 'bring them back to the stone ages'. Days later he warned that 'a whole civilisation will die tonight' adding 'I don't want that to happen, but it probably will'. Such threats would have sounded ridiculous if they had not been made by an angry leader of the world's most powerful country.

Neither threat was carried out, but they illustrate how a vicious war that started on 28 February had by April become a war of words, threats and blackmail, though not before a great many deaths and much destruction on the ground. A related war has been taking place between Israel and Lebanon, to which the government of Lebanon is not a party.

Far from the onset of a third world war, as some predicted, the mood in late April favoured 'jaw jaw' rather than 'war war' – talking rather than fighting – to coin an expression attributed to Britain's wartime leader, Winston Churchill. Yet the threats continued with President Trump writing that if Iran did not take the deal he was offering the United States 'is going to knock out every single Power Plant, and every single bridge, in Iran'.

President Trump has been obsessed with humbling Iran since his first term of office when he took the US out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The JCPOA was negotiated between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – the US, UK, France, Russia and China – along with Germany, to limit Iran's nuclear enrichment programme in return for the lifting of economic sanctions. It was signed in Vienna in July 2015, when Barack Obama was US president.

The JCPOA was endorsed by the UN Security Council, making it a tenet of international law, and approved by Iran's parliament in October 2015 with 161 votes in favour, 59 against, and 13

abstentions. The US Congress failed to endorse the deal amid strong opposition, but it came into effect with the US government calling it a 'non-binding political commitment' which did not need congressional approval. Nuclear-related sanctions were lifted by the UN, the EU and the US in January 2016.

In May 2018 President Trump (who began his first term in January 2017) withdrew the United States from the JCPOA and reimposed 'the highest level' of economic sanctions. War between the US and Iran has been building since that time. It was quiescent during Joe Biden's presidency despite reports that Iran had exceeded the uranium enrichment levels agreed under the JCPOA, but was a preoccupation of Donald Trump when he came back to power fifteen months ago. It seemed like a rash decision when he ended talks and, hand-in-hand with Israel, launched strikes on Tehran on 28 February.

Now the signs are that he wants to wind the war down despite not achieving either of his supposed aims: to force Iran to surrender its stockpile of enriched uranium, ostensibly the *casus belli* of the war, or to bring about 'regime change'.

Ruins of Persepolis, symbolising Iran's 2,500-year-old civilisation invoked in wartime rhetoric. Photo: Blondinrikard Fröberg/Creative Commons Attribution

After seven weeks of fighting, no side has won or seems likely to win. Iran saw its Supreme Leader and many other senior leaders killed, yet the government of the Islamic Republic remains operational with no signs of surrender. An estimated 3,500 people have been killed, mostly civilians including a significant number of children. The US claims to have sunk or disabled the country's entire naval force and to have 'taken control' of Iranian air space but appears not to have inflicted much damage on the more significant Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Iran's infrastructure has been damaged but its ability to produce and export huge volumes of oil and related products remains intact.

Donald Trump announces US–Israeli strikes on Iran on 28 February 2026, marking the start of a conflict that has since yielded no clear winner. Photo: Reuters

At least 1,500 have been killed in Lebanon since Israel launched intensive bombardment of Beirut and the south of the country aimed, it said, at eliminating Hezbollah, a fighting force allied to the Iranian government. Many Lebanese people have been rendered homeless by the bombing.

Israel itself has come under fire from both Hezbollah and Iran and suffered an undisclosed number of civilian casualties, showing the limitations of its 'iron dome' defence system designed to bring down missiles heading for populated areas. The United States has admitted to the deaths of 13 members of its armed forces and lost a number of aircraft – at an air base in Saudi Arabia, over Kuwait and Iraq and in Iran itself. In most cases the pilots were rescued.

So, has anybody won?

Clearly the US and Israel have suffered less severely than Iran or Lebanon, though if economic cost were brought into the equation both countries have spent many millions of dollars fighting the war that they started. What is hard to see is what they have gained. Iran retains its enriched uranium –

An Iranian defiance poster reproduced in an international newspaper reflects how the conflict is being framed beyond the battlefield.

despite claims that it was 'destroyed' by US and Israeli action in the Twelve-Day War last June. The war has resulted in disruption to free passage through the Strait of Hormuz.

The war has raised tension between the US and its European allies in NATO, who have refused to become involved in 'Trump's war'. Several have banned US military aircraft from overflying their territory. Arab Gulf states Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman as well as Saudi Arabia, have themselves suffered damage from Iranian strikes, which will have undermined their confidence in the US – or indeed the UK – defending them, though some of their leaders, uneasy about Iran's power, are urging the US to 'finish the job'. All have suffered damage to their oil and gas exporting ability and thus their economies.

Domestically, President Trump is suffering a backlash even from traditional supporters, with television commentator Tucker Carlson, a Trump supporter, claiming the President has become a slave to the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who has visited Washington six times since Donald Trump returned to office. The high price of petrol is likely to cause an anti-Trump backlash at US mid-term elections in November.

Apart from the combative nations the greatest impact has been felt by Asian nations who import most of their fuel, fertiliser and related products from the Gulf. Japan and South Korea are understood to have many days stockpiles of fuel, delaying the pain of raised fuel prices. Island nations like Sri Lanka, Taiwan and the Philippines, landlocked Nepal, Bhutan and Laos and even countries with ports like Pakistan, Myanmar and Thailand are severely affected by shortages and resulting rationing. There is expected to be a significant loss of remittances sent home by the millions of Asian workers in the Gulf states many of whom risk losing their jobs. The longer the strait remains closed the deeper will be the economic cost.

There are no winners from this latest Gulf conflict and the world seems a less safe place.

In Lebanon, Israeli bombardment has killed over 1,500 people and displaced large numbers of civilians, particularly in Beirut and the south, as fighting against Hezbollah intensifies. Photo: Reuters

Nicholas Nugent reported from Iran during its war against Iraq, a visit carefully supervised by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In 1971 he attended the 2,500-year anniversary of the founding of the Persian nation by Cyrus the Great at the ancient city of Persepolis.

Oil tankers transit the Strait of Hormuz, a critical global chokepoint where rising tensions are exposing China's economic vulnerabilities despite its cautious diplomatic posture. Image AI generated

China is not winning the Iran war

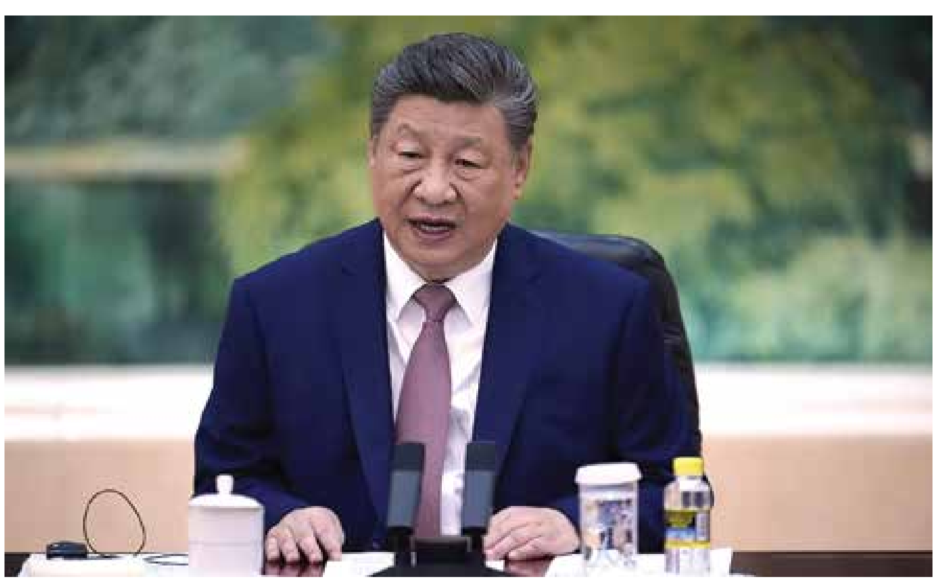
As Hormuz tensions rise, China's words – and silences – tell a clearer story than the headlines. China is not winning the Iran war, but it is not losing it either, as Howard Zhang reports.

As the Iran war has escalated and tensions around the Strait of Hormuz have intensified, Beijing's response has been strikingly consistent and quietly revealing. Chinese officials have openly condemned disruption to shipping as a threat to 'the common interests of the international community', called for an immediate ceasefire, and urged all sides to return to political dialogue. At the same time, state media continues to stress 'root causes', placing responsibility for escalation squarely on the United States.

On the surface, this is familiar territory: criticism of Washington, rhetorical sympathy towards Iran, and appeals for stability. Taken together – and read alongside China's actions – this messaging points to something more nuanced. It suggests a power that is not celebrating the crisis, but trying to contain its risks.

Two competing narratives

Two arguments continue to frame China's position. One holds that China is quietly winning. The United States is distracted, Beijing appears composed, and American attention is diverted from the Indo-Pacific. The other argues that China is losing. Iran, one of Beijing's strategic partners, has been weakened; the talks China supported have faltered; and the crisis is now disrupting the energy flows and trade routes on which China depends.



Chinese President Xi Jinping has called for ceasefire and stability, reflecting Beijing's preference for containment over escalation in the Iran conflict. Photo: AP

Recent developments suggest the second argument has strengthened, though the reality remains more complicated than either side allows.

The breakdown of ceasefire efforts is instructive. Reporting by the *Wall Street Journal* indicates that China has encouraged Iran to engage in talks and lent diplomatic support to de-escalation. Yet Beijing declined to offer any form of guarantee or enforcement mechanism. When the process faltered, it had no practical means of sustaining it.

The Iran conflict is increasingly viewed through the lens of US–China competition, with debate over whether Beijing is gaining strategic advantage or facing new vulnerabilities.

Coverage in *The Guardian* makes a similar point: China has been keen to present itself as a stabilising actor, but has not assumed the responsibilities that such a role would normally entail. This reflects a consistent pattern. China positions itself close enough to claim diplomatic credit, but not so close that it must bear the cost of failure.

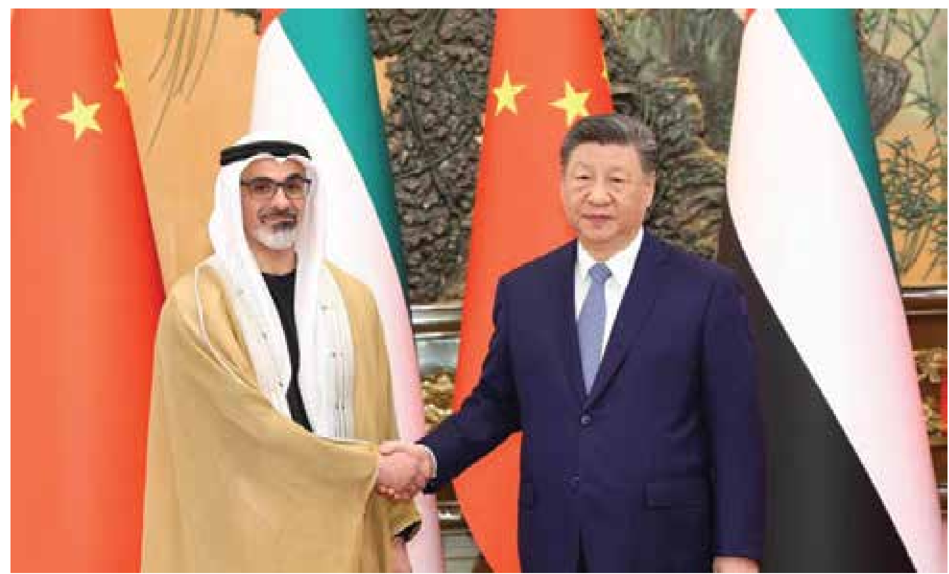
Hormuz: exposure laid bare

The situation in the Strait of Hormuz has brought China's vulnerability into sharper focus. A recent *Reuters* report notes Beijing's increasingly forceful language against disruption in the strait, warning of risks to global trade while continuing to call for restraint and negotiation. Yet analysis by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies suggests that Chinese and Hong Kong-flagged shipping through Hormuz has fallen markedly since the conflict began.

In practical terms, this means that China's position as Iran's largest oil customer does not guarantee secure passage when the strait becomes contested. Strategic alignment does not translate into operational protection. China's export growth has slowed as the conflict pushes up energy prices, transport costs and global uncertainty. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has also warned that a prolonged conflict could weigh on global growth. For China's economy, which is reliant on manufacturing and external demand, this is a direct challenge rather than a distant risk. It weakens the notion that Beijing can simply benefit from American distraction while remaining insulated from the consequences.

Yet it would be misleading to conclude that China is simply losing ground. Analysis from the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) suggests that oil transiting Hormuz represents a smaller share of China's overall energy mix than often assumed, given its reliance on coal, renewables and diversified supply chains.

Similarly, work by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace points to a longer-term dynamic: repeated oil shocks may accelerate the global shift towards electrification and renewable energy, areas in which China already holds a significant advantage. In that narrower sense, China may prove more resilient than some competitors, even


Chinese President Xi Jinping meets Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Beijing as China steps up regional diplomacy while avoiding firm security commitments—underscoring the limits of its role as a mediator in the Iran conflict. Photo: Xinhua/Huang Jingwen

Xi Jinping and Donald Trump at a previous meeting, as Beijing signals that stabilising ties with Washington remains a higher strategic priority than deepening alignment with Iran.

while experiencing short-term disruption.

China's own messaging remains the most revealing guide. At the surface level, official rhetoric continues to criticise the United States and frame the crisis in terms of escalation and responsibility. Beneath that, however, the emphasis is consistent and striking. In official statements, Beijing's focus is overwhelmingly on ceasefire, restoration of shipping and regional stability. This points to a clear underlying priority.

China does not want Iran to prevail decisively. Nor does it want Iran to collapse. What it seeks is containment: a rapid end to hostilities before the damage spreads further.

This hierarchy becomes clearer still when viewed alongside leader-level signalling. On 10 April, Xi Jinping marked the 55th anniversary of Ping-Pong diplomacy, calling for renewed people-to-people ties and a 'stable, healthy and sustainable' relationship with the United States. On its own, this might appear routine. In context, it is highly instructive.

While state media continues to criticise Washington over the Middle East, Xi is invoking one of the defining moments of US–China rapprochement — a reminder that strategic reset remains possible even in periods of tension.

This aligns with external analysis. In a recent interview with Geopolitical Futures, George Friedman argued that Beijing's push for rapid de-escalation reflects a desire to stabilise relations with Washington ahead of a potential visit by Donald Trump, with an eye to securing a more favourable trade outcome. Taken together, these signals point to a reality that Beijing rarely states openly: its relationship with the United States remains far more consequential than its alignment with Iran.

Winning, losing — or something else entirely?

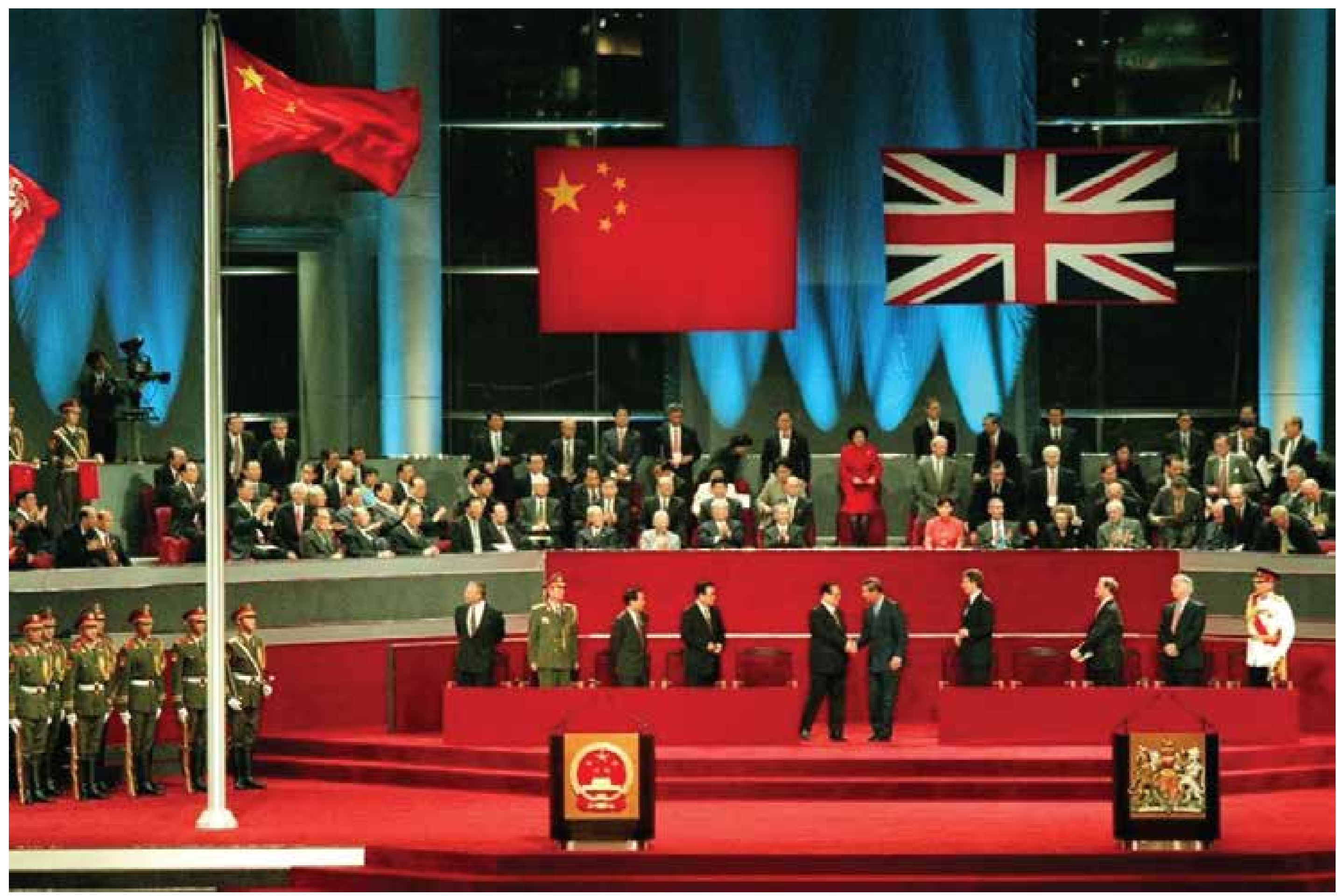
The notion that China is 'winning' the Iran war now appears overstated. The failure of talks and the disruption around Hormuz have exposed the limits of its influence and the persistence of its vulnerabilities. At the same time, China is not a straightforward loser. It retains structural advantages in energy diversification and may yet benefit from longer-term shifts in the global economy. The most accurate assessment lies between the two.

China is not winning the Iran war. It is attempting — with mixed success — to limit exposure, preserve flexibility and extract modest advantage from a deteriorating situation. Its messaging, its diplomacy and its silences all point in the same direction.

Beijing's objective is not victory. It is to ensure that the crisis does not become one it cannot control.

Disruptions to shipping routes and rising energy costs are beginning to impact China's trade-dependent economy, underscoring its exposure to instability in Hormuz. Image AI generated

Howard Zhang left China after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. He later became head of the BBC Chinese Service. He is a trustee of UK-China Transparency, an NGO focused on investigative journalism and China-related risk analysis.



Hong Kong's handover to China in 1997 symbolised the uneasy transition between Western democratic ideals and rising authoritarian power. Photo: Handout

Musings on democracy in Asia

Humphrey Hawksley has been reporting from different parts of Asia for a quarter of a century. Here he muses on what democracy means in China and Hong Kong, in Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Taiwan, and elsewhere.

'What do the democracy reforms mean for the people of Hong Kong?' a London banker friend asked me in 1992 as Britain was preparing to hand back its colony to China. Only three years earlier, China had become a global pariah by its forceful ending of the Tiananmen Square protests. Yet, in five years' time, Britain was to hand over control of its biggest remaining colony to the Chinese communist dictatorship.

The optics among British voters were appalling. How could the government allow such a ruthless regime to run Hong Kong? So, Chris Patten, a top-flight Conservative politician, was sent in as Hong Kong's last governor. Patten's job was to re-write the narrative so Britain could stage an honourable withdrawal.

News headlines sang with stories about his political reforms. But very little was possible because, as Patten himself said, the ink was already dry on the agreements with China. His achievement was to inject hope, a glimpse of what Hong Kong people could enjoy if they fought for democracy. As I told the banker that day, 'Imagine being asked to visit a beautiful sun-strewn beach where everything is wonderful. To get there, however, you need to run through a field of machine gun fire.'

At the time, Western elites were basking in the collapse of the Soviet Union with the belief that we had reached the 'end of history' when all societies, including China, would naturally evolve into liberal democracies.

My analysis of Hong Kong went against mainstream thinking.

But, as a BBC foreign correspondent for more than a quarter of a century, I still conclude that democracy can be dangerous and bloody when implemented badly, too quickly, or against overwhelming resistance.

My first assignment in 1986 was in Sri Lanka to cover the civil war, where the political system, bequeathed by the British, was one of birthright democracy. Most people did not vote on issues, but along ethnic and religious lines. A minority of Sri Lankans are Hindu Tamils, while the majority are Buddhist Sinhalese, who would always hold power. An easy way to win Sinhalese votes was to brand the Tamil community as a threat. The result was a 26-year civil war.

In 1987, I was posted to the Philippines after the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, was overthrown in street protests. I found myself reporting on regular and violent attempts by the military to take over the civilian government, bodies in the street, buildings burnt, attacks on the presidential palace and so on. Naïve politicians, vested interests, and weak institutions created a cocktail of failure in a society that had little understanding of the compromise needed to make a democracy work.

The 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown reshaped global perceptions of China's political trajectory. Photo: Jeff Widener/Associated Press

Meanwhile, Western advisers flooded in, talking up those 'sun-strewn beaches' of democracy I used as a metaphor in Hong Kong. They seemed oblivious to their own history in that Western democracy emerged over centuries of massive bloodshed, including two world wars. At the same time, European and North American societies are anchored in shared cultural values and administrative systems. Asia, by contrast, is a mix of religions, ethnicities and governments. The glue that binds the region is not democracy, values and elections, but trade and wealth creation. Therefore, this democracy conundrum poses three questions.

The first, as in Hong Kong, is what to do if one society is up against another that is more powerful and operates with different values. Other examples include Pakistan with India, the Palestinians with Israel and Taiwan with China.

The second is how a society can move from dictatorship to democracy without violence. Examples of recent Western failure can be seen in Afghanistan, Iraq and Myanmar. One recurring issue is birthright voting, which I encountered in Sri Lanka.

The third is what to do when an embryonic democracy delivers a result opposed by the West. Examples are Iran (1953), Vietnam (1956), Chile (1973), and Egypt (2012) when 'Arab Spring' elections delivered an Islamic Muslim Brotherhood leader who was ousted the next year in favour

The fall of Marcos did not bring stability, but a turbulent cycle of coups and democratic fragility.

The Taiwan Model: A Path to Democracy

A gradual, staged transition over half a century

Note: Stable democracy is the final outcome of deep institutional and economic groundwork

Analysis: Humphrey Hawksley | Design: Democracy Asia

of a pro-Western military government.

In the eyes of Asia and the wider Global South, the issue of how to deal with an unbeatable foreign force applies to all powers, not just authoritarian ones and specifically to America. One society, Taiwan, stands as a model for how to face down a hostile, stronger neighbour and tread the precarious path to democracy. Interestingly, Taiwan was heavily mentored by the US, and its shift from dictatorship can be broken down into five elements.

The first is economic development, creating an awareness of private ownership and personal responsibility. Second is taxation, which introduces a pact between government and citizens. Third is slowly allowing civil society, political parties, commerce, travel and press freedom, all of which boost government accountability. Fourth is growing the economy, building infrastructure, creating impartial institutions and introducing laws suited to a developed democracy.

Rapidly imposed democratic systems in Afghanistan and Iraq revealed the limits of externally engineered political change. Photo: Reuters

Only after all that was in place did Taiwan hold its first presidential election in 1996. Voters went to the poll and overnight it became a democracy. We should note that the whole process took half a century.

A fifth element, critical to success, was building up trade with its enemy and, for that to work, both sides need to prioritise the economy over ideology. Taipei has not sent insurgent bombers across the Taiwan Strait as a gesture of independence, nor has Beijing occupied an outlying Taiwanese island as a claim of sovereignty. Instead, China-Taiwan business has created such wealth that everyone would have too much to lose if political hostilities turned to violence. In too many places, such a pragmatic trade-based approach has not been the case.

Thankfully, Hong Kong's uprisings were nearly bloodless and it retains its ability for commerce and money-making. But pro-Western activists remain in jail, and that 'sun-strewn beach' proved unreachable. Treaties were signed. Hope was dangled. Promises were made. But when it mattered, raw power decided Hong Kong's future.

In our newly emerging world order, there is a lesson here for all to see.

Humphrey Hawksley is a journalist specialising in Asia and a best-selling novelist. His *Rake Ozenna* thriller series is set in the Arctic and High North while his *Third World War* future history series focuses on conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

Across Asia, democracy is measured in different ways, revealing sharp contrasts between electoral strength, civil liberties and institutional balance. Image AI generated

Who decides what counts as a democracy?

Democracy rankings are back in view this spring. The latest Democracy Index from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) suggests that after eight years of global decline, democratic performance may be stabilising. Freedom House and V-Dem have also released updated assessments, offering fresh perspectives on how democracy is evolving across regions. Rahul Jaywant Bhise reports.

Across Asia, countries such as Japan, Taiwan and Australia tend to rank near the top of democracy indices, while others including China, Vietnam and North Korea consistently perform less well. Taken together, these rankings raise a question that matters in Asia as much as anywhere: who decides what counts as a democracy?

At first glance, such rankings look authoritative enough. They come with tables, scores and categories, and seem to promise a neat answer to an untidy subject. Yet they are not simple scoreboards. Each reflects a set of judgments about what democracy really is. Is it mainly about free and fair elections? About civil liberties? About whether institutions can restrain those in power? Or about the broader health of representative government as a whole? The answer varies according to who is doing the measuring.

The EIU's approach is the broadest in political terms. Its Democracy Index measures countries across five categories: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties. It then sorts them into four broad types: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes. The strength of this approach is that it tries to capture democracy as a working political system, not simply a set of formal rights. It is interested not only in whether elections are held, but in whether democratic life functions convincingly overall.

Source: EIU Democracy Index 2025 | Analysis: Democracy Asia | Design: Democracy Asia

Where the EIU is concerned with the broad performance of representative democracy, Freedom House is more squarely interested in whether people are genuinely able to vote, speak, organise, publish and dissent without intimidation or arbitrary coercion. That sharper rights-based focus often gives its judgments a different character.

V-Dem is broader again, but in a more academic way. It distinguishes between several kinds of democracy — electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian — and pays particular attention to whether democratic quality is deepening or weakening over time. It is therefore useful in identifying movement: countries that are drifting away from democratic norms, or edging back towards them.

Even defining Asia is not entirely straightforward. The EIU's regional grouping includes Australia and New Zealand but excludes Central Asian countries. Other indices cut the map differently. That may sound like a minor technicality, but it is worth noting because even a regional league table reflects a prior decision about who belongs in it.

Still, some broad patterns do emerge. Authoritarian systems such as China and Vietnam, along with closed regimes like North Korea, consistently rank at the lower end of these indices. The EIU's latest assessment points to a growing bifurcation within the region, with a stable group of high-performing democracies in Northeast Asia and Australasia alongside increasing political stress in South and South-East Asia. In its latest index, the region's average democratic score fell again, extending a six-year decline and making Asia a drag on the tentative global stabilisation seen elsewhere. Only Australia, Japan, New Zealand and Taiwan are in the top category of full democracies. That alone challenges some easy assumptions about the region. Any older sense that South Korea, Malaysia or India belong comfortably in the same front rank no longer fits this picture.

The EIU's regional table makes these contrasts visible at a glance. New Zealand and Australia sit at the top alongside Taiwan and Japan. India occupies an intermediate position as a flawed democracy, reflecting relatively strong electoral competition alongside persistent concerns

Country	Overall Score	Regional Rank	Regime Type
New Zealand	9.61	1	Full democracy
Australia	8.85	2	Full democracy
Taiwan	8.70	3	Full democracy
Japan	8.48	4	Full democracy
South Korea	7.75	5	Flawed democracy
India	7.29	6	Flawed democracy
Malaysia	7.11	7	Flawed democracy
Philippines	6.63	9	Flawed democracy
Mongolia	6.53	10	Flawed democracy
Indonesia	6.44	11	Flawed democracy
Singapore	6.18	14	Flawed democracy
Papua New Guinea	5.97	15	Hybrid regime
Bhutan	5.65	16	Hybrid regime
Fiji	5.39	17	Hybrid regime
Hong Kong	5.09	18	Hybrid regime
Nepal	4.60	19	Hybrid regime
Bangladesh	4.44	20	Hybrid regime
Cambodia	2.94	21	Authoritarian
Pakistan	2.84	22	Authoritarian
Vietnam	2.6	23	Authoritarian
China	2.11	24	Authoritarian
Laos	1.71	25	Authoritarian
North Korea	1.08	26	Authoritarian
Myanmar	0.96	27	Authoritarian
Afghanistan	0.25	28	Authoritarian

Conclusion of the EIU 2024 Index for Asia and Australasia
Credit: Economist Intelligence Unit, Democracy Index 2024

In India, strong electoral competition coexists with growing concerns over civil liberties and institutional balance. Photo: Election Commission, GODL-India

about civil liberties and institutional balance. The table as a whole underscores the region's uneven democratic landscape, where high-performing democracies coexist with fragile and authoritarian systems.

South Korea is one of the more revealing cases in the region. On the EIU's reading, the turmoil surrounding President Yoon Suk-yeol's brief declaration of martial law in late 2024 was serious enough to push the country down into the category of flawed democracy. Freedom House continues to rate South Korea as free, with a strong score by regional standards. V-Dem suggests something more hopeful still, placing South Korea on its watchlist of democratisers. That reflects three different emphases. One index is responding to a constitutional and political shock. Another sees robust protections for rights and liberties. A third is asking whether the country's overall trajectory may in fact be improving. The differences are revealing rather than confusing.

India presents another kind of problem. On one view, its 2024 general election demonstrated the continuing vitality of electoral politics, with the ruling party losing the commanding dominance many had expected. On another, the condition of civil liberties, media freedom and institutional independence remains deeply troubling. The EIU's 2025 index reflects this tension, noting a decline in India's score amid concerns over electoral violence and pressures on civil liberties. It is here that the contrast between the indices is most instructive. One puts weight on the resilience of electoral competition; another focuses more heavily on pressures on rights and institutions. Neither approach is wholly wrong. But they are not asking precisely the same question.

If there is one clearer positive story in South Asia, it is Sri Lanka. After years of crisis and disillusion, it stands out in the latest assessments as a country that has, at least in some respects, improved. Freedom House identifies it as one of the more notable risers in the current cycle as does the EIU. That does not make Sri Lanka a model democracy overnight, nor does it settle the question of how deep or durable the improvement will prove. But it does offer an example of movement in a better direction, not simply another example of democratic decline.

Elsewhere in South Asia, the picture is more troubling. Pakistan's score fell to its lowest level since the EIU index began, while Bangladesh and Nepal also saw sharp declines linked to political restrictions and institutional instability.

Taiwan and Japan, by contrast, show where the indices broadly converge. Both continue to appear near the top of Asia's democratic field. Taiwan combines competitive politics with a vigorous public sphere and strong institutions; Japan benefits from long-established democratic habits and stability. They are not identical cases, but both suggest that there remain countries in Asia that perform well across quite different democratic yardsticks.

Malaysia is more ambiguous. It still attracts attention because it has often been seen as a country with reformist potential, yet the latest evidence suggests a more qualified picture than any simple narrative of democratic ascent

would allow. One purpose of these indices is not to confirm old assumptions but to test them.

What, then, should readers make of all this? Not that one index is right and the others wrong, still less that democracy can be reduced to a single number. The better conclusion is that democracy is a compound idea. But as experience across Asia shows, the process of building democracy is not always smooth or stable, and can carry significant political and social risks. Elections matter, but so do liberties. Institutions matter, but so does political culture. Participation matters, but so does the ability to restrain those in power. The EIU, Freedom House and V-Dem all measure democracy seriously, but each gives these elements a different weight.

That is why their disagreements are so valuable. They remind us that democracy is not a fixed formula but a contested and evolving idea — shaped as much by lived experience as by how it is measured. The most useful question, then, is not simply who ranks first or who has slipped down the table. It is the larger one behind every table and every score: who decides what counts as a democracy?

Rahul Jaywant Bhise is an independent journalist and public policy professional, with a focus on urban governance, political economy, and urban development.

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Big Tech’s seatbelt moment

As lawsuits mount and governments move towards tougher safeguards, the question is no longer only what appears on the screen, but why the screen was built to behave that way in the first place. Sham Banerji reports that a new regulatory phase may be opening for social media and AI.

From hosting to liability

In September 2024 the British actor and comedian Sir Stephen Fry, commenting on the influence of companies behind social media, warned: ‘You and your children cannot breathe the air or swim in the waters of our culture without breathing in the toxic particulates and stinking effluvia that belch and pour unchecked from their companies into the currents of our world.’ Almost Victorian in its disgust, at the time the remark sounded rhetorical. Today, it reads more like the preamble to an indictment.

In March 2026 a jury in Los Angeles found Meta and Google liable in a landmark social-media addiction case brought by a 20-year-old woman. She claimed that Instagram and YouTube had contributed to her depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. The jury agreed and she was awarded $6 million in damages. In the same month in New Mexico, another jury found Meta had violated the state’s consumer-protection law for misleading users about the safety of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp and enabling child sexual exploitation on its platforms. Fines amounting to $375 million were imposed in civil penalties.

More important than the sums involved, however, is why these cases matter. The US law Section 230, an amendment to the Communications Act of 1934, provides a foundational legal shield for social media. Passed in 1996, it provides protection to social media companies from publisher liability for claims resulting from user-generated content. If any content left a teenager distressed, addictively engaged, or a family divided, that was regrettable, but it is not considered the fault of the product.

In the two recent cases, however, the courts treated the issues not as third-party content but as matters of product design. Reuters reports that more than 2,400 similar federal cases have been consolidated before one judge in California, with

thousands more in the pipeline in Californian courts. For years, the platform owners argued that they merely hosted behaviour. Courts are now asking whether they also engineered it.

Meta's decision in April 2024 to integrate Meta AI chat bots into WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook went mostly unnoticed. Almost overnight, machine-generated content and

A history of warning signs

This moment did not arrive out of nowhere. Social media content as 'ambient toxins' has been in the headlines for some time. The Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018 was an example of how Facebook user data could be harvested for voter profiling and targeting. United Nations Human Rights Council investigators linked Facebook's systems to the spread of anti-Rohingya hate in Myanmar. The Christchurch massacre in 2019 showed how terror and violence could be live-streamed on Facebook faster than any moderator could contain it. These were not isolated mishaps. They were early signals that engineered content could not only be shared but steered.

machine-like interaction entered the flow of everyday social life. Platforms already associated with misinformation, cyberbullying, privacy violations and manipulation were no longer merely carrying human content but hosting synthetic dialogue. At the time, Aleksandra Korolova, a Princeton computer science and public affairs professor who studies the societal impacts of algorithms and machine learning, posted screenshots on X of Meta AI 'speaking up' in a Facebook group for thousands of New York City parents. Responding to a question about gifted and talented programs, Meta AI claimed to be a parent with experience in the city's school system and went on to recommend a specific school. It even shared experiences of its own alleged child with the citywide program. AI chatbots on smartphones alone now sit within reach of 60 per cent of humanity.

From sermons to standards

The courtrooms are only half the story. The more durable shift may come from government regulation. Australia is furthest along. Its social-media minimum-age guidelines took effect on 10 December 2025, putting the burden on platforms, rather than parents or children, to take 'reasonable steps' to stop under-16s from holding accounts. In its March 2026 compliance update, the eSafety Commissioner

said it was focusing enforcement investigations on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube, with decisions on possible action expected by mid-2026. Australia is no longer debating whether the state should intervene. It is testing whether state intervention can make a difference.

Britain is not yet at Australia's stage, but the direction of travel is unmistakable. The government's 'Growing up in the online world' consultation, launched in March 2026, explicitly considers age restrictions for social media, gaming services and AI chatbots, alongside restrictions on addictive design features and risky functionalities. Indonesia, with over 100 million social-media users, has moved from warning to enforcement. After summoning Meta, TikTok and other platforms in 2025 over disinformation, pornography and online gambling, it has now begun implementing its PP Tunas regulation, restricting minors from 'high-risk' platforms and requiring companies to deactivate accounts, strengthen safeguards and demonstrate compliance.

Across the world, government ministers are no longer speaking only of moderation and content removal. They are asking whether certain features should be eliminated by design. Fines are painful. Judicial redesign will impact the companies' bottom line.

A companion-style AI chatbot can flatter, mirror, encourage, and persuade in a highly personalised way. In August 2025, OpenAI and its boss Sam Altman were sued in a California state court by the parents of Adam Raine, who allege ChatGPT coached their 16-year-old son on self-harm methods and even offered to draft a suicide note. Regulators are taking notice. New York's AI companion law was already in force by the time California's SB 243 came into effect in January 2026 aimed at youth protection. These are only first-generation rules but they hint at what may come next. Synthetic companionship may turn out to be less a product feature than a new legal risk.

Resistance before reform

None of this abolishes Section 230, the federal shield on which the platforms have long relied. Appeals are coming, and the scope of recent verdicts may be narrowed. The big tech companies will fight hard and with deep pockets. Legislators too will find it hard to define harmful design without stifling legitimate innovation and free speech. Age-gating, verification and enforcement still remain technically and politically challenging.

For the social media industry this is a seatbelt moment. An immensely valuable technology sold for too long on the assumption that the user bore most of the risk is being re-calibrated. Seatbelt-and-airbag regulation did not arrive at the first crash. Compulsory safeguards for social media and AI are unlikely to arrive without years of resistance, dilution and evasion before they finally harden into law. For now, discussion on social media addiction has shifted from a source of revenue to a source of litigation.

Sham Banerji is a veteran of the high-tech industry with over three decades working with Texas Instruments and Philips in the UK, USA, and India.

All images are AI generated

The Strait of Hormuz, the world's most critical oil chokepoint, became the epicentre of disruption during the US–Israel war with Iran, sending shockwaves through global energy markets and regional economies. Image AI generated

Bisinomics

Persian Gulf

Post-war reconstruction is in the minds of Arab partners of the United States, who were collateral casualties in the hostilities between the US-Israel alliance and Iran. Indeed, Saudi Arabia, among others, pressed Washington to return to the negotiating table, as *The Wall Street Journal* revealed.

'The Arab states,' a United Nations Development Programme report forecast, 'could see GDP decline between 3.7 per cent and 6 per cent, equivalent to losses of up to $194bn.'

Arabian Business reported that 'Elevated oil prices have provided some support in the near term, although lower export volumes have weighed on overall economic performance.' It projected a contraction of 0.2 per cent in 2026 for Gulf Cooperation Council economies because of disruption in commerce, tourism and energy exports.

Saudi Arabia

The US-Israel war on Iran has had somewhat less impact on Saudi Arabia than on other states in the region. Despite that, Saudi banks were said to be vulnerable to the fallout of a prolonged warfare.

Saudi Arabia has restored the East-West oil pipeline to its full operating capacity of about 7 million barrels a day, reestablishing a critical route for crude shipments to the Red Sea.

Fitch Ratings warned Saudi banks' asset quality, profitability and funding would come under pressure if the war continues.

Fitch, whose assessment covered 11 banks, described an 'adverse scenario'. It added, 'Higher inflation and higher-for-longer interest rates would pressure net interest margins, with increased competition for liquidity raising the cost of funding. Higher interest rates would also put pressure on borrowers, potentially lifting impairment charges and further hurting banks' profitability.'

However, thanks to a pipeline to the country's Red Sea coast, Saudi Arabia achieved oil exports at about two-thirds of pre-war levels. Besides, its economy was insulated by decent domestic demand.

United Arab Emirates

Stellantis Middle East, a car distributor, offered free short-term vehicle access to small businesses and community organisations across the UAE, as part of efforts to support local economic activity.

Arabian Business wrote that 'Hospitality leaders from across the UAE joined together... to form a Tourism Majlis to discuss a recovery plan for the industry following the regional downturn sparked by the Iran crisis.' The consensus reached was that the sector needs 'to reinvent itself'.

Property development, sale of flats and houses and leasing of office space to foreign entities have for decades been a money spinner for Dubai, indeed one of the pillars of its economy. *Arabian Business* noted 'Dubai's residential property market entered a more measured phase in the first quarter of 2026, with transaction volumes falling 17 per cent from the previous quarter after three consecutive quarters of record activity.' The trend continued in April.

Qatar

Qatar Airways, a leading international airline, posted on X: 'Customers with a confirmed booking on Qatar Airways operated flights for travel until 15 June 2026 are eligible for complimentary date changes up to 31 October 2026...' This underlined the uncertainty caused by the war, which compelled the concession.

Commercial aircraft from Qatar Airways sit parked at Doha's airport after the airline offered flexible rebooking options amid regional airspace uncertainty triggered by the Iran war.

Iranian missile strikes knocked out an estimated one-fifth of Qatar's liquefied natural gas (LNG) production. To fill this shortfall QatarEnergy and the US company Exxon Mobil secured the Trump administration's approval to start exporting LNG cargoes from Texas in April.

Arab Gulf Business Insight (AGBI) depicted: 'Over a few days in early March, Qatar went from forecasts of soaring gas production and GDP growth to halted energy operations and severe economic contraction. This marked the biggest reversal of fortunes among Gulf states as the Iran war upended expectations everywhere.'

Patrick Theros, a former US ambassador to Qatar, was quoted as saying, 'The biggest victims [in Qatar] are going to be the expatriate community, a large number of whom are going to be sent home.'

Kuwait

Kuwait was on the receiving end of counter-attacks by Iran causing considerable damage to its oil and gas infrastructure.

Kuwait faced a 'triple whammy', according to Li-Chen Sim, an associate fellow at the Middle East Institute. The virtual closure of the Strait of Hormuz paused Kuwait's oil exports, insufficient storage capacity forced down production and this will delay a return to normal operations after the war; a diminution in Qatar's gas output deprived Kuwait of its primary source of LNG.

Sim warned 'Kuwait could face rolling blackouts since ... it does not have supplies of non-associated gas that it can use domestically. No oil production basically means no gas production in Kuwait's case.' State-owned Kuwait Petroleum Corporation

halted oil deliveries under force majeure. They may now have been spared the worst.

Bahrain

Bahrain, also a victim of Iran's retaliation to the US-Israeli assault, moved to shield its economy from the headwinds it faced. It announced a sweeping package of loan deferrals and liquidity support of $18.6bn for the financial sector. That notwithstanding, commentary in AGBI was headlined 'Bahrain's finances need help from wealthier neighbours.'

The opinion piece asserted: 'The conflict has deepened existing fiscal strains and eroded major revenue streams, leaving Bahrain increasingly reliant on external support as it struggles to stabilise its finances and rebuild. The smallest economy in the Gulf Cooperation Council entered the conflict with limited fiscal buffers and a challenging balance sheet.'

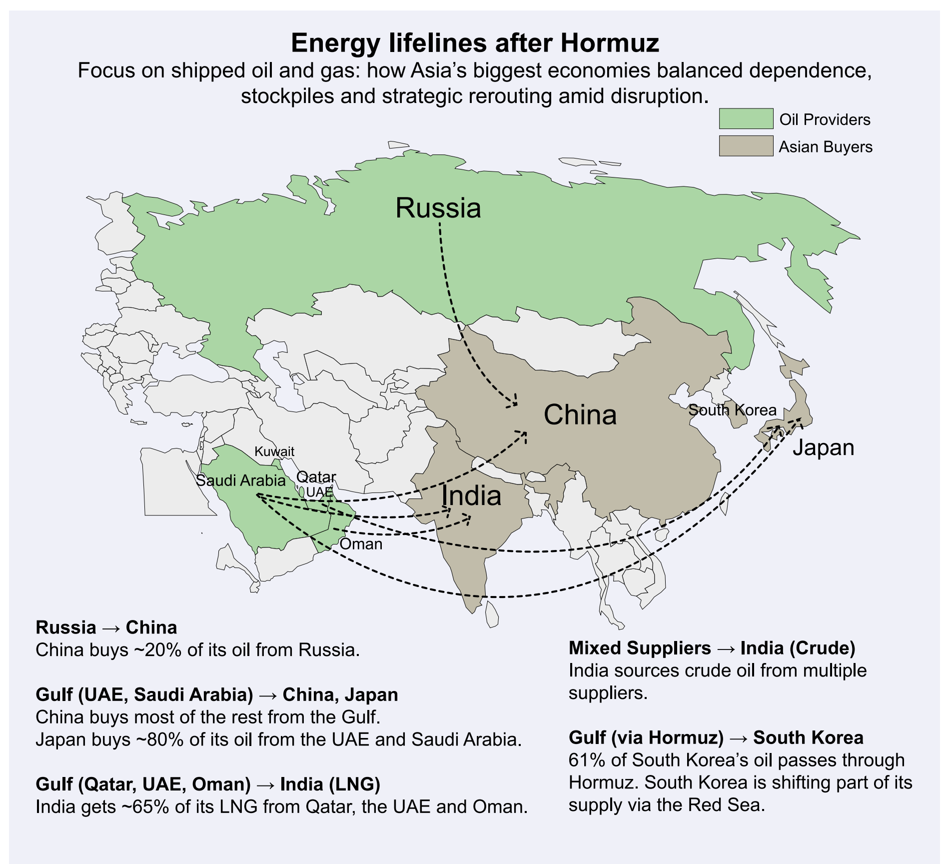
Asia's big four economies

Asia's biggest economy, China, sources 20 per cent of its crude import from Russia and buys most of the rest from the Gulf. The US Navy's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz was, therefore, a potential flashpoint between Beijing and Washington. But even the unpredictable Trump would not want to sabotage his scheduled summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in May.

Japan purchased 80 per cent of its crude requirements from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, but had a stockpile of around 250 days' supply when the war started. Consequently, it was less anxious than other Asian nations.

To avoid US sanctions, India has shifted suppliers. It had stopped buying crude from Iran under the Biden administration and towards the end of last year drastically cut its imports from Russia. Then, it was authorised by President Trump to resume trade relations with both. When the US Navy tried to blockade Iranian shipments, India was once again in a quandary. A 60-day buffer stock saved it but with over 65 per cent of its LNG coming from Qatar, the UAE and Oman it could not avert cooking gas shortages.

61 per cent of South Korea's crude passed through the Strait of Hormuz. So, it switched to sourcing more from Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia via the Red Sea. By mid-April it had secured 273 million barrels, oilprice.com recorded, which will sustain its economy for more than three months.



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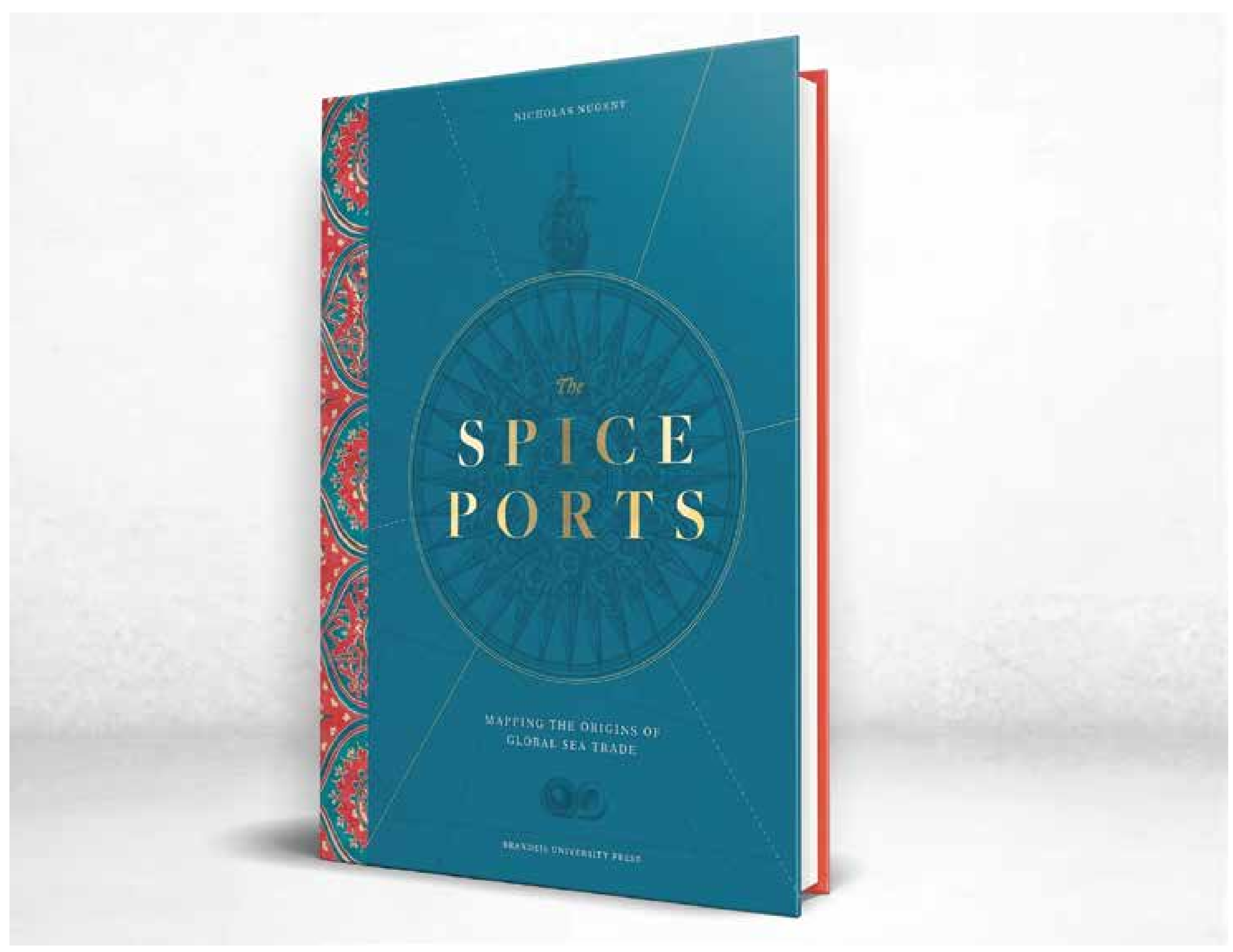


How Europe became hooked on Asian spices

The Spice Ports: Mapping the Origins of Global Sea Trade by Nicholas Nugent, published in London by the British Library and in the US by Brandeis University, is reviewed here by Andrew Whitehead.

When Vasco da Gama landed on Kappad beach, in what is now the Indian state of Kerala, in 1498, his Portuguese mariners proclaimed they were in search of Christians and spices. Religion was part of the Portuguese justification for their determination to find a direct sea route to India. The commercial imperative was black pepper.

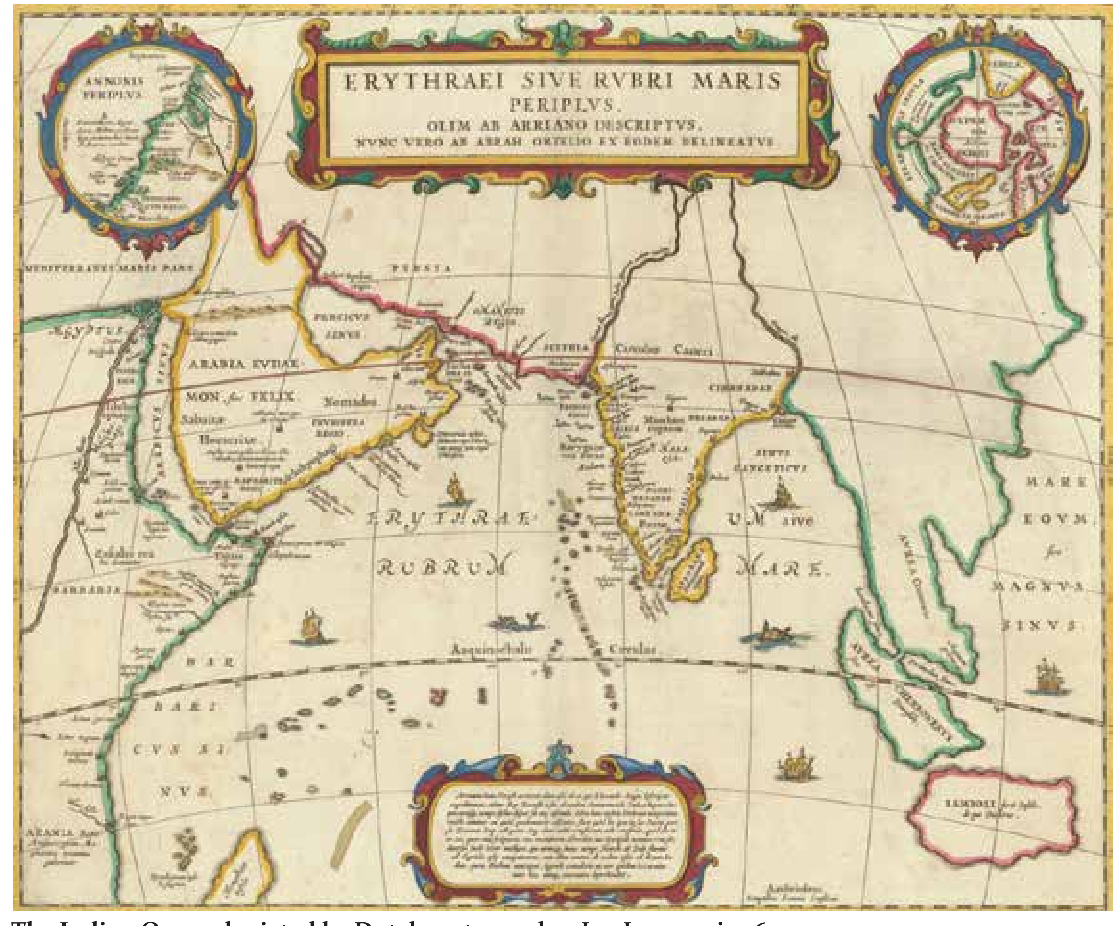
As this book demonstrates, the European quest for spices was one of the main impulses behind mercantilism, the seaborne commerce which brought great wealth to Europe's maritime powers. It provided the initial push to establish trading posts in the spice-producing regions of South and South-East Asia. These often developed into colonial outposts and then metamorphosed into the rapacious imperialism which proved so difficult for emerging nations to shake off.

The merchant powers made huge amounts of money from the spice trade and in so doing left a lasting mark on the world. This commerce was a catalyst in the development of new forms of shipping, navigation, map-making, banking and futures trading. The producing countries benefited far less from this exchange. In the wake of the spice trade came wars, subjugation, the coerced trade in opium and that most awful of stains on our shared history, slavery.

This reviewer recently visited Pulicat to the North of Chennai where an imposing seventeenth-century cemetery is the most tangible evidence of what was once the nerve centre of the Dutch commercial presence on India's Coromandel coast. From there over several decades, Dutch traders arranged, through local compradors, for an estimated 40,000 enslaved Indians to be shipped to work on spice plantations in what is now Indonesia. Slavery is often associated with the feared 'middle passage' across the Atlantic which took millions of captive Africans to toil in plantations in the United States, the Caribbean and Brazil. In fact, it was a global evil.

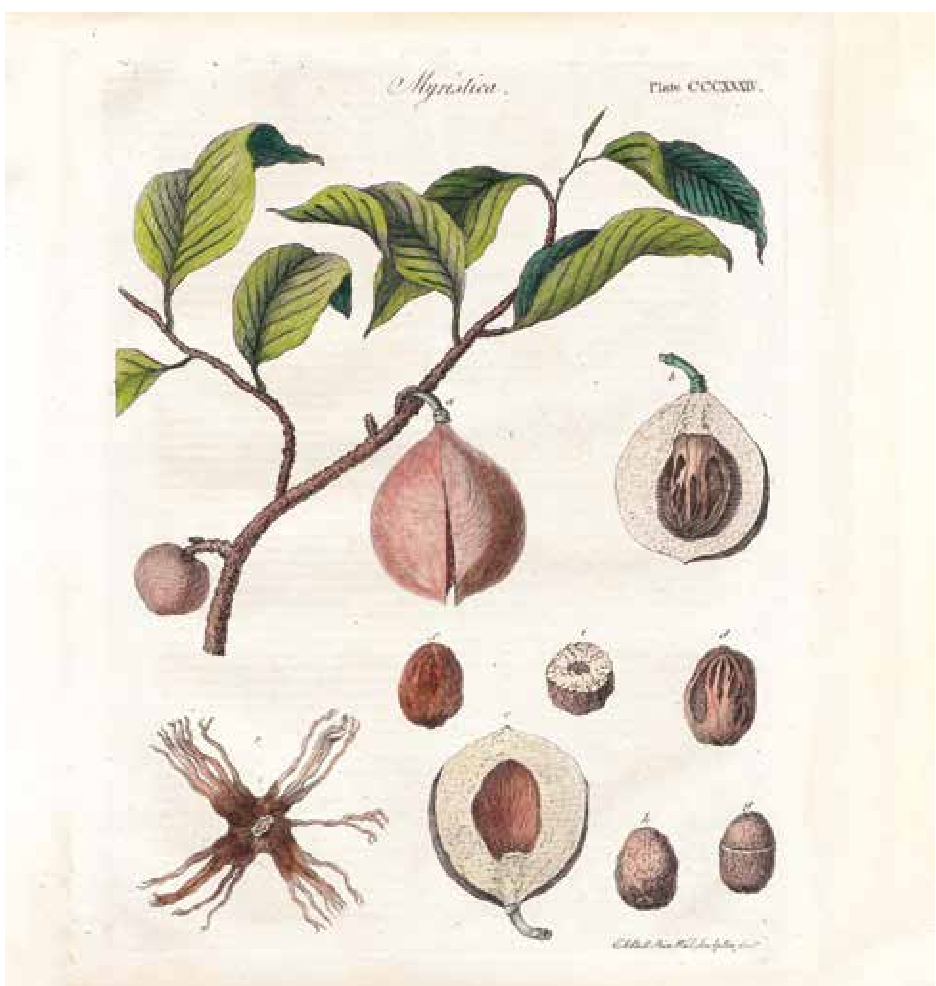
A view of Goa in India looking south across the Mandovi River, by German cartographer Joseph Friederich Leopold in 1700.

The spice trade required spice ports, and the focus of this elegant book is the development of these ports and the role of explorers, pirates, botanists, soldiers, and sultans in enabling the trade. Europe's maritime powers were late to the party. Chinese and Arabian traders had, centuries earlier, recognised the value of spices, used for everything from flavouring food to serving as an aphrodisiac. The great prize was commercial access to the handful of equatorial islands with volcanic soil in the Moluccas (among the easternmost parts of Indonesia) which produced nutmeg, mace and cloves. The other most sought-after spices – pepper, cinnamon and ginger – were grown in the spice gardens of southern India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Sumatra.



The Indian Ocean depicted by Dutch cartographer Jan Jansson in 1652.

Nicholas Nugent has researched the history of the spice ports intensively and has travelled across continents in doing so. The seed of the idea for this book took root many years ago when he visited Indonesia's Banda Islands, the original home of nutmeg. He tells the story well, as you would expect of a



Spices Europeans fought over and traded: the nutmeg plant with its hard seed at the centre and its outer covering or mace, a distinct spice, depicted in 1800.

former BBC editor and correspondent (and now the editor of *Democracy Asia*).

Nugent has chapters on twelve spice ports. Five of these are about European (and allied) commercial centres which gained wealth from importing spices: Venice; Lisbon; Amsterdam; London; and the North American city which was initially known as New Amsterdam and then rechristened as New York. Two chapters concern ports which facilitated the trade: the Egyptian city of Alexandria, which was established by Alexander the Great as part of his search for a land route to India and which remains a gateway to the East; and Cape Town, which a Swedish botanist and traveller described in 1772 as 'an inn for travellers to and from the East Indies, who, after several months' sail, may get refreshments of all kinds, and are then about half way to their destination, whether homeward or outward bound'.

On the export side, Nugent writes about five ports in four Asian nations: Goa, which throughout the sixteenth-century was the principal Portuguese commercial centre in South Asia; Bombay (now Mumbai) which offered a better harbour being able to 'afford at all Seasons, Reception and Security for whole Fleets' according to a description dating from 1724; Malacca, the city which can lay claim to being the birthplace of the Malay nation and which the Portuguese and Dutch fought over in 'the spice wars'; Batavia (now Jakarta) which offered the best access to the clove and

An onshore view of the town of Batavia, now known as Jakarta, in 1748 by English engraver Emanuel Bowen. Jakarta was recently declared the most populous city in the world with 42 million inhabitants.

nutmeg islands; and Singapore, developed by the British as a harbour free of Dutch control but within reach of the Moluccas' spice islands.

Ports which initially traded spices sometimes went on to become still more prosperous from other commodities. Bombay became India's commercial capital because it was so important to the supply of cotton, tea and opium. For Singapore, the global demand for rubber transformed its fortunes. But the contemporary map of Asia remains shaped by the spice trade and the imperial rivalries which stemmed from it. Nugent argues that a treaty agreed between the British and the Dutch more than two-hundred years ago laid the foundations of the modern nations of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

The text of this book is compelling; the production standards are exceptional. *The Spice Ports* includes scores of maps, prints, manuscripts and paintings, with high-quality colour reproduction. Remarkably, as many as a hundred of the maps and illustrations included are from the author's own collection, outnumbering those sourced from the British Library, the publishers of the volume. Like the best spices, this book is piquant and enticing and deserves a place on the shelves of the discerning.

Andrew Whitehead is a former BBC India correspondent.

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