

Bangladesh two years on

Iran's mood of betrayal

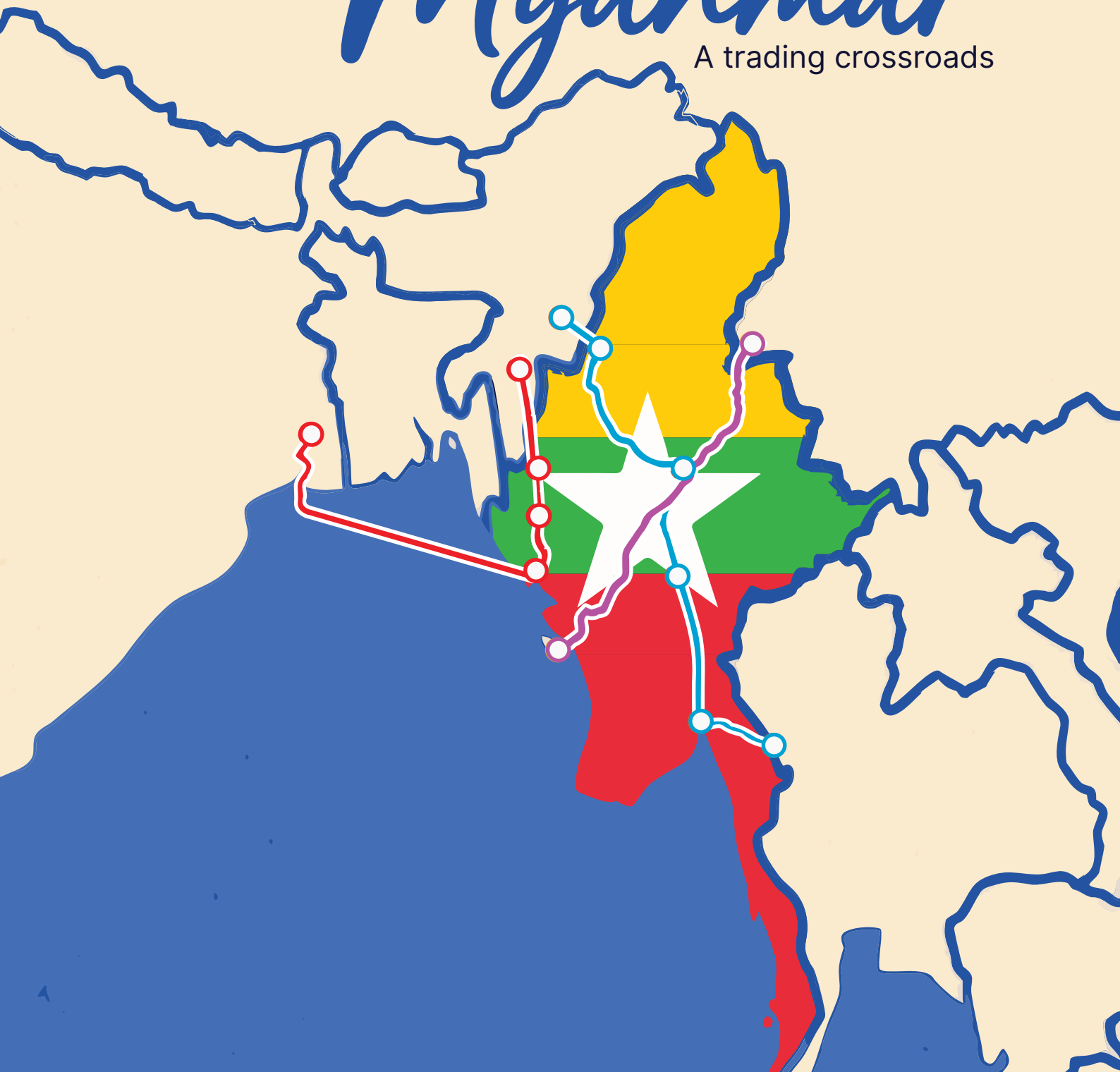
Reflections on Partition

Democracy Asia

August 2026

Myanmar

A trading crossroads





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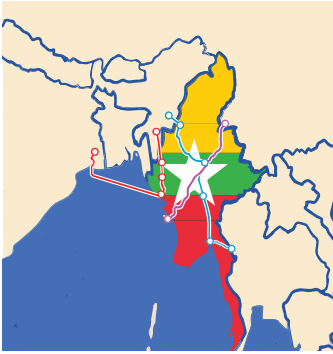
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Myanmar's generals are back on the diplomatic stage. India, China and ASEAN are reopening talks, signing deals, and reviving plans for highways, pipelines and trade corridors across the country.

But there is one problem: much of the land those projects must cross is no longer under the junta's control.

As neighbouring powers race to secure access, Myanmar's civil war has fractured the country's map, leaving governments to negotiate with a state that controls barely 60 per cent of its own territory.

What happens when a government can sign agreements, but no longer controls the roads that are meant to deliver them?

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Address:

35 Bow Road, London, England, E3 2AD

Contact Us:

Email: info@democracyasia.com
Web: www.democracyasia.com

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This month we take a close look at Myanmar following the elections earlier this year and the formation of a civilian government. The former military leader, now president, Min Aung Hlaing, has seized the opportunity to rebuild relations with neighbours, making visits to India, China and Laos and plans to visit Thailand in August. We focus on the possibility of opening strategic trade routes across Myanmar despite the fact that so much of the country's borderlands are not under government control.

We reflect on Bangladesh, six months after the Bangladesh Nationalist Party came to power and two years since the previous prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, was forced out of power and into exile in India by a movement led by young Bangladeshis. As Sheikh Hasina says she plans to return to Bangladesh later this year we ask: How close is the country to restoring its democracy?

We take a first look at Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest economy, having difficulty making ends meet while making its expensive 'free' school meals programme work. And we look at South Korea to see how it is faring two years after the former president attempted to declare martial law – and ended up in prison for doing so.

Another new country for us is Afghanistan from where we carry a BBC report about how difficult it is to be a woman if you have ambitions to make your mark in society. In neighbouring Pakistan, there is some divergence between its role as a mediator between Iran and the United States and the intransigence of its government in confronting

insurgency at home in the Baloch and Pashtun homelands.

As we go to press, it is difficult to assess the situation in Iran where the ceasefire and memorandum of understanding agreed with the United States in June appear to be coming undone – and the international price of oil is rising again. We talk to the people of Iran and reflect on the promise made earlier in the year by President Trump that 'help is coming'.

We carry a very personal statement from a distinguished son of India, now living in the United Kingdom.

“ Across Asia this month, governments are trying to redefine their futures while citizens continue to live with the consequences of history. From fragile democracies and political transitions to unresolved conflicts and forgotten voices, the region remains in search of a more stable tomorrow. ”

Centenarian Captain Yavar Abbas, who is old enough to have fought in Burma during the Second World War, shares an extract from his memoirs in which he argues that Partition should never have happened. Partition, the division of South Asia which took place in 1947 to create the new nations of India and Pakistan, and from which Bangladesh

emerged in 1971, is also the subject of Bookshelf this month featuring British broadcaster Mishal Husain, who writes in a new book of the role her grandparents played in that Partition.

Business takes a look at the state of the Indian economy, alongside our regular Bisinomics feature, and we could not leave you without taking a considered look at Asia's disappointing presence – or lack of – at the football World Cup.

Welcome to Democracy Asia's August edition, which I hope you will find both enjoyable to read and informative.

Nicholas Nugent

Iran

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader killed in the opening strike of the US-Israeli war on 28 February, was finally laid to rest in a state funeral spanning 3–9 July, after the ceremony was twice postponed amid fears over security. The main procession through Tehran on 6 July continued to Qom before crossing into Iraq, taking in the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, ahead of burial at the Imam Reza shrine in his hometown of Mashhad on 9 July. More than 100 countries sent representatives. Mojtaba Khamenei, who succeeded his father as Supreme Leader in March, has not appeared in public since the killing.

Iran-US

The ceasefire, which had held only tenuously since April, collapsed in early July after a fresh exchange of strikes centred on the Strait of Hormuz. President Trump declared on 10 July that the memorandum of understanding signed in June is over, following days of American strikes on Iranian targets and Iranian missile and drone fire on US bases in Kuwait, Bahrain and Jordan. Mediators, including Qatar and Pakistan, were working to bring both sides back to talks. Commercial shipping through the strait has again fallen sharply from its pre-war average of around 110 vessels a day.

India

India's satirical Cockroach Janata Party (CJP), the subject of last month's cover story, escalated its stand-off with the government

after police used tear gas and batons to disperse a march of more than 10,000 protesters toward Parliament on 20 July. Delhi police said nearly 180 people were injured, including 118 of their own personnel, and 70 protesters were detained. CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke said the movement would halt street marches for supporters' safety but continue its month-long sit-in at Jantar Mantar while maintaining its demand for the resignation of education minister Dharmendra Pradhan over alleged examination irregularities.

China

Xi Jinping used an AI conference in Shanghai to launch a World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organisation, with 29 founding member states from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. Addressing the conference on 17 July, Xi called on countries to embrace open-source AI to avoid what he called 'new historical injustices' in global technology access. UN Secretary-General António Guterres attended the launch.

Myanmar

President Min Aung Hlaing announced on 15 July that he would visit Thailand in August, following his first official visit to an ASEAN member state – Laos – earlier this month. Myanmar's foreign minister met ASEAN counterparts in Bangkok on 13 July, days before the announcement.

Thailand

Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul held talks with Malaysian counterparts on 9–10 July on containing a renewed wave of

violence in Thailand's Muslim-majority southern provinces, where a series of bomb attacks has reignited a decades-old insurgency.

Sri Lanka

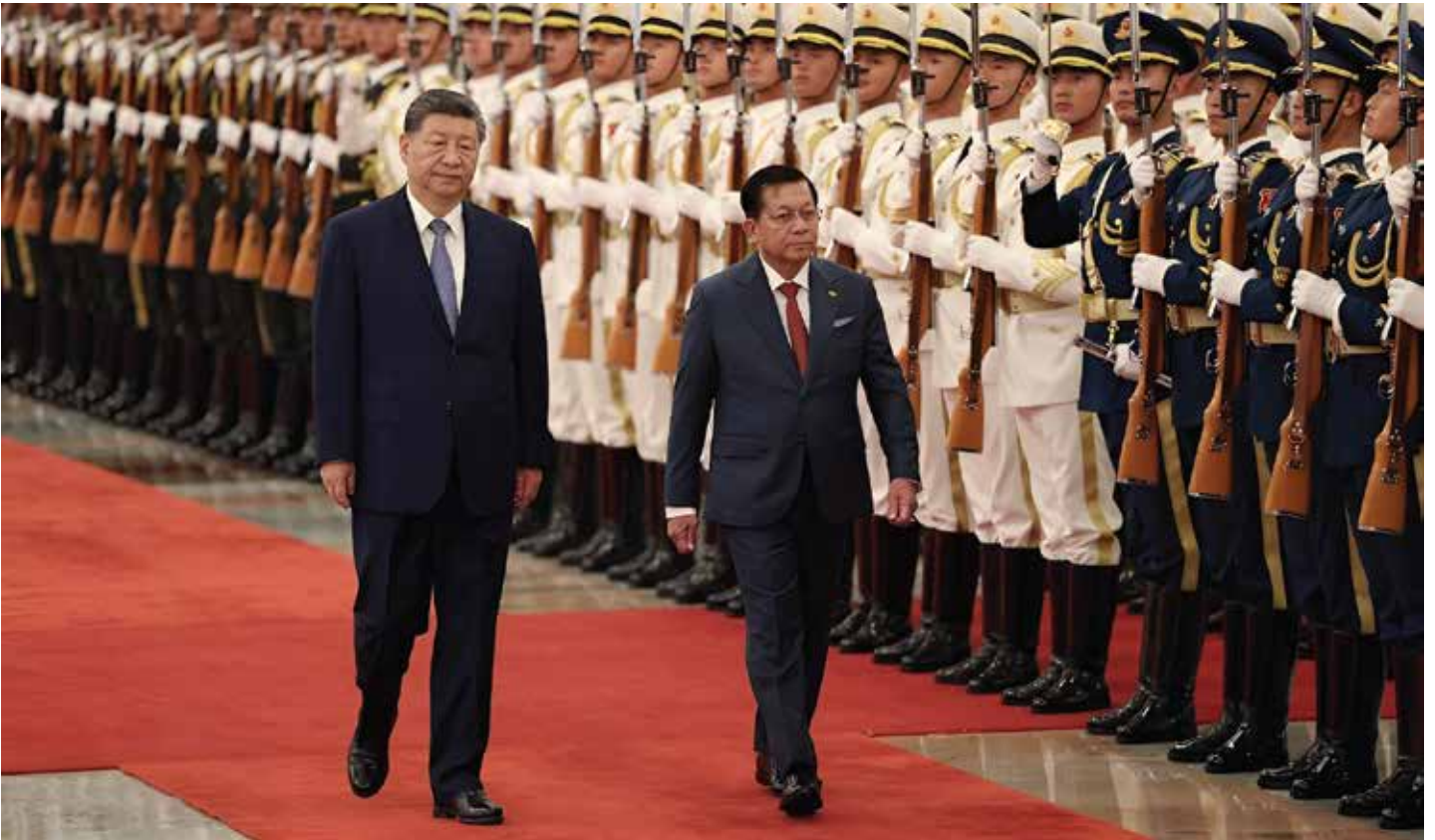
Organised scam networks are increasingly relocating to Sri Lanka as crackdowns intensify in Cambodia and Myanmar, according to Sri Lankan police, who arrested more than 1,000 foreign nationals from scam centres in the first five months of the year. A police raid in the southern towns of Galle and Matara in May led to 192 Indian and 29 Nepali nationals being detained.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's atomic energy chief, Almassadam Satkaliyev, toured Chinese nuclear facilities in mid-July as the two countries deepened cooperation following Kazakhstan's selection of China National Nuclear Corporation for its planned nuclear power programme. The visit followed a trip to Astana by China's energy chief, Wang Hongzhi. The cooperation reflects Kazakhstan's efforts to expand its civilian nuclear energy programme with Chinese support.

Nepal

Nepal's monsoon season has killed at least 168 people and injured nearly 1,000 since mid-April, with more than 3,400 weather-related incidents recorded nationwide, according to Nepal Police. A fresh spell of heavy rain in mid-July triggered dozens of landslides and floods within a single 24-hour period.



Chinese President Xi Jinping welcomes Myanmar's President Min Aung Hlaing in Beijing, reflecting regional efforts to secure strategic interests despite Myanmar's ongoing conflict. Photo: Lintao Zhang/Reuters

Myanmar: state of control

Throughout Asia, Myanmar is the country whose government controls the least of its terrain, probably barely more than 60 per cent. Yet neighbouring governments of India, China and Thailand, tired of waiting for peace to break out, are negotiating with the newly civilianised government to establish crucial trade routes across Myanmar's territory. Nyein Chan Aye questions whether this approach can succeed.

Regional powers are restoring ties with Myanmar's military-backed government to secure strategic corridors. Yet many of those routes run through territory controlled or contested by ethnic armed groups and resistance forces. Five years after the coup, Myanmar's war has killed more than 100,000 people, according to a conflict monitor, ACLED, while the general whose takeover triggered it has swapped his uniform for a civilian jacket. The neighbours have responded in kind.

India hosted the coup leader Min Aung Hlaing in May on his first foreign trip since becoming president, and China accorded him a five-day state visit in June. In early July, he received a state welcome in Laos on his first presidential visit to an ASEAN member state. Later that month, ASEAN foreign ministers met their Myanmar counterpart before the bloc's envoy held talks in Thailand with ethnic armed groups and a military-backed negotiation committee.

Read quickly, this looks like a state returning to regional business. Read closely, it is something stranger: regional powers are negotiating with the regime over roads, pipelines and border gates that it increasingly cannot secure on its own. The contradiction was on display in July, when Min Aung Hlaing pledged to complete India's Kaladan corridor, the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, and to advance the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Kaladan is

Strategic corridors and territorial control

Infrastructure is only useful where the state actually controls the ground



Strategic transport corridors through Myanmar and the shifting territorial control that complicates regional connectivity projects. Map illustration created by Democracy Asia

intended to connect India's landlocked northeast to the Bay of Bengal. The trilateral highway would link India to Thailand through Myanmar, while the China–Myanmar economic corridor would connect Yunnan to the Indian Ocean. Construction, he told his ministers, should begin once security is established along the routes. Security is not a footnote to these projects; it is the whole question.

The limits of formal authority

'Control is often difficult to assess in Myanmar,' said Thomas Kean, senior consultant at the International Crisis Group. The military still controls many cities and important highways, but trade follows a different map. 'Most of the country's borderlands – the areas adjacent to Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand – are under the control of ethnic armed groups,' Kean said, adding that they 'often

have a firm grip over many of the key trade routes and border gates'.

Significant sections of the oil and gas pipelines running from Kyaukphyu to Kunming pass through territory controlled by the Arakan Army (AA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation

Army. Despite the military expending enormous effort to control the Mandalay–Lashio highway on the route to China and the Kawkaik–Myawaddy road to Thailand, Kean noted that 'formal trade is yet to resume' because armed groups still hold sections of the corridors.



Arakan Army fighters operate in Rakhine State, where resistance forces control much of the territory surrounding key infrastructure projects. Photo: Collected

Rakhine - Myanmar's western gateway

Why India and China both care about western Myanmar



Rakhine State has become a strategic gateway for Chinese and Indian infrastructure projects, despite continuing conflict. Map illustration created by Democracy Asia

Aung Thu Nyein, a director at the Institute for Strategy and Policy–Myanmar, characterises the war as a ‘strategic stalemate’. The military has adapted, conscripted new troops and retaken some territory, but ISP–Myanmar estimates that ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and resistance forces still hold roughly 38 per cent of the country’s territory.

‘Completely wiping out the EAOs and resistance forces remains a tall order,’ he said. He expects ‘guerrilla warfare, small-scale skirmishes, wars of attrition’ alongside a ‘coercive push to negotiation’ intended to force opponents to the table.

The state retains ministries, a central bank, the air force and control over large cities – what Aung Thu Nyein describes as its ‘incumbent advantages’. But formal authority diverges sharply from secure access. As

Kean explained, ‘even if a corridor comes back under military control, it is not difficult for ethnic armed groups to carry out attacks to disrupt traffic’.

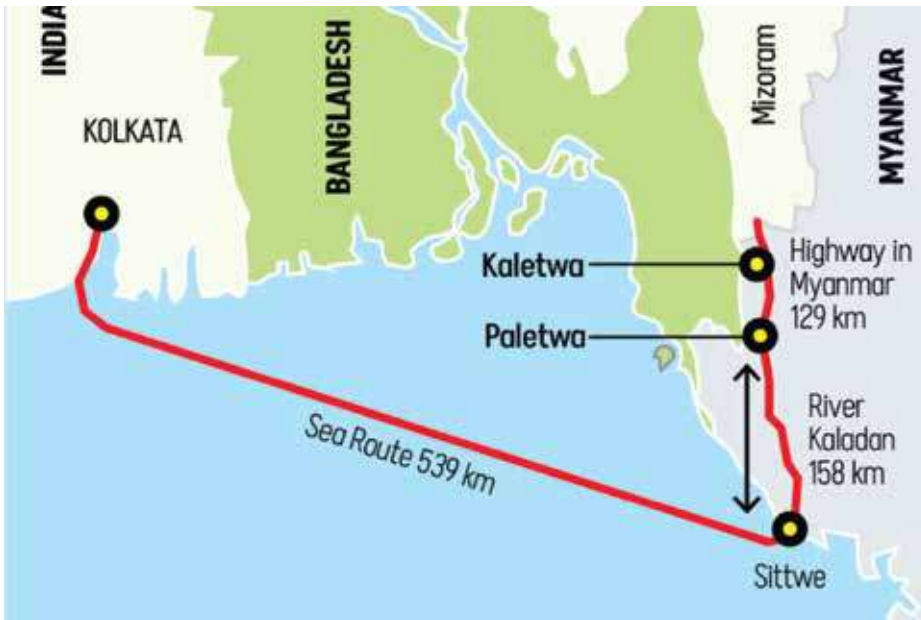
Who controls the corridors?

Rakhine State shows this new geography most clearly. Kean estimates that the Arakan Army controls about 90 per cent of the state, while the military holds three small pockets: Sittwe, Kyaukphyu and Manaung. Kyaukphyu anchors China’s oil and gas pipelines and planned deep-sea port; Sittwe is the maritime terminus of India’s Kaladan project. ‘The Arakan Army does not seem to be able to dislodge the military, but Naypyitaw also seems unable to retake much or any of the ground it has lost,’ Kean said.

Local residents describe fierce fighting concentrated on the approaches into Rakhine. The

military relies heavily on air power as it tries to reopen land access and cut the AA’s supply lines. A Kyaukphyu resident, requesting anonymity for security reasons, said natural gas extraction and transmission to Yunnan ‘have never stopped’ and operations remain normal. The resident said armed Chinese security personnel were seen at pipeline facilities in 2025 and later relocated to Maday Island as AA forces advanced. The resident also believed Chinese pressure prompted the AA to pull back from areas near the facilities.

The pipeline’s continued operation suggests that Beijing protects strategic assets through pressure and contact with multiple authorities. ‘China’s policy is primarily access-based,’ said Aung Thura Ko Ko, a visiting scholar with Cornell University’s South East Asia Program. ‘Beijing works



India's Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project is intended to connect its northeastern states to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar. Map illustration created by Democracy Asia

with whoever can protect its interests on the ground.'

China formally backs Min Aung Hlaing's administration, but it 'cannot simply order the AA to stop fighting or surrender its gains', he added. Kean described Beijing as 'essentially trying to establish a balance of power between Naypyitaw and ethnic armed groups'.

India is adjusting more slowly. Official Kaladan contracts remain in Naypyitaw, giving New Delhi a reason to deal with the central administration. 'Does India worry about its interests being harmed in Myanmar? Yes,' said Salai Dokhar, founder of the civil society group India for Myanmar. 'Do they desperately want to

reduce Chinese influence? Absolutely. But have they formulated a clear policy? No.'

Dokhar said Indian agencies meet ethnic and resistance representatives, but their contacts remain fragmented and focused on specific border or project concerns rather than a coherent Myanmar policy. Aung Thura Ko Ko put New Delhi's choice plainly: 'The real choice is between adapting to the new power reality or losing strategic influence in western Myanmar.'

The same access gap extends north into Chin State. The military retook Falam, a strategically important northern Chin town where Chin State's

first airport is located. But local residents say military control does not extend across the surrounding township and that the airport remains too insecure to reopen.

The Rikhawdar-Tedim corridor to India's Mizoram State remains in resistance hands. 'There will be times when the military controls certain areas, and other times when Chin revolutionary forces take them back,' said Salai Jacob Thang, who provides technical support to elected Chin lawmakers and resistance institutions. 'I believe territorial control will continue to shift back and forth.'

Min Aung Hlaing's diplomatic comeback is real. His administration can sign agreements, issue contracts and deploy devastating forces. But his neighbours are hedging in plain sight – courting Myanmar's junta chief-turned-president, while maintaining channels with the ethnic armed groups that sit astride his promised corridors. Formal authority remains concentrated in Naypyitaw, while access is negotiated on mountain roads, river ports and pipeline routes far beyond its reliable control.

As Aung Thura Ko Ko put it: 'The military government can still destroy, but its ability to govern and hold territory is far more limited.'

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



President Prabowo Subianto. His ambitious economic agenda and increasingly centralised style of government are reshaping Indonesia's political and economic landscape. Photo: Reuters

Tension in Prabowo's Indonesia

The head of the country's controversial and wildly expensive 'free' school meals programme is dismissed. Then the country's chief prosecutor resigned after gold bars were found in his home, amid suggestions of large-scale corruption. What is going on in South East Asia's largest economy? Joseph Rachman reports.

The plan to provide free school meals is symbolic of President Prabowo Subianto's style. In theory it has merit, providing meals to more than 50 million school-age children; in reality, it is a financial burden, absorbing an eye-watering 8.7% of the national budget. The programme has also been plagued by scandals. In June, Indonesia's rowdy students took to the streets targeting the country's free school meals programme, which many regard as unaffordable for a country suffering severe strains in its public finances.

The resignation of the chief prosecutor in mid-July came after

he was implicated in an unconnected scandal relating to the procurement of coal for electricity generation from as far back as 2018. His resignation followed the discovery by police of a safe containing nearly \$26 million in gold bars and foreign currency.

Both events suggest large scale corruption and have caused Indonesian elites to question whether the country is on the wrong path, seeing the expensive school meals programme as emblematic of wider dysfunction. Their core concerns are about an imperial presidency that

mismanages the economy and does not welcome criticism. Indeed, fear of retaliation means many keep their concerns and complaints private. With 2025's riots fresh in people's minds, the worst since those that toppled Suharto in 1998, there is a nervousness in the air.

Indonesia's economy hit a respectable 5.6% in the first quarter of 2026, short of the 8% Prabowo promised on taking office in 2024 but above the average 5% of the past decade. Under the bonnet, the picture is grimmer. To develop, Indonesia needs foreign capital. But the

latest World Bank report showed that growth was driven by government spending even as exports weakened, foreign investors sold Indonesian stocks, and foreign direct investment flagged. Government budgets are now severely strained, and the Iran War oil shock has pushed up the prices of staple goods further.

Much of this is beyond Prabowo's control. However, his big-state nationalist and autarchic approach has worsened things. In 2025, before the short-term shocks, capital outflow was already well underway, with Indonesia's financial account turning sharply negative.

The reality is that Indonesia's finances are creaking under Prabowo's lavish spending plans. On top of the wildly expensive free school meals there are the village cooperatives programme, food estates in Papua, and military modernisation. To pay for these projects, other areas have faced deep and unpredictable cuts. The infrastructure budget was cut 76% in 2025 and reductions this year have affected education and healthcare expenditure. Ratings agencies warn Indonesian bonds could be downgraded. This would further strain finances.



Indonesia's free school meals programme is one of President Prabowo's flagship initiatives, but its high cost and implementation have attracted growing criticism. Photo: Willy Kurniawan/Reuters

On the business front, policy is increasingly unpredictable. In May, in a typically Prabowoian move, the president announced he would nationalise the export of key commodities. As businesses panicked, ministers and officials hastily reversed the policy. The move added to a perception that Indonesia – once a good investment – is now subject to unacceptable political risks. New regulations on mining permits and mineral exports which were supposed to push up commodity prices have in fact depressed earnings. The

disruption to coal miners may be behind a wave of power blackouts.

Meanwhile, across the country, millions of hectares of plantation land have been seized amid allegations of corruption and handed over to military-linked state-owned enterprises. The charges may have merit. Land ownership is beset by graft in Indonesia's murky system. However, companies often suspect targeting is governed more by political connections and animus against Indonesian-Chinese business people than by the degree of wrongdoing. The fact that much of the land has then been turned over to a military-run company has only deepened suspicions.

For Prabowo, who has long voiced a suspicion of foreign business and advocated state-led domestic self-reliance, this may all be according to plan, but the economic effects are worrying. Few of his signature programmes can be seen as clear successes. The free school meals programme has been hit by repeated food poisoning scandals, and in June its head was arrested for corruption with two others. The village



Indonesia Stock Exchange (IDX) building in Jakarta. Despite continued economic growth, weakening investment and mounting fiscal pressures have raised concerns about Indonesia's longer-term outlook. Photo: Bursa Efek Indonesia/CC BY-SA 4.0



Mining remains central to Indonesia's economy, but changing regulations and corruption allegations have unsettled investors. Photo: Reuters

cooperatives and food estate programmes – part of the same strategy of self-reliance – also show signs of graft and mismanagement.

But, even as the president's agenda falters, his opinion is now the only one that matters. Powerful institutions that previously might push back, such as the courts, the central bank and the technocratic ministries, have been brought into line through strategic appointments and pressure tactics. In parliament, only one party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), sits outside the government, though it declines to name itself an opposition party. The trial and then pardon of its secretary-general sent a clear message. Other critics have met with similar treatment.

The system of governance has become more and more presidential. The military and police, whose commanders are presidentially appointed, have seen their bureaucratic power expand. State-owned enterprises

now report directly to his office via the holding company Danantara. Foreign policy too is now coordinated by Prabowo's office. Governance is concentrated in a tight coterie of personal advisors who control access to the president. Sources say they limit the amount of bad news Prabowo receives.



Public protests have reflected growing frustration over economic pressures, governance and the direction of President Prabowo's administration. Photo: East Asia Forum

Constant presidential travel adds to this sense that Prabowo may not be kept fully informed on the state of the economy, for example. Since becoming president in October 2024, he has spent 114 days – nearly four months – abroad. Keen to project Indonesia, and himself, on the world stage, he constantly pays official visits to other countries, including four trips to Paris.

Yet, even in foreign policy, things seem adrift. Prabowo's attempts to make himself a major foreign policy player by offering to mediate between the US and Iran or volunteering Indonesian troops for a Gaza peacekeeping force seem to have fallen by the wayside.

The situation may slowly be turning dangerous. Last year, Indonesia saw serious street riots in Jakarta. The proximate cause was a deadly police hit-and-run on a delivery driver. But, for many, the backdrop of stalling job opportunities and a nasty bout of food inflation was an important factor. The government may have learnt some lessons by introducing temporary relief measures for Indonesia's economically precarious citizens.

But, the government's space to buy peace is tightening. If ordinary Indonesians continue to feel squeezed and the avenues for opposition other than the street continue to narrow, the prospect of a repeat before the end of Prabowo's term in 2029 is a worrying possibility.

Joseph Rachman is a freelance reporter based in South East Asia. He writes the South East Asia Brief, a weekly newsletter about the region, for *Foreign Policy*.



Muhammad Yunus was sworn in as Chief Adviser in August 2024 following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government, leading Bangladesh's interim administration toward constitutional reforms and national elections. Photo: PID

Two years on from Bangladesh's August rebellion

In theory, last February's national election has restored Bangladesh's democracy after a period of authoritarian rule was ended by the July-August 2024 protest. In practice polling has restored the once powerful Bangladesh Nationalist Party, founded by former president Ziaur Rahman, and now led by Tarique Rahman. Long-time Bangladesh watcher Nicholas Nugent considers to what extent democracy has been restored.

Bangladesh's July 2024 elections led to an uprising against authoritarian rule by Sheikh Hasina's Awami League. There were accusations the election lacked any vestige of fairness, as there had been during polls her party won in 2014 and 2018. This time students took their discontent onto the streets of the capital, Dhaka. Hundreds were killed when Sheikh Hasina ordered the security forces to open fire – as many as 1,400 according to a subsequent report by the United Nations Human Rights office.

The killings failed to quell the protests and on 5 August Sheikh Hasina recognised that her time

was up and fled to safety in India. Parliament (the Jatiya Sangsad) was dissolved, ending the Awami League's 15-year rule. The army attempted to restore order to the streets while protesters took their revenge on Awami League ministers and party members. It was said that Gen Z had brought about the fall of the elected government.

Rather than take power itself, as was usual in Bangladesh, the army followed the suggestion of student protesters in handing power to their nominee, Nobel Peace laureate Muhammad Yunus, a widely respected figure in Bangladesh and beyond, who

had himself been persecuted by Sheikh Hasina's government. Three days after Sheikh Hasina fled, he was sworn in as Chief Adviser at the head of an interim government tasked with restoring order, reforming key institutions, and preparing for credible elections. The choice of Yunus as interim leader was widely welcomed.

During the period of interim rule, political parties and individuals involved in the overthrow of the Awami League government agreed a 28-point agreement known as the July Charter. This codified a consensus for reform of the country's constitution and



Student demonstrators celebrate in Dhaka after Sheikh Hasina left office in August 2024, ending 15 years of Awami League rule. Photo: Collected

electoral laws, as well as of the judiciary and the state administration, which had become politicised under the Awami League.

A key test of the interim government was the holding of elections. It was criticised for taking 18 months, much more than the Constitution's 90-day provision and three times longer than Nepal's post-uprising transition. Yet the Yunus-led government, working with the Election Commission, were considered to have done a satisfactory job, though the banning of the Awami League was criticised by human rights groups as a blemish on the country's project to restore democracy.

Despite fears of violence, the elections were peaceful; nearly sixty per cent of eligible citizens turned out to vote on a day that was treated as a national celebration. The winning party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Tarique Rahman, gained a two-thirds majority, an initial mark of success for the country. With the army back in barracks, it could be said to have set a democratic example for

neighbouring Myanmar, where elections six months ago confirmed in power military men dressed as civilians.

However, the BNP government has been accused by the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami-led alliance, which represents many of those involved in the 2024 protests, of dragging its heels over agreed reforms. This would have included restoring the principle of secularism, which was in the



Bangladeshis cast their ballots during the February 2026 general election, the country's first national vote following the 2024 political transition. Photo: Collected

country's 1972 constitution but was removed in 1977 when Tarique Rahman's father was in power. These reforms were endorsed by voters in a referendum alongside the parliamentary election.

Rather than lifting the ban on the Awami League, the BNP government passed it into law, consolidating the BNP's dominant position in Bangladeshi political life, but leading to further criticism that it was anti-democratic, especially given the Awami League's association with the formation of the nation in 1971. The International Crisis Group says that a ban on the party is not sustainable in the long term. The failure so far to implement the July Charter has damaged the victorious party's claim to have restored parliamentary democracy. Dr Tarikul Islam, professor of politics at Dhaka's Jahangirnagar University, says 'democracy is an evolving process rather than a one-time achievement'. He believes the BNP-led government is 'more liberal than at any time before'.

There have been other obstacles to progress beyond the government's control. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has had a devastating impact on Bangladesh as almost all the country's oil and gas comes from the Gulf. Garment factories, which under Sheikh Hasina had become a mainstay of the economy, have been forced to reduce output or close completely causing large numbers of workers to lose their jobs. 40 million Bangladeshi citizens depended for their livelihoods on the clothing industry which provided four-fifths of the country's export earnings. According to Thomas Kean of the International Crisis Group 'the conflict in the Middle East will not just drain government coffers – it could



Bangladesh's garment industry remains the backbone of the country's economy but has faced mounting pressure from higher energy costs and weakening global demand. Photo: Shanjir H.

potentially push millions of Bangladeshis back into poverty.'

India's refusal to extradite Sheikh Hasina to face trial in Bangladesh may have been inevitable. In a Reuters interview published in July, Hasina said she and senior Awami League figures plan to return to Bangladesh by December and surrender voluntarily, despite the death sentence handed down in absentia in November 2025 – a gesture she framed as exposing what she called politically motivated prosecutions. The decision by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman to make his first overseas visit to China, rather than India, marks a re-prioritisation of foreign policy. During the visit it became clear that the new government plans to award two major projects, developing Mongla port and the Teesta River, to Chinese companies. Sheikh Hasina had promised them to Indian companies.

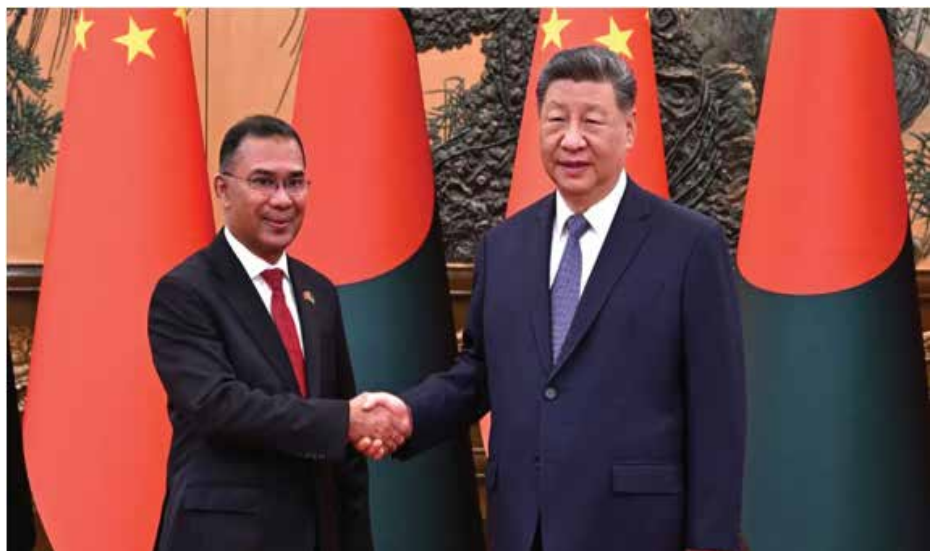
Another dip in relations with India came after May's state election gave control of West Bengal, which neighbours Bangladesh, to India's ruling BJP. Since then there has

been an increase in forcible expulsion across the joint border of Muslims whom India says infiltrated illegally from Bangladesh. Critics see this as part of the BJP's Hindu-ification drive. Bangladesh has yet to resolve the considerable problem of the 1.2 million Rohingya refugees earlier forced into the country from Myanmar.

Tarique Rahman's government has an uphill task ahead. According to Professor Islam, 'greater attention

should be given to strengthening institutional accountability and enhancing the independence and capacity of public institutions'. A big test will be whether parliament is enabled to function effectively with a role for the political opposition. There is also a need to solve the problem of large numbers of unemployed young people, which lay at the heart of the 2024 unrest.

The country has come far since Sheikh Hasina was ousted two years ago. Looking back over the 15 years of authoritarian rule and departure from norms of democracy, it is clear it still has a long way to go, though Professor Islam argues that the government's performance 'is more satisfying than at any time since the independence of Bangladesh'. Expressing itself content with the election and transfer of power, the International Crisis Group noted: 'There is now an opportunity to strengthen this step toward peaceful, democratic competition and make sure it is not a one-off occurrence.'



Bangladesh's new leadership has signalled a shift in regional priorities, strengthening ties with China while relations with India remain under strain. Photo: PMO

Nicholas Nugent covered earlier Bangladesh elections for the BBC.



Field Marshal Asim Munir (left) meets Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf in Tehran. Munir has become Pakistan's leading diplomatic figure on the regional stage. Photo: Iranian Parliament Speaker Office/WANA via Reuters.

Today's Pakistan: peacemaking abroad, insurgency at home

Pakistan's army chief has been in the limelight as a peace broker on the international stage. But there are no talks or mediation for dissent at home, as Umber Khairi reports.

As a consequence of the Israeli-US war on Iran, Pakistan's army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, has emerged on the world stage as a peace broker, featuring more prominently in talks and meetings than the country's prime minister. However, as many observers have pointed out, this 'peacenik' approach does not apply domestically – there are no talks, mediation or tolerance for any conflict within Pakistan.

This situation – 'peacenik' internationally but ruthlessly

intolerant at home – can seem contradictory, but actually is nothing new. It is a policy which Pakistan's military rulers have stuck to over the years. General Zia-ul-Haq, who presided over a regime with zero tolerance for any political or social protest, enjoyed a very positive image on the international front because he had allied Pakistan with the US war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Another of Asim Munir's predecessors, also a self-appointed field marshal, Mohammad Ayub Khan, allied Pakistan with the US bloc during

the Cold War and tried to persuade his anti-American compatriots that the Americans were 'Friends not Masters', the title he gave to his 1967 book.

So, Field Marshal Asim Munir is following a pattern, the only difference being that, so far, he has not awarded himself a non-military title – unlike most predecessors of the country. The man President Donald Trump has referred to as his 'favourite field marshal' has gone from strength to strength internationally – mainly due to two wars. The first

was the India-Pakistan conflict in April-May 2025, in which at least 130 people were killed and military sites on both sides were attacked.

Pakistan got the US to intervene diplomatically and somehow managed to emerge from the weeks of fighting with a more favourable image than India. The second conflict is, of course, the Israel-US war on Iran where Pakistan emerged as a mediator bringing the Iranians and the Americans to the negotiating table in Islamabad.

Pakistan has kept communication channels open with countries and groups condemned by the international community and it is precisely these contacts which allow it to take on the mantle of 'mediator'. Its ties with China helped connect Washington and Beijing in the early 1970s; its historic links with the Afghan Taliban made it an important participant in the peace talks facilitated by Qatar during President Trump's first term. But successes on the international stage cannot solve Pakistan's economic or regional problems if no attention is paid to domestic issues, such as two ongoing insurgencies in the country.

Pakistan faces two insurgencies, in the north and west of the country, but the nature of both struggles is very different. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) movement in the north is linked to religious ideology and once had close links with the military. It is largely Pashtun and operates along the Pakistan-Afghan border.

Our enemies in the North

At the height of the militancy in Pakistan 2008-2014, the TTP was responsible for a number of major attacks on army installations and key sites including an attack on the army's headquarters in



Pakistan's strategic location has allowed it to play a mediating role in regional conflicts while facing growing security challenges along its own borders. Map: Collected

Rawalpindi, an attack on a naval base in Karachi, an attack on Karachi International Airport, an attack on an army training school in Charsadda in which 67 young graduates were killed and an attack on the Army Public School (APS) which killed 149 students and teachers.

The group is the product of a murky policy of creating and using militants; the state's attitude to the TTP has now been mixed up with a number of factors and prejudices: the



Pakistani security forces continue operations against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants along the country's northwestern frontier.

establishment's historical distrust of the Pashtuns including its kinship with Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and the regime's distrust of the provincial government, now in the hands of the incarcerated former prime minister Imran Khan's party the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf or PTI. The party has won three successive elections in a province which before this had never returned an incumbent to power.

Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of aiding the TTP, and last year a UN report confirmed the Afghan Taliban, now in government in Afghanistan, were providing 'logistical, operational and financial support' to the TTP. So effectively Pakistan is fighting a vicious proxy war with Afghanistan.

The Balochistan issue

There have been uprisings and militant movements in Balochistan throughout Pakistan's history, from its controversial accession to the country in 1947. The present-day struggle of the Baloch Liberation Army, or BLA, revolves around a narrative of occupation and colonisation, political and economic marginalisation. In recent years it has been fuelled by lucrative



Gwadar Port has become a symbol of major Chinese-backed investment projects that remain at the centre of tensions in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Photo: Collected

investment projects in the province, awarded by central government but giving no benefit to the people of the province. These include the Gwadar port project, set up by the Chinese in 2002, and the Saindak Copper-Gold mine which was leased to China in 2001, now extended to 2037. Gold and copper from the project are exported to China.

The *Financial Times* recently reported that the head of the Saindak project had written to Pakistan's Energy Minister saying the project was becoming unsustainable because of the 'law and order situation' in the province. A nearby gold and copper mine at Reko Diq is not functioning due to the security situation and supply chain disruption concerns. Several Chinese workers in Pakistan have been killed as a consequence of action by the BLA, which has also been blamed for an attack on a train in May which killed 47 people.

For Balochistan, the military makes all the decisions. Elected governments have tried to make political inroads but these have been obstructed. Baloch politicians have tried to work within the parliamentary system but unless they agree with the central policy on Balochistan they are sidelined. Effectively, the military is fighting a war against the Baloch people. War conditions are applied to reporting or discussion of what is happening and even peaceful protest is



The Saindak Copper-Gold Mine in Balochistan. Rich in natural resources, the province remains at the centre of Pakistan's long-running insurgency and security challenges. Photo: Collected

criminalised, a policy also applied to the TTP insurgency.

The Pakistan military has always been suspicious of the neighbouring states of India and Afghanistan. These countries' perceived hostility is what justifies constant strengthening of the armed forces of the country. Pakistan's armed forces are now fighting a war on two fronts but this is constantly downplayed and news of it is blacked out as far as possible.

What then, will the army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, do in this situation? It is likely that the status quo will continue: unrest and dissent will simmer and erupt periodically inside the country while on the international stage Pakistan will continue to build its image. Since the military do not seem ready to consider a political solution it is likely that action against these groups will become increasingly harsh. Pakistan is muddling along now but the situation is volatile and if economic projects, such as the Saindak mine project, are put on pause, retaliation for this could become very violent.

Umber Khairi is a former BBC World Service broadcaster, author and columnist. Her novel *Akbar in Wonderland* is set in Pakistan in the 1990s in a post-martial law landscape.



A woman walks past an anti-Israeli mural in Tehran. While governments hail diplomacy, many Iranians say the ceasefire has brought little relief from political repression and economic hardship. Photo: Majid Asgaripour/WANA

Iran: A deal that feels like betrayal

The ceasefire announced in mid-June between Iran and the US, and signing by both of a memorandum of understanding, raised hopes for an end to the war. Full-scale war may have ceased, but a game of ‘tit for tat’ for control of the Strait of Hormuz is underway between the combatants: Iran strikes at passing ships, the US hits Iranian missile bases or boats, and Iran responds by targeting US bases on the western side of the Gulf. Meanwhile Fariba Sahraei has been finding out how the memorandum of understanding has been received inside Iran.

For those who had hoped the war might lead to the collapse of the Islamic Republic, the agreement has brought nothing but disappointment, distress and a profound sense of betrayal. They described the deal as one negotiated between

governments while ignoring the aspirations of millions of Iranians who have spent years confronting economic hardship, political repression and repeated waves of unrest.

‘I was deeply disappointed and

angry when I heard the memorandum had been signed,’ said Navid, a 38-year-old artist, whose name has been changed to protect his identity. ‘For nearly two months we lived with bombings, fear, and constant stress. We

thought this war might finally bring an end to the suffering we have endured for decades. Instead, everything stayed the same.'

Hopes raised – then dashed

The start of the conflict followed months of political turmoil inside Iran. Nationwide protests and the massacre of thousands of protesters, possibly the bloodiest in modern history, left deep scars on society before military operations by the US and Israel dramatically escalated the crisis. Many senior military commanders were killed, key military and nuclear facilities were damaged, and the Islamic Republic faced its most serious challenge in decades.

That expectation was reinforced by statements from President Donald Trump in the weeks before the US 'Operation Fury' was launched. He warned Tehran against using violence against demonstrators and publicly urged Iranian protesters to continue demonstrating,



Damage from recent strikes in Tehran underscored the human cost of the conflict before the ceasefire was announced. Photo: Hamid Vakili/Anadolu Agency

declaring that 'help is on its way'.

For some inside Iran, those remarks carried enormous symbolic weight. 'When the military operation began, many people believed that help had finally arrived,' Navid said. 'We thought this might be the beginning of real change.' Instead, the ceasefire followed

by the memorandum of understanding convinced many that geopolitical interests had once again taken precedence over the fate of the nation.

Navid questions why Trump had told Iranian protesters that 'help is on the way'. 'Trump changed his position. He betrayed us. He used the Iranian people as leverage to justify his war on



US President Donald Trump and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian display the memorandum of understanding signed on June 17. Photo: EPA

Iran and to strengthen his negotiating position,' Navid said.

Negin, a 27-year-old resident of Tehran whose name has been changed for security reasons, expressed a similar sense of disappointment. 'Why tell Iranian protesters that help was coming?' she asks. 'In the end,

Left out of the deal

The agreement signed by Trump and Masoud Pezeshkian, Iran's president, is intended to end the war between the US and Iran on all fronts, including Lebanon, and establish a framework for negotiating a broader nuclear agreement. Under its terms, Washington would begin easing sanctions and release frozen

For Iran's 90 million people, two wars in six months have brought only deeper economic hardship, tighter political repression and growing uncertainty about the future. 'Neither the war nor this agreement has ever belonged to the Iranian people,' Navid said. 'The Islamic Republic dragged the country into it to preserve itself. Now it has reached an agreement for exactly the same reason.' 'What have we gained?' he asks. 'More fear. More stress. More poverty.'

While foreign governments present the accord as the beginning of a diplomatic breakthrough, those I spoke to say life inside Iran is unchanged. 'Has the repression decreased?' Nastaran asks. 'No. Every night the squares are filled with armed Basij forces because they're afraid people will protest again.' 'Arrests have increased. Executions have increased.' Interviewees I spoke to rejected suggestions that recent political changes represented a meaningful shift in the nature of the Islamic Republic.



Shoppers at a market in Tehran. Many Iranians say rising prices and economic hardship continue despite the ceasefire. Photo: AL Monitor

he reached an agreement that served his own interests while allowing the same regime that oppresses us to survive.' Many of those interviewed described the agreement not simply as a diplomatic compromise but as the collapse of hopes that the conflict might produce lasting political change. 'We lost so many young people during January protests,' said Nastaran, another Tehran resident whose identity has also been concealed. 'Then came the war. We lived through bombings. We had no internet for 90 days. People lost their jobs. We endured all of that, only to see another agreement signed with the same regime!'

assets, and in return, Tehran would reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

For many of those interviewed, however, one omission overshadowed every provision. 'I asked myself one question,' Navid said. 'Where are the people of Iran in this agreement?' To him, the answer was clear. 'They're nowhere.' 'The people of Iran have no place in the US memorandum of understanding,' said Nastaran. 'We don't matter to our own government, and we don't matter to the rest of the world either.' She paused before adding: 'We are nothing more than tools for others to use in pursuit of their own interests.'

At the G7 summit in France, Trump said Iran now had 'a new group of leaders' who are 'very smart' and 'far less radicalised'. Sima, a Tehran resident who participated in the January protests, dismissed that assessment. 'I don't see any difference,' she said. 'What's interesting is that Trump now claims that the regime has changed. But I completely disagree. Their thinking is exactly the same as that of their predecessors. I see no change whatsoever.'

Although the conflict eliminated several senior Iranian political and military



Strait of Hormuz, where tensions between Iran and the United States continue despite the ceasefire. Map Illustration: Bloomberg

figures, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, interviewees consistently argued that the institutions of power remain intact. ‘The system survived,’ Sima said. ‘For ordinary people, nothing has changed.’

Waiting for relief that may never come

Interviewees say they have little confidence that ordinary citizens will benefit. Instead, they believe any financial gains will bolster the regime and its proxy groups across the region, rather than improve daily life at home. ‘If Iran’s frozen assets are released, ordinary people will not benefit,’ said Navid. ‘It will

go toward strengthening the regime’s proxy groups in the region, purchasing military equipment and missiles, or disappearing into the corruption of regime officials and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).’

‘Our lives become more expensive every day,’ Nastaran said. ‘Prices change almost by the hour.’ She questions whether increased oil revenues would ever improve living standards. ‘People keep saying Iran will be able to sell more oil,’ she says. ‘But we’ve asked this question for years: where does the oil money go? It never reaches ordinary Iranians.’ To

many interviewees, economic hardship has become inseparable from a broader sense of political exclusion. ‘They don’t care about us,’ Nastaran said. ‘Even if billions of dollars are released, our lives won’t change.’

Iran points to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz as proof of strength, while Donald Trump says the US degraded Iran’s military capabilities and reopened the strategic waterway. Caught between these competing claims, many Iranians feel betrayed and abandoned, seeing themselves as the main losers of a conflict they had once hoped would bring down the regime.

Fariba Sahraei is a UK-based journalist and filmmaker who has worked with BBC, Channel 4 News and ABC News. Through her extensive network, she has interviewed residents in Tehran for this report.



Afghan women continue to navigate severe restrictions under Taliban rule, balancing hope for education and independence against growing pressure and fear. Photo: AP

Alia's story – it's hard being a woman in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan

Understanding life in Afghanistan has been difficult since the Taliban came to power – for the second time – in August 2021. One of the few international journalists to have gained access to the country is BBC correspondent Yogita Limaye. Here she tells Alia's story.



When I met her in Kabul, the nineteen-year-old woman who we're calling Alia was clutching an English grammar textbook, memorising lines from it. I can't tell you her real name, because she fears reprisal from the Taliban government for speaking out

against their ban on female education. We had to meet Alia at a discreet location, because going to her home might have attracted unwanted attention.

Alia is enrolled in a short-term English language course in Kabul. Private classes like this

still continue for women and girls, slipping through the cracks of Taliban diktats. For her, the course was both a fragile link to the life she led before the Taliban seized power five years ago – and an excuse to stay away from home, where she fears being

pressurised into marriage by her family.

‘Before the ban, my parents passionately encouraged me to study. They believed in me and told me I could definitely achieve my dream of becoming a pilot,’ she told me. ‘But now they say the best way for me is to get married because I can’t go to university – and I can’t even work,’ she went on.

And so, eight months ago, Alia got into a taxi along with a female cousin, saying she was going to Kabul to meet her former classmates and friends. ‘That was a lie. My classmates have either left the country or have got married. When I arrived in Kabul, I enrolled onto a course and convinced my family to let me stay here to complete it,’ she said.

That simple act of travelling hundreds of miles to Kabul from her home in the remote Daykundi province was extraordinary, because in Afghanistan women are not



Empty seats reserved for female students at an institute in Kandahar. Photo: Stringer/EPA-EFE

allowed to travel long distances without a male relative. ‘I was constantly scared that we would be stopped and questioned, but luckily nothing happened and we reached Kabul,’ she said.

I asked where she had found the courage to make the

journey. ‘There was no question of courage,’ she shot back. ‘It was the only way for me. I want a bright future. What if the family I’m married into is conservative and does not allow me to pursue my dreams? I will resist until I cannot breathe,’ she told me with steely resolve. But holding on to this dream in Afghanistan means withstanding a continuous onslaught of blows dealt by the Taliban’s top leadership.

After I left the country, Alia’s story took a turn. When I recently spoke to her again over the phone, she was back home in Daykundi. She explained she was standing on the roof of her house, so the signal would be strong enough for her to speak to me. ‘I came to Daykundi a few weeks ago to visit my mother who had taken ill. I had plans to return to Kabul, but then we saw what happened in Herat,’ she said.

She was referring to a recent incident in the western city,



With universities closed to women, private language classes have become one of the few remaining spaces where Afghan women can continue learning and hold onto hopes for the future. Photo: Collected



Afghan female students walk near Kabul University in Kabul. Since the Taliban banned women from higher education, thousands of young Afghans have seen their academic ambitions put on hold. Photo: Reuters

when Taliban police fired at people who'd gathered to protest after local officials had detained some women for allegedly violating the dress code imposed by the Taliban's supreme leader. Two people were reported to have been killed – a charge the Taliban police deny.

Far away in Daykundi, news of the incident had reached Alia and her family through social media. 'It was really painful to see the videos. I felt upset and cried a lot,' said Alia. And now her family is too scared to send her back to Kabul.

'My mother says she would be extremely worried if I went back,' Alia told me. 'I am also scared, of course – what if officials stop me and take me to an unknown place, and even my family and friends don't know where I am?' 'But on the other hand, I am also scared about my future,' she said.

While in Kabul, Alia told me she had already encountered the Taliban's morality police. 'The first time they stopped me, my hair and body were covered but not my face. The second time

they told me to button up my overcoat properly, even though I was fully covered. The third time they asked me not to look around while walking, and to only keep my eyes on the path ahead,' she said. 'I felt so scared. My legs began to feel wobbly. I couldn't utter a word so I just nodded and quickly walked away.'

And yet she insists she would choose to return if her family allows her to, as she's more worried about what might await her if she stays in Daykundi. 'When I was in the kitchen making tea, I overheard my parents talking about whether I should get married,' she said.

The future Alia wants for herself, the one she's fought so hard for, feels more out of reach, with every passing day.



Women in Afghanistan face strict enforcement of Taliban regulations governing dress, movement and everyday public life, with fear of punishment shaping even routine activities. Photo: Ebrahim Noroozi/AP

Yogita Limaye reports for the BBC from South Asia and Afghanistan. Alia's story was first broadcast on From Our Own Correspondent on BBC Radio 4 and the BBC World Service in June 2026.



South Korean president Lee Jae-myung at the 6th Cabinet meeting of 2026 on February 24. Photo: Cheong Wa Dae

South Korea in recovery mode

Is a clampdown on free expression the legacy of President Yoon Suk Yeol's attempt in 2024 to declare martial law? Or is it, as current president Lee Jae-myung's party argues, a necessary measure to restore the people's trust in government? Ifang Bremer reports from Seoul.

On 6 July, the leadership of South Korea's main opposition party walked into their regular leadership meeting room wearing black masks. Jang Dong-hyuk, head of the People Power Party, told reporters that history might remember the date as the day Korean democracy died. The occasion for the theatrics was an amendment to a law due to take effect the following morning, one allowing courts to impose damages of up to five times a plaintiff's losses on journalists, YouTubers and influencers found to have spread false information, and fines of up to a billion won –

approx US \$656,000 – for repeat offenders.

Less than two years earlier, South Korea's president from Jang's own party, the now imprisoned Yoon Suk Yeol, declared martial law, and dictated that 'all media and publications' had to report to the Martial Law Command, and instructed authorities to seize control of critical media organizations like public broadcaster MBC. It was the closest South Korea's press had come to outright state control in decades.

This history explains why the current president, Lee Jae-myung, has voiced his concern over South Korea's online information environment, arguing that the new law is necessary to stop the kind of disinformation it says threatens social stability. But critics read it differently: a government elected largely to restore the democratic norms Yoon broke, they argue, is now introducing measures that could limit freedom of expression, causing journalists and others to worry that once again, Seoul is reaching for restrictive power to grapple with its democratic challenges.

The law

The law, an amendment to the Information and Communications Network Act, took effect on 7 July. It allows courts to award damages of up to five times a plaintiff's losses against journalists, media outlets, and YouTubers found to have knowingly spread 'false or manipulated information'. Large media outlets and platforms with more than a million daily users – a threshold that captures YouTube, Naver, and Kakao – are required to remove flagged content or suspend accounts once a complaint is filed. Courts make the final ruling on damages, but the first judgment on what counts as false or manipulated falls to the platform, working from a database maintained by fact-checking bodies tied to South Korea's media regulator.

The Lee administration introduced the amendment after repeatedly warning of the harm fake news poses to democracy. In May, President Lee Jae-myung posted a police intelligence report on X naming dozens of accounts under investigation for spreading disinformation, writing that creating and spreading fake news 'is not a prank, but a crime subject to criminal punishment,' and that causing social chaos through false information 'does not receive protection as free speech.'

The justification

Lee's point is not without grounds. His now-imprisoned predecessor Yoon cited conspiracy theories of election fraud and involvement of 'pro-North Korean' forces in South Korea's politics as part of his defence of martial law, and those ideas linger, despite his imprisonment.

Some of Yoon's supporters have continued to spread fake news. In March 2026, as the US-Iran war sent oil prices spiking, a rumour spread online claiming 900,000



South Korea's new misinformation law places greater responsibility on major online platforms, including Naver, Kakao and YouTube, to remove disputed content. Photo: Marc Smith/CC BY 2.0

barrels of Korean crude had been secretly diverted to North Korea, complete with a fabricated 'intelligence source'. The Trade Ministry denied it, confirming the oil had gone to Vietnam, a legitimate buyer. Jeon Han-gil, an influential YouTuber and prominent supporter of the ousted former president, was among those spreading the false report.

But while concerns over fake news in South Korea may be valid, journalists and advocates are just

as concerned over the amendment. South Korean media have pointed out that big platforms like YouTube or Naver may overreact out of fear of government reprisals and remove content without proper due diligence.

Seoul already has defamation laws to punish false claims that hurt a specific person, some of the strictest in the democratic world. But in defamation cases, the only way to punish a 'false' story is to go to court, where a judge weighs evidence, hears both sides, and rules – a process that takes months or years. The story stays published the whole time. If the plaintiff loses, the outlet pays compensatory damages tied to actual, provable harm.

The amendment adds something new: platforms, not judges, now get to decide almost immediately whether a story counts as 'false', with the power to pull it down before any court has weighed in, and steeper financial punishment if it later turns out to be wrong. The lines blur, then, between a malicious lie and a true story someone powerful wants denied, because at the moment of publication, both can look the same on paper.



Former President Yoon Suk Yeol's brief declaration of martial law in 2024 continues to shape South Korea's debate over democracy and freedom of expression. Photo: Reuters



Journalists and press freedom advocates have warned the new law could have a chilling effect on independent reporting. Photo: Engin Akyurt/Pixabay

The backlash

The Journalists Association of Korea said: 'It is self-evident that false information undermines social trust and damages the credibility of the press itself. But the response to false information must be built on constitutional rights and democratic foundations, and it must never be overlooked that excessive regulation can produce its own side effects.' The Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club (SFCC), which represents foreign journalists, said it was 'concerned about the potential impact on freedom of expression, the free flow of information, and the work of journalists and news organizations.' Raphael Rashid, a long-time foreign correspondent in Seoul working for *The Guardian*, said, 'The law's ambiguity risks a chilling effect on legitimate reporting, well beyond its stated target of malicious fake news.' 'The definition of false information is ambiguous. Content can be treated as partially false even when the core of a report is accurate,' he said.

While South Korea is not the only country introducing laws to fight

misinformation, Kyoungmi Oh, a researcher at the Seoul-based digital rights group Open Net, pointed out that Korea's approach breaks from the model most European countries have settled on, which centres on pushing platforms toward stronger moderation while preserving publishers' ability to appeal takedowns. 'Korea, on the other hand, has chosen the method of imposing liability on platforms through rigid regulations,' she said.



South Korea's National Assembly has become the focal point of debate over balancing the fight against disinformation with protecting democratic freedoms. Photo: Alain Seguin/CC BY-SA 3.0

For now, despite the criticism, the Lee administration has not budged, and the law still stands. Lee was elected in large part to repair the institutions Yoon had shaken, which makes the backlash over his own signature disinformation law an awkward footnote to that mission. The controversy shows that eighteen months after South Korea's institutions held firm against the most dramatic threat to its democracy in a generation, South Korean politicians still tend to reach for restrictive measures whenever new democratic challenges emerge.

It is too early to tell whether that reflex proves to be South Korean democracy's blind spot, or just its messy, self-correcting immune response. But the SFCC, for its part, and with the restrictions imposed on media under Yoon's martial law fresh in its memory, expressed hope that despite good intentions, 'the government and the National Assembly will bear in mind that laws often outlast the administrations that enact them.'

Ifang Bremer is a reporter and documentary producer based in Seoul who has written for *Al Jazeera*, *NK News*, *The Observer*, *The Times* and *The Guardian*.



Yavar Abbas, veteran, writer and film-maker, reflects on the legacy of Partition, arguing that the division of British India was a historic mistake. Photo: Royal British Legion

‘Was Partition a big mistake? I think so.’

Yavar Abbas lived the first part of his life in undivided British-ruled India and the second in Britain, maintaining close contacts with the land of his birth. Last year, at a celebration to mark the end of the Second World War in Asia, in which Yavar fought in Burma, he brought tears to the eyes of King Charles III and Queen Camilla by speaking publicly of the King’s battle with cancer. Yavar is nearing his 106th birthday, so *Democracy Asia* felt this centenarian deserved to express his personal view.

My wife persuaded me to write my memoirs and I was getting on well – I’d completed twelve out of sixteen chapters. And then Benjamin Netanyahu intervened with his ghastly war in Gaza. How can he hound Palestinians out of their rightful homeland in the way he is doing? What gives him the right to determine nation states according to religion? Israel may have been granted the right by international powers to create a Jewish homeland in Palestinian

territory. But nobody gave him the right to hound Palestinians out of their homeland in the way he has been doing.

The imbroglio in the Middle East made me think of my own homeland: India! My India! By that, I mean the ‘real’ India, unpartitioned India, whose constituent parts are Bharat, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It is facing an existential threat because it is living and perpetuating a monumental

lie: that Hindus and Muslims are two different nations.

Let us take Pakistan first, which was created on the basis of a spurious ‘two-nation’ theory. It has no moral, or perhaps even legal, basis for existence as the theory which was its lifeblood was drained dry by the creation of Bangladesh. Its founders had in 1970 convincingly won what was arguably the only fair and clean election ever held in the short history of Pakistan. It is indeed Bangladesh, as the

majority shareholder in a wasting asset, who had a prior claim to the brand Pakistan. 'Pakistan' ceased to exist in 1971, except in the imagination of a set of people who continue to flog a dead horse in the vain hope that it will revive and run again.

Bangladesh itself missed a golden opportunity. It should have reunited with another absurd entity called West Bengal (for the name assumes there is an East Bengal) to become a natural Bangladesh – thus setting an example for the mockery that are the two Punjabs. So, Bangladesh too is facing a potentially existential crisis if it continues to pursue its 'Islamic' agenda to become, like Pakistan, a pale copy of Saudi Wahabistan.

As for our Bharat, it is facing the more serious existential threat of Balkanisation with its current regime pushing through its Hindutva agenda. The South will never accept the northern version of the mythical Ramayana and will continue to venerate Ravana instead of Rama. The 'Dalits', conveniently so called, will never accept their institutionalised status as a sub-caste in the evil of the caste system devised by Brahmins and their cohorts. The Ambedkarite Buddhists will not always be peaceful chelas [disciples] and will fight to break the chains of thousands of years of shameful slavery being re-tightened under the cloak of Hindutva. And the Kashmiris will never submit to India's remit and will fight against the tyrannical occupation of their beautiful and otherwise peaceful land by both Bharat and Pakistan.

Reverting to Pakistan, Sindhis will never reconcile themselves to the hegemony of Punjab or the MQM [political party]; Balochistan will be even less inclined to be rolled



Yavar Abbas greets King Charles III at the VJ Day 80th anniversary service in 2025. The veteran's reflections at the event renewed attention to his memories of war, Partition and South Asia. Photo: PA Media

over willingly by the Punjabi juggernaut; as for the Frontier Province, the very name change, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, sends out a clear hint of their intent to assert their own separate entity. That leaves just half of Punjab, the other half being in Bharat, holding a tattered flag as a fig leaf.

I am using the term 'Bharat' intentionally, because it is part of the coinage the flip side of which is Pakistan and Bangladesh. India! My India! on the other hand, was something different – a wholesome entity where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Jains, Jews and Gentiles had learnt to live



Yavar Abbas shares his reflections on Partition, arguing that its legacy continues to shape South Asia today.



The British Fourteenth Army fought to retake Burma during the Second World War. Yavar Abbas served in the campaign with the Sikh Regiment. Photo: Archive Photos/Getty Images

together in spite of an alien power sowing the seeds of discord, first as traders turned part-time rulers and later as rulers turned part-time traders. And when the trade was no longer profitable, the rule was hurriedly folded up. Partition was seen as the cheapest way out of the mess they themselves had created, and let the devil take the hindmost. In hindsight, though, it emerges that Partition was something no one really wanted – not Jinnah, not Nehru, not Gandhi, not the Muslim League, not the Indian National Congress and not even, towards the end, the British.

It may be argued that I am inventing the sequence of events to suit my version of what happened. Let me give you the evidence straight from the horse's mouth. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, whose credentials as a freedom fighter can only be denied by people who know little about the freedom struggle and care even less, is my witness. He was there, twenty-four-seven, as the events moved to the tragic denouement of Partition, and he was there right at the centre of the talks as the chief negotiator for India in his capacity as the president of the Indian National Congress. The model for the

British Cabinet Mission Plan of 16 May 1946 was the statement publicly issued by the Maulana the previous month, which deserves to be quoted here.

'I have considered from every possible point of view the scheme of Pakistan as formulated by the Muslim League. As an Indian I have examined its implications for the future of India as a whole. As a Muslim I have examined its likely effects upon the fortunes of Muslims in India. Considering the

scheme in all its aspects I have come to the conclusion that it is harmful not only for India as a whole but for the Muslims in particular. And in fact it creates more problems than it solves.'

'I must confess that the very term Pakistan [which means 'land of the pure' in Urdu] goes against my grain. Further it seems that the scheme of Pakistan has been built up on the analogy of the Jewish demand for a national home. One can sympathise with the aspiration of the Jews for such a national home, as they are scattered all over the world and cannot in any region have any effective voice in the administration. The condition of Indian Muslims is quite otherwise. Over 90 million in number, they are in quantity and quality a sufficiently important element in Indian life to influence decisively all questions of administration and policy.'

'Let us consider dispassionately the consequences which will follow if we give effect to the Pakistan scheme. India will be



After the war, Yavar Abbas worked for the BBC as a cameraman, producer and writer, documenting events around the world. Photo: Yavar Abbas



Yavar Abbas with *Democracy Asia* editor Nicholas Nugent, whose conversations with the veteran inspired this reflection on Partition and its enduring legacy.

divided into two states, one with a majority of Muslims and the other of Hindus. In the Hindustan State there will remain three and a half crores [35 million] of Muslims scattered in small minorities all over the land. They will awaken overnight and discover that they have become alien and foreigners. Backward industrially, educationally and economically, they will be left to the mercies of what would become an unadulterated Hindu raj.'

What a prescient statement. Why oh why did we not listen to our own seer? To his credit, Azad tried desperately to stop victory being swallowed up by the jaws of defeat. But by then, to mix the

metaphors, he had handed over the baton to a younger member of the team in the hope that he would take it to the finishing line in great style. But unfortunately, the baton became a mighty clanger that was dropped in panic.

It is human to make a mistake, but it is madness to make more serious mistakes to justify the original one. We can see that Bharat, Pakistan and Bangladesh are not working, but we are persisting in trying to push a square piece in a round hole. Talking of holes. We dug one for ourselves in 1947 and we keep on digging without realising that the hole is getting deeper and deeper and, if we keep on, it will be

impossible to come out of it even if we wanted to.

So, I say 'Stop digging. There is still time. It is still possible to crawl our way out of it.' And when we do, we will be able to see clearly in daylight and begin to put the broken pieces together again. And this time we will build with the full knowledge that we have been there, done that, and have seen that it doesn't work. That is about the only plus that we can rescue from the ruins of the historic blunder of 1947: the uncomfortable and visible evidence that Partition of India doesn't work. It has brought nothing but misery on an industrial scale to all the partitioned parts of India, be they Bharat, Pakistan or Bangladesh, who are all outdoing each other, marching backwards. The beards are getting bushier, the hijabs are graduating to burqas, and the lynchings are becoming the new sport.

We have the examples of Ireland – the division of the island by religion that doesn't work. Even worse, that of Palestine, divided around the same time as India and still in turmoil, at war as a result of the division of a land by religion.

So please stop digging in India. Come out of the hole. There will be helping hands to haul you up. Come out and start building a truly secular and wholesome United States of India – something that was within our grasp, thanks to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, and we let it go for a mess of pottage.

Yavar Abbas was born in 1920. He fought with the (British) Sikh Regiment in Burma, attaining the rank of captain. After the war he became a writer and film-maker, winning gold and silver in New York and two lifetime achievement awards. He also worked for the BBC as producer, writer, presenter and news cameraman.



Japan's Ayase Ueda reacts after Brazil scored during the Round of 32 at the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Japan's exit marked the end of Asia's strongest challenge in the tournament. Photo: Karen Warren/AP

Why didn't Asia fare better in the football World Cup?

The 2026 World Cup has ended and Spain was triumphant. The final took place on 19 July, but for Asia it was over three weeks earlier when Japan lost to Brazil. Fans in China felt encouraged that their underachieving team, which dreams of adding to its 2002 sole appearance, was not that far behind regional rivals. There wasn't much happiness elsewhere on the continent in what has been a sobering summer. John Duerden considers why Asian teams did not perform better.

India and China actually made World Cup headlines but not for their footballing prowess. Rather for leaving it to the last minute to agree deals with FIFA to broadcast the games. How much they paid was not revealed but is thought to be considerably less than the hundreds of millions that the Swiss-based organisation wanted. Such business success is not, however, replicated on the

pitch. China came closer to qualification than India, and the poor performance of most of the continent's hopefuls was seen in some ways, as a positive sign that Zhongguo or 'the Middle Kingdom' is not that far away from qualifying.

India has much further to go – and unlike China would be unlikely to qualify in 2030, even

were FIFA to expand the tournament again to include 64 teams, as is being discussed. However, there were many reports of the passionate support that Indians showed for the established football powers such as the semi-finalists Argentina, France, England and Spain. Something similar happened in Pakistan and Bangladesh, leaving football observers in South Asia



Football fans across South Asia enthusiastically followed the World Cup, even as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh remained absent from the tournament. Photo: Collected

to remark that if this quadrennial interest was around all the time then the cricket-loving region could actually have teams of its own to support at the World Cup.

This time round nine nations regarded by FIFA as coming from Asia started in the newly expanded 48-team competition which was co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico. Only Japan made it out of the group stage into the final 32 – as well as Australia, which belongs to the Asian Football Confederation so for football purposes competes as an Asian nation.

As expected, Japan was the best and while the country's long-term vision and patient execution continue to be the model for the rest to follow, there is a sense of missed opportunity. The Samurai Blue made it out of the group stage for the fifth time but have still to win a knockout match. Facing five-time champions Brazil in the Round of 32 was unfortunate. Japan narrowly lost but there were feelings back home that the team – missing four of its biggest stars through injury – was not aggressive enough against the South Americans and could actually have won with a bit more belief.

The debate in South Korea is very different. The 'Taeguk Warriors', as the national team are known, won their first game against the Czech Republic but then lost to Mexico and South Africa. Their dismal performances intensified the pre-tournament disquiet. The pre-tournament disquiet about how the Korea FA (which is supported by several companies including Hyundai) hired coach Hong Myung-bo.

President Lee Jae-myung made his feelings clear in a remarkable and unprecedented statement. 'Once again, it has been proven that personnel decisions are

everything,' Lee said. 'When "us versus them" is prioritised over competence, and an incompetent person is selected as a leader, the outcome is as clear as day.' Many Koreans have felt the same about cronyism for years. Korea FA boss Chung Mong-gyu and coach Hong have resigned but more heads may roll as the ministry of sports and the police carry out their separate investigations into the FA.

A more positive factor for Korea was the reception their footballers received in Mexico. K-Pop is such a hit that Mexican president Claudia Sheinbaum asked President Lee for boyband BTS to extend its stay in the country. Another Korean singer, EJAE, took part in the official opening ceremony in Mexico City while Blackpink's Lisa was involved in the same in the United States. Korean cultural exports are in a healthier state than the national football team and made more of an impact on the tournament.

This World Cup demonstrated that the route to success is not just about exporting local players to the best leagues like England, Spain and Germany, as Japan has done. It is about using Europe as a development pathway for young



Japan's 'Samurai Blue' once again reached the knockout stage but remain in search of their first World Cup victory beyond the group phase. Photo: JFA



South Korea's disappointing World Cup campaign intensified scrutiny of the Korea Football Association and head coach Hong Myung-bo. Photo: Reuters

talent. More than a quarter of players at the tournament were born in another country, a trend that looks set to continue in Asia. Indonesia, for example, have embraced their Dutch connections, at times fielding teams with as many as eight Netherlands-born players. It is a tempting shortcut to success, though there can be risks, as seen in 2025, when FIFA ruled that documents provided by Malaysia's FA – purporting to show that the grandparents of seven players were born in the Southeast Asian nation – had been forged.

Of the nine teams in the Asian category, Iran was the unluckiest, missing out on the knockout stages by the narrowest of margins. Had Team Melli enjoyed the same treatment as the other 47, they would surely have made it out of the group stage for the first time. The domestic league had been cancelled from February due to the US-Israeli attacks, leaving many players without football for

months. And there was constant uncertainty over visas into the United States. Their training camp was switched from Arizona to the Mexican border city of Tijuana, where the team had to return after every game. There were signs of frustration and

captain Mehdi Taremi left one press conference remarking that there had been no questions about football.

Uzbekistan came out with zero points. However, due to government investment and long-term planning, the White Wolves are expected to be back. That is also the feeling in Kazakhstan, which left the Asian Football Confederation in 2002 to join its European equivalent, UEFA. Watching their Central Asian neighbour go to the World Cup has started a debate about whether moving was the right choice as Kazakhstan are unlikely to qualify for the World Cup through Europe anytime soon.

Asia offers an easier path, though the events of the summer show that this could actually be a problem. Raising standards at all levels would help the top teams challenge. It may take some time.



Iran's World Cup preparations were disrupted by regional conflict and travel restrictions, overshadowing the team's performances on the pitch. Photo: Reuters

John Duerden has covered Asian sports for *The Guardian*, *BBC*, *World Soccer*, *Associated Press* and more and has had several books on the subject published.

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Mumbai's financial district symbolises India's economic transformation, even as households continue to face pressure from rising living costs.

Where is India's economy heading?

As rising fuel and food prices test Indian households, Sam Tully asks whether digital infrastructure and AI can power India's next economic leap.

Petrol has gone up, cooking gas has gone up, and all of this means other prices are also going up, including vegetables, dal and rice.' Vinod Kumar is a driver in New Delhi and is definitely feeling the effects of India's continued reliance on energy imports and the consequent impact of the Iran conflict. He has invested heavily in his 15-year-old son's education to improve his prospects, including adding a room to his one-room flat to give his son a better place to study for upcoming Class 10 exams.

At the moment Vinod is worried about whether that investment

will pay off and provide a better quality of life for his family. This is a somewhat different perspective from the big-picture success story of India's economic transformation over the past three decades and the government's vision for it to achieve developed-country status by 2047, 100 years after its independence.

There have undoubtedly been huge strides since India started to deregulate its economy in the early 1990s following a severe currency crisis. The population has grown, though a significant fall in the birth rate is now

causing concern. The infrastructure from roads to rail and telecommunications has been transformed. Vinod's own home, in South East Delhi, is connected to his work in an upscale part of South Delhi by the pink metro line, something few could have seen coming even 30 years ago. Even so, he still prefers to ride his own scooter because of poor last-mile connectivity. This is why he feels the petrol price pinch in his pocket.

This transformation, and the growth in domestic consumption, has attracted substantial international investment into



Vinod Kumar, a driver in New Delhi, says rising fuel and food prices are making it harder for working families to get ahead.

India's economy. The Bombay Stock Exchange, which dates back to 1875, was opened up to international funds, which poured money in, making it one of the largest and most lucrative global emerging markets. Its companies, across all major sectors, were finally able to unleash the entrepreneurial energy that is such a key part of India's success.

Over the past 18 months, international funds have been withdrawing money from India's markets and deploying it elsewhere – in particular into companies that benefit from the explosion in AI. This includes large US technology stocks and semiconductor manufacturers from Taiwan and South Korea. India does not have any large semiconductor manufacturers on the scale of Taiwan or South Korea, though a catch-up effort is currently under way. IT services companies are perceived as possible victims rather than beneficiaries of AI. The coding work they specialise in could increasingly be outsourced to AI so they really need to reinvent their business models.

Reinvention and resourcefulness characterise the capability of India and its companies.

Nothing exemplifies India's resourcefulness more than its ability to adopt and adapt new technologies, to leapfrog some of the many barriers that would otherwise have held it back. For example, returning to the theme of inadequate infrastructure, before the advent of mobile phones India's dated and

congested fixed-line network was not fit for purpose. The rapid roll-out of affordable mobiles and some of the cheapest data in the world meant that by 2025, this country of 1.4 billion people had more than 1.2 billion mobile subscribers, up from 75 million in 2005. These users are also among the world's most prolific users of data.

Taking advantage of this digital transformation, India has also pioneered a national biometric digital identity system known as Aadhaar. This roll-out has followed a similar timeline, from being conceptualised by the central government as a tool for identifying families below the poverty line in 2006, to the setting up of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) in 2009, and then its rapid adoption over the subsequent decade. By 2023, approximately 99% of India's adult population had been enrolled in Aadhaar.

Via another home-grown innovation, Aadhaar also helped underpin India's digital public infrastructure. This was originally designed to promote financial inclusion and has succeeded well



The Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) building in Mumbai. International investment has played a major role in India's economic transformation since the liberalisation reforms of the 1990s. Photo: BSEINDIA/CC BY-SA 3.0



Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has transformed everyday commerce, making digital payments commonplace across India. Image AI Generated

beyond those original aims. While Aadhaar facilitated tens of millions of previously unbanked individuals to open bank accounts, the Unified Payment Interface (UPI) allowed them to send and receive money with ease, to the extent that it is a model now being studied by other countries.

In another example of leapfrogging, this also enabled India to bypass the use of physical debit and credit cards as most of the population, from taxi drivers to tycoons, use their phones instead. In the same way, internet adoption in India has largely taken place on phones, not laptops or PCs.

It remains to be seen whether India will be able to turn its weaknesses to its advantage again, this time with AI. It is unlikely, given a paucity of both financial and physical resources, that India will be able to expand data centres or set up 'chip' foundries on anything

like the scale of other large economies. It is, however, already producing new ways in which AI adoption, via its powerful digital public infrastructure, can be used to empower the broader population.

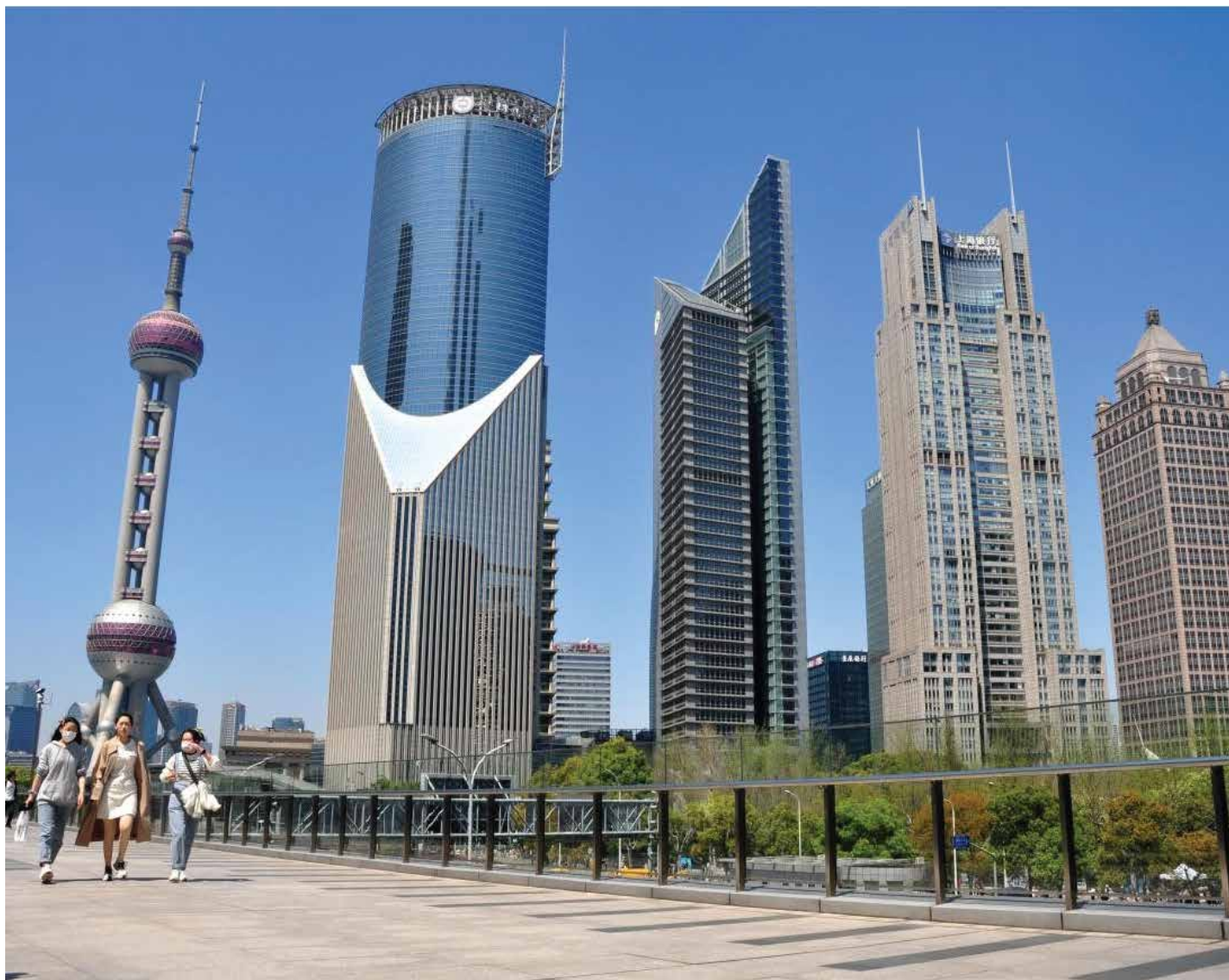
Examples include automatic translation into multiple regional languages. As early as 2021, for example, in cooperation with its eastern neighbour, Bangladesh, India made available free software which uses AI to translate court records and judgments from English to the regional language Bengali. Other areas of adoption could include education, skilling and healthcare.

Returning to Vinod, he would certainly like to see AI helping to keep down the prices of daily staples. Equally, in order to generate additional income, he is considering taking on extra work as a delivery driver on his scooter via one of the many apps which are now available on his phone. He would be paid digitally, of course.



India is looking to artificial intelligence to build on the success of its digital public infrastructure. Image AI Generated

Sam Tully has worked in emerging-market equities and asset management in London and Mumbai.



Shanghai's Lujiazui financial district remains a symbol of China's economic strength. Photo: People's Daily Online

Bisinomics

China

'Despite a challenging trade environment and tariffs, China had strong GDP growth in the first quarter of 2026,' *The Wall Street Journal* reported. There's been 5% year-on-year growth. Keyu Jin, an economist and professor, told the publication, 'Chinese companies have been adapting since 2018... One of the major goals of Chinese companies, every single Chinese company you talk to, they have expansionary plans. So, they're really pushing their goods abroad. One is because,

domestically, it's just so competitive... so all of them have a strategy to go abroad. EM, emerging markets, demand is very strong from Chinese goods that benefit from pretty low inflation.'

More recent reporting from Bloomberg Asia expressed a different view, though, in a report entitled, 'China's Economy Stumbles With Growth Unexpectedly Below Target'. It went on to detail: 'China's economy slowed more than expected last quarter

(meaning Q2 of 2026) to the weakest in more than three years, raising pressures on policymakers to speed up public spending to ensure their annual growth goal is met.'

Japan

Nvidia chief executive Jensen Huang visited Japan from 15 to 17 July. During the visit, he promoted semiconductor cooperation, met executives from Kioxia, Tokyo Electron and Fujitsu, and announced robotics partnerships with Fanuc and Yaskawa Electric.

Japan has been slow on the uptake in the arena of AI, and has suddenly woken up.

‘India is helping to power the AI boom – but will it shape the future or just serve it?’ the



Nvidia chief Jensen Huang (right) and SK Group chairman Chey Tae-won discuss AI and semiconductor collaboration, reflecting Asia's accelerating technology race. Photo: Reuters

Japan's Toyota wears the crown as the world's biggest carmaker. But it is facing stiff competition from China's low-cost electric-vehicle maker, BYD, which threatens to overtake its sales outside the US.

India

A CNBC Asia Pacific header blared, 'Modi is exporting India's workforce to a world turning against immigration.' The report accompanying it pointed out, 'Labor mobility deals have become a feature of many recent bilateral deals India has signed with Russia, Israel, New Zealand, Finland and the European Union.' It analysed: 'Modi's push for labor exports comes as remittances, roughly 3% of India's GDP, have become an important source of government finances.' It further commented, 'Unlike Chinese workers, who are returning home to aid local technological advancements, experts say India lacks the opportunities to provide cutting-edge work to its highly skilled labor force.'

Financial Times asked. It went on: 'Thirty years of growth in outsourced tech services has transformed India's economy. However, AI's expansion is forcing the tech sector to evolve.' The question it posed was: 'Whether data annotation to train AI models and humanoid robots is enough for India to thrive in the AI era?'

South Korea

'South Korea raises 2026 Growth, Inflation Forecasts,' said a *WSJ* banner, adding, 'Growth in Asia's fourth-largest economy is accelerating, driven by the continued semiconductor boom and policy measures.' Robust chip exports and fiscal stimulus underline the buoyancy.

UAE

The United Arab Emirates topped the 2026 Global Passport Index ranking. The GPI scoring system assigns 50% weight to visa-free travel and commercial flights availability, 25% to how friendly a country is to foreign investors, including tax regimes and business environment, and another 25% to environmental performance, personal freedoms and global reputation. There is undoubtedly a relative lack of civil liberties and media freedom in the UAE. Meanwhile, Dubai has also felt the effects of Iran's counterattack against the US and Israel's military campaign against Iran. A *WSJ* despatch read, 'Dubai Plots a Postwar Comeback That Repairs Its Shattered Image.'

Central Asia

Kazakhstan has joined the AI bandwagon. *The Times of Central*



Manyata Tech Park in Bengaluru, one of India's largest technology hubs, reflects the country's efforts to adapt its IT sector to the AI era. Photo: MFAR

Asia reported that the country's \$10 billion AI data centre project in Ekibastuz is moving into deployment.



A Soyuz spacecraft lifts off from Kazakhstan's Baikonur Cosmodrome, highlighting the country's continuing role in global space cooperation. Photo: John Kraus/NASA

The paper also reminded the world that the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan – a facility from the Soviet era – remains a 'launchpad for discovery and diplomacy'. American astronaut Anil Menon and Russian cosmonauts Pyotr Dubrov and Anna Kikina blasted off on a Russian Soyuz MS-29 spacecraft to the International Space Station, where they will spend eight months on two expeditions. It commented, 'Baikonur continues to show how nations can cooperate in space even when relations are strained.'

Singapore

Singapore's growth slowed to 5.7% in Q2 2026, but manufacturing expanded 12.2% as semiconductor demand stayed firm. However,

given that US-Iran hostilities had resumed somewhat in July and uncertainty over supply chains continued, Proxima's 2026 Global Supply Chain Resilience Outlook assessed, 'Singapore businesses are better prepared for major supply chain disruptions than their peers in other surveyed markets.' 23% of businesses can withstand shocks for up to six months.

Bangladesh

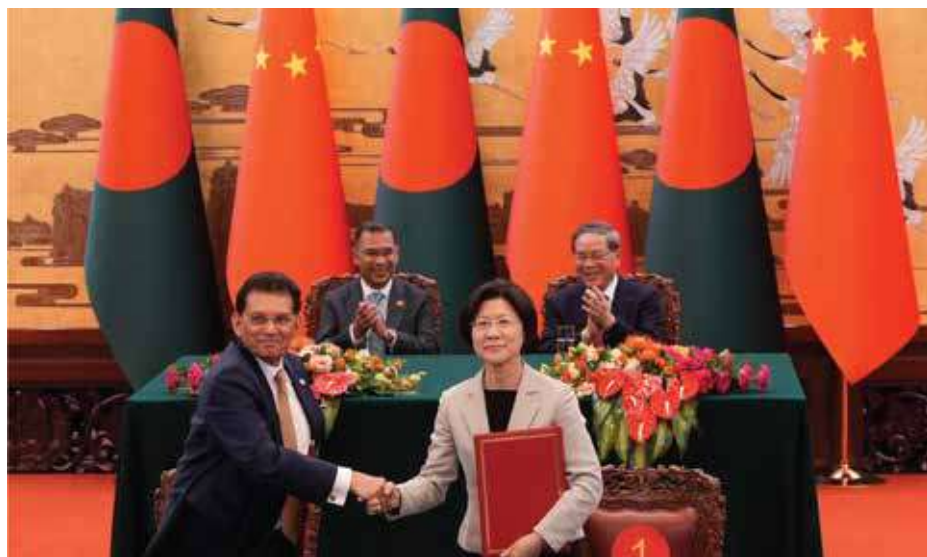
'Indian security analysts alarmed by Bangladesh-China port deal,' was the caption of an article in *Nikkei Asia*. This referred to Dhaka signing a memorandum of understanding in Beijing to develop an economic zone near Mongla Port, Bangladesh's second busiest port, just 80 kilometres from the Indian coast. India was supposed to undertake the work under a 2015 agreement, but the interim government formed by Muhammad Yunus after the ouster of pro-India Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina scrapped the project in October 2025. It was the newly elected Bangladesh Nationalist Party government, led

by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, that subsequently signed the memorandum of understanding with China during his visit to Beijing in June 2026.

Rahul Bhonsle, a retired Indian brigadier and director of Security Risks Asia, a New Delhi consultancy, felt, 'Our (India's) own slow progress [led] to China seizing the opportunity.'

Finally...

Finally, the *WSJ* ran a story which said, 'Forget France: China Is the New Foie Gras Champion.' It added, 'The Asian country makes 11,000 tons of bird-liver delicacy annually – and it costs a little more than half its French counterpart.' Whether it tastes as good is, of course, the question. French connoisseurs are likely to dispute that it does. Nadia Meliani, a French chef, moved to Beijing a decade ago to open a restaurant. Today she 'is working long days at a foie gras farm in northeast China trying to nail the perfect, mouthwatering flavor,' the *WSJ* reported.



Bangladesh and China sign cooperation agreements in Beijing, reflecting Dhaka's growing economic partnership with Beijing, including the development of an economic zone near Mongla Port. Photo: PMO



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Blending family memoir with history, the book explores empire, Partition and the creation of India and Pakistan through the lives of Husain's relatives.

Broken Threads: A Family From Empire to Independence by Mishal Husain

Mishal Husain became well known in Britain as a presenter of BBC Radio 4's flagship *Today* programme and she commentated on major royal occasions, including the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. In her new book *Broken Threads: A Family from Empire to Independence* she tells a family story with great historical significance. Published by Fourth Estate, it is reviewed here by Sindamani Subryan Bridglal.

In the 2022 broadcast, Husain deftly ushered her audience through the rituals and ceremonies of the funeral of a monarch who came to the throne in 1952, a time when the push for liberation across Britain's colonial empire had gathered momentum. A few years before, in 1947, Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Queen's second cousin and the uncle of her future husband, became the last Viceroy of British-ruled India, and first Governor-General of independent India. In *Broken Threads*, Husain tells of her own

family's connection with the transfer of power from Britain to independent India and Pakistan, a process remembered for its Partition of the Indian subcontinent.

Husain describes Mountbatten as a man in a rush. Ten weeks after his arrival in India plans were drawn up for a departing empire, an empire which had set down deep roots in all aspects of life in India, from the military, to taxation, to grain export. So much was shattered when that

boundary line was created to bring Pakistan into existence, severing peoples who had long lived within one political and social world.

Husain's family memoir *Broken Threads* could be a memoir of all the peoples of the former British Empire who lived through the redrawing of boundary lines, and of a rushed departure, though perhaps not on such a tragic, and consequential scale as on the Indian subcontinent. Husain tells the story of her maternal and



Journalist and broadcaster Mishal Husain traces her family's journey through the final years of the British Raj and Partition. Photo: Mikepaws/CC BY-SA 4.0

paternal grandparents, taking us on a journey through the Second World War, the post-war years and the creation of Pakistan, turbulent years for those who lived through the fray and snap of colonial life, men and women who through generations had cultivated the art of reading the nuances of life within the limitations of colonial society, and now, finally, after centuries, were navigating their own paths.

Mishal Husain is blessed with the treasure trove of material left by articulate, well-educated family members with a drive to bequeath to the next generation a family history lived in momentous times; diaries, memoirs, tapes and historical documents. Husain also gained access to intimate portraits through, for example, the letters of Barbara Swinburn, a British woman who wrote to her family in England about her experiences.

Husain writes about the events leading up to Partition and the great movement of people that extinguished so many lives with delicacy and nuance and can be sobering reading. For the family there were near misses. As both

Husain's grandfathers were army men, they had the connections to gain access to British planes to airlift their families safely to Pakistan. This was not available to thousands on what came to be called 'ghost trains.' Carriage after carriage left various railway stations with men, women and children, Muslims and Hindus, travelling in opposite directions, only to arrive at their destinations with passengers dead, killed on their journey.

Mishal Husain at one point wonders aloud how the shape of history might have turned out if more time and thought had been given to negotiations, and if Mountbatten and the British had allowed more time and thought had been given to negotiations, had Mountbatten and the British allowed more time for the process of handing over Britain's largest, most lucrative and most complex colony in its empire.

The narrative of a family living through such times – characters formed by ancestry and empire – is detailed and flawlessly researched. It has its dense moments, but overall this is a family that rubbed shoulders with the historical anxiety of self-rule. Husain returns to the horror of splitting one army into two, of who gets what, and who gets to keep the guns and ammunition. Betrayal is there. Shahid, her maternal grandfather, whom we get to know as a man of scrupulous character, had left his post as private secretary to Supreme Commander Auchinleck and settled his family in Pakistan. In



Muhammad Ali Jinnah with General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Fatima Jinnah and Shahid Hamid (far right), whose military career features prominently in *Broken Threads*.



General Sir Claude Auchinleck (far left) with members of the Hamid family in Simla shortly before the Partition of India in 1947.

1951, as Pakistan's Master-General of Ordnance, he found, while going through the inventories of military supplies, that what had been written down when the army supplies were divided was not what had been received.

one's own family history and how one can go about writing about it. We, the children of Empire, have all heard stories of life before the independence of our countries, of how our own grandparents lived through those momentous times.

Within the narrative are the key players: Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister in 1947, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, Lord Mountbatten, Auchinleck the last Commander-in-Chief of the pre-independence Indian army; Stafford Cripps, a member of the Churchill and Attlee governments and others.

Husain writes with verve and engaging language. She takes nothing at face value, seeks verification of family myths until she finds the truth in the libraries of Britain.

This is essentially a story of Mishal Husain's family. The way this book is written makes one think about

If there is a desire to write our own story, here is a guide, and if one simply wants to read about a family involved in the process of independence, Husain carries the reader along, for Husain carries the reader along drilling into the choices of her grandfathers and, to a lesser extent, her grandmothers. It is a narrative of men seizing opportunities both for themselves and the future of their families. It is a narrative of grandfathers who rose through the military ranks through hard work, and of choices which, if wrong, could have resulted in the deaths of family members.

The book is absorbing. Mishal Husain writes with skill, and with such a sweep of history that she creates individuals as vivid as characters in a novel. Engaging and entertaining us with wit and charm. She also conveys the depth of sadness, a sadness that lingers on, long after tragedy strikes.



Govind (centre) and Shahid Hamid (far right) served in the British Indian Army before Partition reshaped the subcontinent.

Sindamani Subryan Bridglal, who is of Tamilian heritage and was brought up in the Caribbean, is a writer and film-maker based in Britain.



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