The new drug conquering Southeast Asia

Is BRICS actually working?

Cockroaches advance their democratic protests across Indian cities

Democracy Asia

November 2026

From HIGHLAND POPPIES *to* URBAN SYNTHETICS




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Asia's drug trade is shifting from opium and heroin to synthetic drugs, with far-reaching consequences for the region.

As Myanmar's methamphetamine industry expands and the drug spreads across Asian markets, the Philippines continues to grapple with the legacy of its violent 'drug war' and the challenges of treating addiction.

The costs extend beyond trafficking and law enforcement, affecting communities, public health and the networks of power that sustain the trade.

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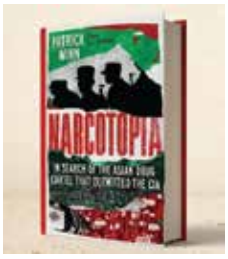
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Former president Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines goes on trial at the International Criminal Court in The Hague at the end of November for alleged crimes against humanity committed during his so-called 'war on drugs'. It is a significant moment for the Philippines, where Duterte's daughter and current vice-president, Sara, is herself on trial in the Senate on impeachment charges. It is also significant for the region, where the synthetic drug methamphetamine seems to be taking over from heroin as the recreational drug of choice.

In *Democracy Asia* this month we report on drug culture in the Philippines; we look at the country that is still regarded as the region's principal source of both heroin and methamphetamine, Myanmar; and we review the book *Narcotopia*, which tells the story of the shift from heroin to methamphetamine and the role played by the Wa in the region where Myanmar, Laos and Thailand meet, long known as the 'Golden Triangle'.

> "This month, we explore Asia's shifting drug trade, challenges to the US dollar's dominance, and the growing tensions surrounding technology and geopolitics. We also examine protests in India, the long-running Kashmir dispute, corruption in Malaysia, changing social values in China, and the impact of the Asian Games."

Another theme in this month's edition is 'de-dollarisation', moves towards reducing the central role of the dollar in international trade and investment. In Business, Sam Tully explains the moves, mainly led by China, to reduce the dominance of the US dollar and questions whether they can succeed, while Rahul Jaywant Bhise explains how leaders of the BRICS group of nations, meeting in Delhi in September, put off any decision, asking only for further study. Also in Business, Helen Davidson reports on the smuggling of advanced AI chips through Southeast Asia to China in defiance of US export controls.

Delhi and several other Indian cities have recently been the scene of large street protests led by the 'Cockroach' movement of young people, many of them students or unemployed graduates concerned at the direction of India's democracy. The protests have been fuelled by the removal of some 130 million names from the electoral rolls, which determine who may vote, in a revision by the country's Election Commission. Madhavi Ravikumar reports on the anger this revision has generated and questions its impact on Narendra Modi's government. It is not our role to predict an outcome from this protest movement but the episode has already demonstrated the important role played by the media – in this case *The Indian Express* and *The Wire* – in digging beneath the surface to find out what has gone wrong with India's democracy.

One of the longest-lasting territorial disputes in Asia – over Kashmir – is the subject of a background report by Andrew Whitehead, who explains the history of rival claims to the former princely state, parts of which are ruled by India, Pakistan and China. Clare Rewcastle Brown updates what we know of the 1MDB scandal that brought down the government of Najib Razak and led to his imprisonment.

Lijia Zhang reports how China's wealthy are moving on from conspicuous consumption to subtler markers of status – experience, taste and escape – in a society founded on the promise of equality. John Duerden assesses the impact of the recent Asian Games in Nagoya in Japan on two Asian countries, South Korea and India.

Nicholas Nugent

In India the Tata Sons feud deepens
The Tata Sons board voted on 17 September to reappoint N. Chandrasekaran as chairman for five more years, five weeks after he said he would not seek another term in February 2027. The resolution was passed over the objection of Noel Tata, chairman of the Tata Trusts, which hold 66 per cent of shares in Tata Sons. Noel questioned the use of the chairman's casting vote, asked for the video and minutes of the meeting, and tabled an opinion from a former chief justice of India, D.Y. Chandrachud. Tata Sons produced opinions from two other former judges backing the decision. The Reserve Bank of India has also rejected Tata Sons' bid to avoid a stock-market listing, which the Trusts oppose.

Rubio skips Delhi for Ambani's refinery
US Secretary of State Marco Rubio held talks with India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in Mumbai and then visited Reliance Industries' refinery at Jamnagar in Gujarat, bypassing Delhi. He toured the facility, the world's largest single-site refinery, and met members of the Ambani family, including Mukesh Ambani. Rubio called India a 'refining superpower' and said the US wanted to work more closely with Reliance on refining energy from the 'Western Hemisphere', a nod to Venezuelan crude, of which Reliance was once among the largest buyers before US sanctions disrupted the trade. The visit came weeks after the US Labor Department suspended green-card processing for eight companies, including Infosys, TCS and Wipro, which Vice-President JD Vance accused of replacing American workers with 'foreign indentured servants', a remark India called 'deeply offensive'.

Pakistan-Afghanistan cross border fighting resumes
President Asif Ali Zardari declared a state of emergency in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on 11 October and suspended the provincial government, led by the party of the imprisoned former prime minister Imran Khan. The federal cabinet accused it of disengaging from the fight against militancy. The planned march on Islamabad to demand Khan's release fizzled out after hundreds of activists were detained. The ousted chief minister, Sohail Afridi, and other party leaders are being held in 'preventive detention' at undisclosed locations. The emergency followed a suicide attack in the north-west on 18 September that killed 31 people, and fresh clashes with Afghanistan's Taliban government after talks in Moscow ended on 5 October without a joint statement. Also on 5 October, the International Criminal Court unsealed arrest warrants for four senior Taliban figures, including supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, for gender persecution.

Hormuz stalemate drags on
October has been the busiest month for attacks on shipping in the strait since March, according to the UK's maritime monitor, and the war has spread to Saudi Arabia, where a Houthi missile strike on Riyadh's airport killed 13 people. The war that began with US and Israeli strikes on 28 February remains deadlocked over the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's parliament speaker, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, said on 4 October that the strait would stay closed until Washington accepted Tehran's seven-point plan. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on 18 October that the strait could reopen within days if Washington met Tehran's conditions, which include an end to the American blockade of Iranian ports. A person briefed on the talks told Reuters that the sides largely agree on the steps but not their sequence.

China's Communist Party plenum to focus on discipline
The Communist Party's Central Committee is meeting in Beijing from 26 to 29 October for its fifth plenary session since it was formed in 2022. Xinhua gives the agenda as 'several major issues concerning the sustained advancement of full and rigorous party self-governance', which the South China Morning Post says usually means fighting corruption, tightening discipline and shoring up loyalty. The fourth plenum, in October 2025, approved recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan. This session precedes the 21st party congress in autumn 2027, when Xi Jinping is widely expected to begin a fourth term.

China/US summit extends trade truce, but little else
Xi Jinping's state visit to Washington on 23–25 September, his first to the White House in more than a decade, extended the US–China trade truce by two months, to 10 January. The two sides agreed to cut tariffs on US$30 billion of non-sensitive goods in each direction and began operating a Board of Trade and a Board of Investment, but larger disputes over technology controls, rare earths and farm purchases remain unresolved. Taiwan appeared in China's readout but not in the White House fact sheet. On 10 October Taiwan's president, Lai Ching-te, said in his National Day speech that the island cherishes peace but will not give up its freedom. Beijing accused him of clinging to a 'Taiwan independence' mindset.



The Philippines continues to confront the social and public-health consequences of its former war on drugs as the country shifts towards more compassionate approaches to treatment and recovery. Photo: Zachary Angeles

Philippines copes with drug use while recovering from 'drug war'

As former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte goes on trial on 30 November for alleged crimes against humanity, the country continues to struggle with the deep remnants of the former leader's violent anti-drug campaign. Diana Gomez Mendoza reports from Manila.

Arrested in March 2025, Duterte will face trial before the International Criminal Court's Trial Chamber III in The Hague on three counts of crimes against humanity. These involved killings allegedly committed between 2011 and 2019, when he was mayor of Davao City and subsequently during his presidency.

'Filipinos lost family members and loved ones as thousands were killed during the war on drugs in the Philippines, and people who use drugs were driven by fear due to stigma and punishment,' said Dr Ivanhoe Escartin, formerly of the Department of Health (DOH), who oversaw the agency's Dangerous Drugs Abuse Prevention and Treatment Program. Escartin, a psychiatrist who now teaches medical students at the National Center for Mental Health, said there is now 'a more compassionate and less punitive approach' under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. 'This time, there is a process that hopefully will improve,' he said.

The psychiatrist was instrumental in setting up drug abuse treatment and rehabilitation centres around the country – there are now 23. These centres are specialised, accredited health facilities operated and regulated by the Department of Health to provide holistic medical, psychological, and social interventions for persons who use drugs.

Escartin said, 'We cannot have a war on drugs because no society has ever gotten rid of drugs,' He continues to work on initiatives for drug demand reduction and advocates for early intervention for persons who use drugs.

Against this backdrop, arrests, drug buy-bust operations and confiscations continue. A regional trial court in Benguet province north of Manila sentenced two men to life in prison for selling 20 kilos of dried marijuana leaves



Drug rehabilitation centres in the Philippines provide medical, psychological and social support for people seeking treatment for substance use. Photo: Reuters

valued at more than two million pesos (roughly US$32,500).

Marijuana remains the most used substance, especially in the provinces, but methamphetamine hydrochloride, locally known as 'shabu', is the leading illicit drug of abuse and is currently increasing in prevalence in Metro Manila and many other urban centres, according to the Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) in its 2023 National Household Survey on the Patterns and Trends of Drug Abuse.

The DDB said 'shabu' is rapidly becoming the main highlight of law enforcement activities. In September 2026 alone, the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency and the Philippine National Police carried out six anti-drug operations that resulted in the arrest of more than 300 suspects and the confiscation of hundreds of millions of pesos worth of 'shabu'. While the DDB said the number of persons who use drugs has declined from approximately 1.67 million in 2019 down to 1.47 million in 2023, or 196,000 fewer individuals, 'shabu' accounts for over 95 per cent of drug-related treatment admissions in health facilities.

The agency said the use of heroin, while also classified as a dangerous drug, is rare in the country, although possession of even five grams carries penalties of heavy fines and life imprisonment under the law, the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act. Dr Joselito Pascual, an addiction specialist at the Philippine General Hospital, said 'shabu' continues to represent one of the country's most formidable illicit drug challenges. 'Its clinical consequences are familiar to our emergency departments and



Methamphetamine, locally known as 'shabu', remains a major focus of drug enforcement and treatment efforts in the Philippines. Photo: Joven Cagande



Thai police display seized crystal methamphetamine, highlighting the regional challenge of tackling drug trafficking in Southeast Asia. Photo: Sakchai Lalit/AP

hospitals: severe intoxication, cardiovascular complications, agitation, seizures, and stimulant-induced psychosis,' he said. 'More than a decade ago, international reports described the Philippines as having one of the highest rates of methamphetamine use in East Asia. The illicit drug economy was estimated to be worth billions of dollars annually,' he said.

In September, Pascual and his fellow specialists founded the Philippine Academy of Addiction and Recovery Medicine, where he is president, to provide evidence-based studies and treatment as the substance abuse landscape continues to change in the Philippines. The University of the Philippines has also opened a Drugs of Abuse Research Laboratory to supply health and law-enforcement agencies with testing data.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's 2023 report on synthetic drugs in East and Southeast Asia noted that the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, have for years been key transit countries for methamphetamine trafficking and large-scale production. The report said methamphetamine is the main substance used by those admitted for treatment, even as poly-drug use in the Philippines has been of concern for years, with drug authorities noting that persons use methamphetamine in combination with MDMA, various benzodiazepines and pharmaceutical drugs, and other substances.



Street-connected children in the Philippines face heightened risks from substance use, highlighting the need for protection, support and evidence-based interventions. Photo: Lcue Par Jzul

Dr Pascual backed the report, saying that, next to marijuana and 'shabu', MDMA or 'Ecstasy' and other substances associated with recreational nightlife and rave culture have introduced another dimension of risk, particularly when illicit products contain mixtures of unknown substances.

Children, especially street adolescents and teenagers in cities and urban centres, are not spared from the drug situation, as many of them use 'rugby' or solvent, the most common substance of abuse. The DDB said the toluene-based 'rugby', a term for a popular brand of industrial glue, is recognised as a dangerous psychotropic substance that is highly toxic and 'produces an intense, rapid high that can cause hallucinations and euphoria and can cause damage to the central nervous system, leading to cognitive impairment.'

Street children inhale the substance contained in small plastic bags or pieces of cloth while climbing over jeepneys or sprawled on the streets. For these marginalised street children who may be neglected or abused, the 'high' serves to numb their hunger and mental and emotional feelings of distress, depression and anxiety. The University of the Philippines has also pioneered an ongoing transdisciplinary study into the physical, chemical and psychological impacts of solvent abuse on the country's street children.

Diana Gomez Mendoza is a Philippine-based independent journalist reporting on health, science, human rights, and socio-political issues.



Myanmar authorities destroy seized narcotics, as the country's illicit drug economy expands beyond opium into synthetic drugs. Photo: Myo Min Soe and Zaw Zaw/The Irrawaddy

Beyond opium: Myanmar's 'meth' economy goes industrial

Myanmar is again the world's largest illicit opium producer, but a far larger illicit business is industrial-scale methamphetamine – made in Myanmar's war-torn borderlands and sold across Asia. Myanmar's drug economy has gone synthetic, as Nyein Chan Aye reports.

In Yangon, a man in his 50s who asked not to be named, said yaba – cheap methamphetamine tablets – has become 'practically everywhere' and much cheaper. On a recent trip to Shan State, he said he saw stimulant tablets being pressed inside homes using small, makeshift machines. The Institute for Strategy and Policy–Myanmar reported a similar trend in February, saying small pill presses allow tablets to be made 'on the spot' as production technology becomes more accessible.

That street-level abundance reflects a wider transformation. Alastair MacBeath, Southeast Asia coordinator at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, placed Myanmar among the world's main methamphetamine centres. 'Myanmar is certainly one of the largest, if not the largest, synthetic meth producers globally,' he said. He described the market as 'a massive generator of wealth' that is 'completely integrated into governance systems'.

Meth at scale

Regional methamphetamine seizures reached a record 349 tonnes in 2025, up 48 per cent in a year and more than five times the amount seized a decade earlier. Price trends also point to abundant supply: the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) recorded Myanmar as the region's cheapest crystal-meth



Myanmar and its neighbours, through which its synthetic drugs reach markets across Asia. Map: ASEAN urbanist

market in 2024, at about US$6 a gram.

Patrick Winn, author of *Narcotopia*, said the economics favour synthetics. 'From satellites, a methamphetamine lab can look like a barn or a school or anything else,' he said. 'Synthetics – namely methamphetamine – are the powerhouse pillar of the narcotics economy in Myanmar and Asia writ large.'

Chemicals and landlords

The industry depends on chemicals moving across borders. MacBeath said producers have shifted from tightly controlled ephedrine and pseudoephedrine towards pre-precursors, many with legitimate industrial uses.

Winn said he has seen no evidence of Chinese state involvement in precursor trafficking, but called Chinese commercial supply essential. 'Point blank, period: without chemicals coming from China, from China's huge pharmaceutical industrial sector, the narcotics economy in Myanmar would shrivel up within a few months. It absolutely relies on these chemicals.'

Beijing imposed licensing controls on additional chemicals bound for Myanmar, Laos and Afghanistan in 2024. India is another source: MacBeath described diverted pharmaceutical chemicals moving from the Indian state of Mizoram through Myanmar's Chin State to Shan State. UNODC has also documented increased chemical seizures along the India-Myanmar border.

Both MacBeath and Winn described a 'landlord' model in parts of Shan State: professional criminal groups run laboratories, while territorial authorities provide space and protection in exchange for rents or taxes. 'The armed group that controls the territory is not the main force manufacturing the drugs,' Winn said. 'What they are is landlords.'

MacBeath described the military's role as more indirect, citing revenues from drugs crossing military-controlled checkpoints and possible precursor facilitation by people within the military-government structure. 'They are, but how they're involved is quite complex, and it's people within the military structure that are benefiting,' he said, while cautioning that firm evidence is difficult to establish.



Thai police examine seized drugs in Bangkok, highlighting the wider regional context of Myanmar's synthetic-drug trade. Photo: Reuters/Artorn Pookasook

Winn said military-aligned People's Militia Forces and some Border Guard Forces have long been allowed to finance themselves through illicit economies in exchange for loyalty. UNODC has also found industrial drug laboratories and scam centres operating side by side in Myanmar, sharing protection, logistics and financial networks.

Meth across Asia

From Myanmar, drugs move through Thailand and Laos, west towards Bangladesh and India, and through Malaysia and Indonesia. MacBeath called Australia and New Zealand 'the prize' because prices there are 'astronomical'. Bangladesh, Winn said, has become an important market for cheaper yaba.

The authorities and armed organisations also publicise anti-drug efforts. In June, Myanmar authorities destroyed more than US$600 million worth of seized narcotics. The United Wa State Army, an anti-government militia dominant in north-eastern Myanmar, cites its 2005 drug ban and describes its territory as drug-free. Its spokesman Nyi Rang did not respond to Democracy Asia's request for comment on experts' descriptions of protection arrangements in Wa-controlled areas.

In September, the Trump administration listed Myanmar among 23 major drug-transit or illicit drug-producing countries for fiscal 2027 and among four deemed to have 'failed demonstrably' to meet international counternarcotics obligations.

What the coup changed

Myanmar's industrial meth trade predates the 2021 coup. A 2026 study by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime found a long-term upward trajectory before and after the takeover, driven by improvements in synthesis, management and trafficking rather than a sudden post-coup production surge.

Opium, however, has resurged alongside the boom in synthetics. UNODC estimates cultivation rose 17 per cent in 2025 to 53,100 hectares, a decade high, with Shan State accounting for 88 per cent. Potential production reached about 1,010 tonnes and the gross opiate economy was valued at US$1.05 billion. Winn linked the revival partly to worsening rural poverty, saying more families have turned to 'the most profitable crop' available.



Members of the Karenni State Police search travellers for yaba, a type of methamphetamine, at a checkpoint in southern Shan State, Myanmar. Photo: Gemunu Amarasinghe/RFA



Children play at a camp for internally displaced people in Myitkyina, Kachin State, where conflict continues to disrupt everyday life. Photo: Nyan Zay Htet/UNICEF

In Myitkyina, northern Myanmar, a former heroin user said a bottle of heroin that cost K50,000 when he was a student now sells for about K10,000 – roughly US$2.50 at K4,000 to the dollar, and less than a litre of petrol. 'Drugs are the only thing I've ever seen where the price actually plummets,' he said.

An aid worker said HIV positivity among detox clients tested there had risen from roughly one in ten to one in two – not a national estimate. Another described private 'High Rooms' for drug parties becoming routine in Yangon, Mandalay and the capital, Naypyidaw.

Back in Myitkyina, close to some of northern Myanmar's heaviest fighting, the same man said military authorities restrict basic goods while police outposts operate in every ward.

'While people get arrested for transporting cement or oil, nobody gets arrested for dealing or transporting drugs. There is absolutely no way these drugs are moving around without the authorities turning a blind eye.'

According to MacBeath, illicit economies are 'very much integrated into the politics and the conflict and the peacebuilding side', rooted in the 'ceasefire capitalism' of earlier decades. Any future peace process, he argued, will have to confront them.

Nor does he expect synthetic drugs to become easier to contain. 'Unlike opium and cocaine, which are crop-based, synthetics can be produced anywhere and they can be integrated into anything,' MacBeath said. The response, he argued, requires more than seizures: tighter precursor controls, action against underground banking and cryptocurrency platforms, and better tracking of shifting routes.

'The threat that's coming out of Myanmar – be it scams, drugs, human trafficking – goes across the world,' he said. The response, he added, needs 'a very clear-headed reset' at the policy level.

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*.



A protester climbs a police barricade during a march in New Delhi demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, reflecting growing tensions over electoral transparency and institutional accountability. Photo: Manish Swarup/AP

‘Cockroaches never die’ – the generation testing Modi’s institutions

The streets of India’s main cities have become a testing ground for institutional accountability. Protests against the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls and demands for Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar’s resignation have brought student organisations, opposition parties and the youth-driven Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) together. Madhavi Ravikumar considers the implications for Narendra Modi’s government.

India’s famed democracy is going through something of a crisis. With roughly 130 million names removed from voter lists during the SIR, protesters fear widespread disenfranchisement, particularly among marginalised communities. The Election Commission says most of those removed had died, moved away or were duplicate entries. In Hyderabad, demonstrators sang a Hindi version of *Bella Ciao*, renamed the exercise ‘Special Intensive Resistance’ and alleged that it amounted to a National Register of Citizens (NRC) through the back door – a proposed citizenship register that critics fear would target Muslims and the poor. Their demands centre on constitutional safeguards, electoral transparency and institutional accountability.

Public scrutiny intensified following a 23 September investigation by Ritika Chopra in *The Indian Express*, which revealed that two of the commission’s three members, Election Commissioners, Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and



Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi join opposition leaders marching towards the Supreme Court in New Delhi to protest the controversial revision of voter lists, amid wider concerns over electoral transparency and the Election Commission's accountability. Photo: Reuters

Vivek Joshi, had recorded at least 14 objections over ten months to decisions allegedly taken without their knowledge or against their advice. These covered voter registration, the deletion and restoration of names, the centralisation of the voter database and court appeals. The Election Commission acknowledged the notes but maintained that decisions were unanimous. The revelations nevertheless raised serious questions about internal deliberation, transparency and institutional independence within the body entrusted with safeguarding India's electoral process.



Abhijeet Dipke addresses protesters; his satirical question inspired the Cockroach Janta Party. Photo: Getty Images

Further concerns emerged from *The Wire*'s reporting that Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) has run ERONET 2.0, the software that manages the electoral rolls, since 2023 – an arrangement the Election Commission never announced. Coming on top of the commissioners' objections and the mass deletions, this raises broader questions about public oversight, private contractors and accountability in India's increasingly digitised electoral machinery.

From examination halls to electoral resistance

The present mobilisation builds on the summer's examination protests. In May, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant's comparison of unemployed youth with 'cockroaches' (he later said he meant people with fake degrees) inspired activist Abhijeet Dipke's satirical question: 'What if all cockroaches come together?' The resulting Cockroach Janta Party mobilised young people through social media and sustained demonstrations at Jantar Mantar, Delhi's designated protest site, following a paper leak of the national medical-school entrance examination. Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned on 25 July amid mounting public pressure, describing his departure as necessary to prevent 'anti-national forces' from exploiting the agitation. The movement declared victory. Its significance, however, extends beyond a ministerial resignation: grievances over educational opportunity have increasingly converged with demands for electoral accountability, suggesting a widening crisis of confidence in public institutions.

When the state confronts dissent

The state's response to the street protests intensified concerns



It was reported that 20,000 armed security personnel were brought to the capital ahead of the Cockroach Janta Party's 16 October protest, as authorities tightened security around demonstrations demanding the Election Commission chief's resignation. Photo: Democracy Asia

about democratic freedoms. On 10 and 11 October, barricades, transport restrictions, internet suspensions and preventive detentions disrupted demonstrations in Delhi and several other cities. CJP leaders, opposition figures and activists were among those detained. The Committee to Protect Journalists documented the detention of at least 43 journalists and reported incidents of obstruction and assault. The committee's Kunal Majumder described the incidents as 'deeply troubling and a blot on India's democratic traditions'. The treatment of reporters has raised concerns about press freedom and the constitutional right to document public dissent.

Judicial scrutiny has added another dimension. The Supreme Court has sought the Election Commission's response to the disputed decisions, though it declined to suspend the Chief Election Commissioner, and has directed that journalists and lawyers covering the protests must not be obstructed. After his release, CJP spokesperson Saurav Das, held with Dipke on 10 October, accused the government of fearing politically awakened youth. The protesters' slogan, 'Cockroaches never die', captures the movement's defiance and its transformation of a derogatory label into a collective political identity.

A generation losing faith in institutions

These protests retain a distinctly constitutional character. Student organisations invoke voting rights, opposition parties demand electoral accountability, and petitioners seek judicial scrutiny. Yet beneath these demands lies deepening generational insecurity. India's young people confront persistent unemployment, unequal educational opportunities and intense competition for public-sector employment. For millions of young Indians, competitive examinations represent a pathway to social mobility. Allegations of examination irregularities and electoral-roll exclusions therefore reinforce perceptions of institutional failure. The convergence of economic insecurity, digital mobilisation and institutional distrust has given recent protests their distinctive political momentum.

The Modi government faces a political dilemma. Conceding demands for the Chief Election Commissioner's resignation would carry institutional implications far beyond a ministerial departure, potentially intensifying scrutiny of electoral administration. However, continued restrictions on demonstrations risk deepening generational alienation. The government maintains that electoral-roll revisions are necessary for accuracy, while protesters question their transparency and fairness. Meanwhile, the CJP's meme-driven mobilisation demonstrates how satire can transform political disillusionment into collective action, blurring the line between online expression and street politics.

Youth resistance beyond borders

India's unrest reflects a broader pattern of youth mobilisation, although its political trajectory differs from movements elsewhere. In Bangladesh, student protests against quotas in government jobs escalated into the 2024 uprising that ended Sheikh Hasina's rule. In Nepal, anger over corruption and restrictions on social media toppled Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's government in September 2025. Both movements demonstrated how youth grievances could expand into challenges to political authority. India's protests, by contrast, have largely focused on institutional accountability within the existing constitutional framework.



India's youth mobilisation echoes student protest elsewhere, like here in Bangladesh, where grievances over fairness and opportunity grew into wider demands for accountability. Photo: Reuters

Beyond Asia, student movements reveal similarly diverse expressions of generational discontent. In France, high-school students have blockaded hundreds of schools since September over teacher shortages and crumbling buildings. German pupils have staged school strikes against a new military service law that many fear will bring back conscription, while Serbia's sustained student-led mobilisation following the deadly 2024 collapse of a railway-station canopy in Novi Sad has placed corruption and state accountability under scrutiny. In Brazil, students have marched against the presidential bid of Flávio Bolsonaro, son of the jailed former president Jair Bolsonaro. Although their demands differ, these movements reveal how education, economic insecurity, militarisation and democratic accountability increasingly intersect in youth politics. Their outcomes, however, depend on national political conditions, organisational capacity and state responses – and online visibility does not automatically translate into political change.

What distinguishes India's emerging youth mobilisation is its insistence that democratic institutions fulfil their constitutional responsibilities. Rather than demanding wholesale regime change, protesters are questioning whether educational, electoral and judicial institutions can deliver fairness and accountability. Their mobilisation also raises difficult questions about representation: whose voices dominate these movements, and whether digitally visible activism can accommodate the experiences of marginalised youth. The larger question is whether sustained public pressure can produce institutional reform, meaningful political participation and renewed democratic trust. For India's young generation, the outcome may shape its relationship with democracy for years to come.

The streets have spoken across continents. The institutions must now decide whether they will listen.

Dr Madhavi Ravikumar teaches at the Department of Communication, University of Hyderabad, India.



Dal Lake and Char Chinar in Kashmir, a region renowned for its natural beauty yet marked by decades of territorial conflict between India and Pakistan. Photo: Suhail Skindar Sofi/CC BY-SA 4.0

Kashmir, a mountain valley that has become a nuclear flashpoint

One of the oldest territorial disputes in Asia concerns the former princely state of Kashmir in the western Himalayas, which has been the subject of rival claims and wars between India and Pakistan since 1947. Different parts of the state are controlled by India, Pakistan and even China. Andrew Whitehead reports.

'If there is paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this'. This verse couplet from many centuries ago is said to be in praise of the beauty of Kashmir. Its dramatic scenery of mountains and lakes, fertile groves and bounteous orchards, is of global renown. But for as long as any Kashmiri can remember, their valley has been more a battlefield than a fabled arcadia.

For almost eighty years, the Kashmir Valley has been fought over by India and Pakistan. Of the four wars that India and Pakistan have waged since independence (including the 1999 Kargil conflict), three have been fought largely in and about Kashmir. An insurgency within Indian Kashmir stretching back to the late 1980s – now at a low ebb but still not extinguished – has claimed tens of thousands of lives and blighted millions more.

Kashmir remains the main fault line between two nuclear-armed neighbours. No wonder that Bill Clinton, when president of the United States, described Kashmir as perhaps the most dangerous place in the world.

Both India and Pakistan claim sovereignty over all the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, while control of the territory is divided between them. The larger part, in terms of population, rests with India. At its core, the conflict is about the Kashmir Valley, which constitutes not even a tenth of the area of the former princely state and is home to fewer than half its total population. The valley is the heartland of Kashmiri culture. It has a population of about seven million, is overwhelmingly Muslim, and is governed by India.

The competing narratives about Kashmir – India's, Pakistan's, and the Kashmiri nationalist version – suggest that the story is simple and



Border fencing along the India–Pakistan border, highlighting the territorial divide at the heart of the Kashmir dispute. Photo: Mukesh Gupta/Reuters

that the territorial claim they assert is incontestable. In fact, the modern history of Kashmir is complex. But it is impossible to understand why the Kashmir dispute has been so intractable without appreciating how it started.

The British are often blamed for the inception of the Kashmir crisis. In 1846, the British authorities sold the Kashmir Valley to a Jammu-based warlord who had helped defeat the Sikh kingdom based in Lahore. The price was a few million rupees and an annual tribute of goats and shawls. That dynasty – Dogra by culture and Hindu by religion – became the princely rulers of the region.

Over the decades, the maharajahs of Kashmir accumulated territories with little in common beyond their ruler. The princely state had two main constituents: Jammu, in part an extension of the plains of Punjab and which is now mainly Hindu, and to its north, the large, flat-bottomed vale of Kashmir in the Himalayan foothills.

In 1947, the British failed to resolve the enduring status of Kashmir before pulling out in a hurry and partitioning British India into the two independent nations of India and Pakistan. In legal terms, the decision over which new nation to join lay with the maharajah, Hari Singh. He was attracted to the idea of an independent Kashmir. Two months after India and Pakistan gained independence, an armed force from Pakistan – a tribal militia encouraged by some in the new government – invaded the Kashmir Valley. That prompted the maharajah to flee to Jammu, and once there he signed his princely state up to becoming part of India.

India's armed forces staged a dramatic air lift to Kashmir which succeeded in pushing back the invading forces. This developed into the first war between India and Pakistan. The ceasefire deal which ended it divided the former princely state between India and Pakistan, and that line – now known as the Line of Control – has changed little in the intervening decades.

Pakistan, established as a nation for South Asia's Muslims, has always argued that ties of religion, culture and commerce underscore its claim to the Kashmir Valley.



Kashmir's territorial divisions extend beyond India and Pakistan, with China controlling parts of the former princely state. Map: The World in Maps

India insists that the maharajah had the right to decide on accession and that, at the time, his decision to become part of India had the support of the commanding Kashmiri nationalist of the last century, Sheikh Abdullah. He was a Muslim and became the first prime minister of Indian Kashmir.

There are several further layers of complexity. As well as India and Pakistan, a third nuclear power, China, governs some of what were the maharajah's dominions. It controls Aksai Chin, a large and almost totally unpopulated high-altitude region adjoining Ladakh. And a little further west, China also has possession of an area ceded by Pakistan, the Shaksgam Valley, which is of potential strategic significance but has next-to-no permanent residents.

Another factor is the commitment made by the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, to allow the people of the former princely state a plebiscite about their future status. That vote never happened; and many of those in the Kashmir Valley continued to hanker after independence, however unrealistic that may seem.

The anti-India insurgency which erupted in the Kashmir Valley at the end of the 1980s was sparked off by young Kashmiris who had been armed and trained in camps across the Line of Control in Pakistan Kashmir. The Indian army's response was forceful – many Kashmiris would say brutal. For several years, Srinagar felt like a war zone, with curfews, checkpoints and street-corner bunkers swathed in anti-grenade netting.

While Indian security forces gained the upper hand, they never



Indian security forces patrol a deserted street in Srinagar following the revocation of Kashmir's special status, highlighting the impact of the decision on daily life. Photo: Reuters/Danish Ismail

completely crushed the armed militants. And persistent allegations of human rights abuses alienated many Kashmiris. Disaffection with India runs deep, but there is little evident enthusiasm for Pakistan.

In August 2019 Delhi's Hindu nationalist government revoked the limited autonomy granted to Kashmir by India's constitution, arguing that this amounted to appeasement of the country's only Muslim-majority region. The move, and the manner of its implementation, caused anguish in Kashmir. The Kashmir Valley continues to face high levels of youth unemployment, and civil society has just about disappeared. But security improved markedly, prompting Indian tourists to return to the northernmost part of their nation.

The Indian authorities at times suggested that the upsurge in tourism demonstrated that normality had returned to the Kashmir Valley. That may be why mainly Indian tourists were the target of a vicious militant attack near the Kashmiri resort town of Pahalgam in April 2025 in which twenty-six people were killed. India blamed Pakistan, which denied involvement, and undertook cross-border military operations in response until a ceasefire on 10 May 2025. President Donald Trump claimed credit for brokering it; India says it was agreed directly between the two militaries.

And the prospects for peace? Well, almost twenty years ago, the then military ruler of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, proposed a peace deal for Kashmir. Under this, both India and Pakistan would have kept those parts of the former princely state they controlled; the Line of Control would have been made porous; and both armies would in time have pulled back from the main population centres. India was interested in the proposals – but President Musharraf lost power before the plan could be developed. Many regard that as the best chance there has been for a lasting settlement, and lament that the opportunity was lost.



Tourism has returned to parts of Kashmir, but the 2025 attack near Pahalgam exposed the region's continuing security risks. Photo: Jannes Jacobs/Unsplash

Andrew Whitehead is the author of *A Mission in Kashmir*.



Najib Razak's government was brought down by the 1MDB scandal, which exposed the diversion of billions of dollars from Malaysia's sovereign wealth fund. Photo: Hasnoor Hussain/Reuters

Update on the scandal that brought down a government

The 1MDB scandal brought down the Malaysian government after US financial investigators and investigative journalists showed that around US$5 billion had been stolen from the country's sovereign wealth fund. What came to be known as the world's greatest financial scandal led to the arrest and jailing of former prime minister Najib Razak as well as the son of a former prime minister of Kuwait. A new study shows that those responsible for the fraud, including Malaysian Jho Low, attempted to cover their tracks by inflating the costs of China-backed projects in Malaysia. Investigative journalist Clare Rewcastle Brown, author of a new book *The China Contract*, tells the story.

Najib Razak served as Malaysia's prime minister from 2009, until his coalition's defeat at the polls in 2018. From an early stage in his premiership, Najib was determined to build a war chest to secure his position as prime minister. He tasked the youthful, Penang born, ex-Harrovian, Jho Low, to act as his proxy in setting up a sovereign wealth fund, One Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), that would borrow billions on behalf of the taxpayer to invest in profit-making ventures and develop the economy, or so it was claimed.

The actual plan was to divert those billions to fund Najib's political patronage and the lavish lifestyle of his second wife, Rosmah Mansor. Jho Low duly organised the theft of the bulk of 1MDB's borrowed money, diverting much of it for his own use which he splurged on an ostentatious display of wealth that started to catch headlines – bringing attention from reporters like myself.

In July 2016 the reckoning came with a devastating public press conference by the US Department of Justice announcing the seizure of $1.7 billion worth of property in the United States purchased with

the stolen money, including the film *Wolf of Wall Street* owned by a production company belonging to Rosmah's son. Najib was left struggling to deny the forensically detailed money trails revealed by the US investigation and trying to refinance the mountain of debt of borrowed money that had disappeared into such frivolous expenditures.

Jho Low, advised by the Southeast Asia boss of Goldman Sachs, Tim Leissner (now jailed in the US) and an associate, Malaysian Roger Ng, initially planned to disguise the thefts by floating the fund on the Kuala Lumpur stock market. Najib, in his dual role as finance minister, could encourage government linked companies and pension funds to invest. The exposure put paid to that scenario leaving the conspirators with hundreds of millions in debt repayments which they needed to pretend could be met by 1MDB itself to maintain their falsely audited narrative that no money had actually gone missing.

Jho Low reached out to Beijing for his 'Big Boss' and started to employ his contacts in the Gulf. The urgent task was to find a way to purloin further billions from the Malaysian taxpayer in order to channel funds back into 1MDB to pay off its increasingly frustrated creditors, who included IPIC, the Abu Dhabi petroleum wealth fund. The original thefts and money laundering were performed with the none too scrupulous assistance of a shocking number of international banks and professionals who turned a collective blind eye to off-shore jiggery pokery by the increasingly suspicious Jho Low. The Malaysian perpetrators used China's Belt and Road initiative to disguise the next round of thefts.

The scheme due to be presented to the Malaysian cabinet on 27 July



Jho Low, Najib's associate and alleged proxy in the 1MDB scheme, is accused of helping orchestrate the diversion of billions of dollars from the fund. Photo: Sam Tsang

2016 was to inflate the proposed budget to link Malaysia's east coast to Port Klang on the Malacca Strait by 100 per cent, turning it into a Belt and Road project to be financed through a loan from China under the Chinese construction giant CCCC. A leaked document detailed how the extra money, $8 billion, would be siphoned out over five years to pay off 1MDB debts and other costs run up by Jho Low's activities.

Much of this would be undone by the subsequent government which scaled back the cost of the now virtually completed contract considerably after Najib was defeated at the 2018 election. In the meantime, the desperate prime minister had raised another $2 billion through a second Belt and Road 'pipeline' project which specifically allowed for 88 per cent of the project money to be loaned up front, again from China's Exim Bank. That cash had disappeared and the projected Trans Sabah Gas Pipeline and Peninsular West Coast 'multi-product' oil Pipelines remained largely unbuilt (to be later scrapped). It was not till 2020, when I received a call from Syrian French national Bachar Kiwan, that I was able to solve what happened.

Through Kiwan I learnt that Jho Low had arranged a meeting with the Kuwait prime minister to discuss yet another Belt and Road project proposed by China for which the young Malaysian was mysteriously acting as the broker. The project, again billed as an $8 billion investment, was also a façade. Nonetheless, Jho was given Chinese diplomatic support and accompanied on his visit to Kuwait by an impressive array of senior Chinese officials including Li Shan, CEO of the Belt and Road Finance Corporation.

The purpose of these arrangements was to channel the cash from the bogus Malaysian pipeline project



US investigators traced billions of dollars allegedly stolen from 1MDB through a global network of accounts, companies and luxury assets. Photo: Reuters



Malaysia's East Coast Rail Link, a China-backed infrastructure project that became entangled in allegations that inflated costs were used to help cover 1MDB debts. Photo: Bloomberg

into a company belonging to the Kuwaiti prime minister's son, Sheikh Sabah Jaber Mubarak al-Sabah, which was designated as the local agency for CCCC, which once again was the nominated contractor.

Malaysia's pipeline loans were to be channeled through CCCC subsidiaries into the Kuwaiti accounts of Sheikh Sabah and then on through a Cayman Island offshore entity, which then employed a fake land purchase from 1MDB. This provided funds to pay a major debt owed to Abu Dhabi, which had bailed out Najib in the first instance and was by 2017 angrily demanding repayment. All of these transactions went through accounts at China's ICBC Bank in Chinese yuan, thereby avoiding the scrutiny of western banking regulators.

Had Najib continued in office he would, as a result of these compromising actions have been indebted to China for his survival.

Democracy prevailed at the 2018 elections when the electorate united in disgust at the plunder already revealed to have taken place through 1MDB.

My later coverage of the Kuwaiti cover up would have a similar impact. The former prime minister initially protected his son by arresting Kiwan under various pretexts and was able to stave off official enquiries. However, once the story came out, popular anger prevailed there also with the arrest and conviction of Sheikh Sabah. In Malaysia, Najib was convicted in 2025 on four charges of abuse of power and twenty-one charges of money laundering for his presiding role over the thefts from 1MDB and sentenced to a further 15 years' imprisonment. He had been jailed earlier for a related, Jho Low assisted, multi-million-dollar theft from Malaysia's public sector pension fund. Jho Low remains on the run in China with an apparent stash of billions with which he has sought to buy pardons from both Malaysia and the United States, without success.

In both Malaysia and the Gulf, public interest reporting played a role in informing against high-level corruption which led to the rightful downfall of those who had abused office for the purposes of power and self-enrichment.



The 1MDB scandal ultimately led to Najib Razak's downfall and convictions, while Jho Low remains at large despite years of investigations into the missing billions.

Clare Rewcastle Brown is the author of *The Sarawak Report* and *The China Contract*, which tell in detail the story of the scandal which brought Malaysia's government down.

Publisher's link: saqibooks.com



A luxury countryside retreat in China reflects a shift in status, from displaying expensive possessions to purchasing privacy, nature and exclusive experiences. Photo: Lijia Zhang

From designer bags to bamboo groves

Lijia Zhang reflects on how experience, taste and escape became the markers of status in the new China.

Last autumn, I returned to China with my two daughters. My sister took us and the rest of her extended family to a luxury resort amid bamboo-covered hills and tea plantations outside Nanjing. A large white villa rose above a reflecting pool, with glass-fronted terraces, manicured lawns and palm trees. It looked like a vision of California transported to the Chinese countryside.

The resort offered quiet, clean air and carefully tended nature. We could admire the hills without farming them, enjoy local flavours without worrying about the harvest and retreat indoors whenever the weather turned. A butler with a car was available to drive us anywhere, at any time.

When did the Chinese countryside cease to be somewhere people struggled to escape and become an experience the rich paid to enter?

My own life spans an extraordinary transformation in what consumption means in China. I grew up in a poor working-class family in Nanjing, when food and cloth were rationed and almost nothing was wasted. In 1980, at sixteen, I was taken out of school and put to work in a factory producing intercontinental missiles. For families like mine, consumption was a calculation of necessity: what could be obtained, saved or done without.

In the 70s, possession of a bicycle, watch, sewing machine and radio signalled that a household was doing well. Later came colour televisions, refrigerators and washing machines; then private apartments, imported cars and foreign labels. As reform and opening gathered pace, possessions took on new meanings. By the 1990s and 2000s, China's new wealthy often displayed their success loudly. Banquets grew more extravagant; logos grew larger. Cars, watches, handbags and apartments announced how far their owners had come. Some men, including my businessman brother-in-law, even left the labels on the sleeves of their new suits. A society that had long condemned bourgeois

indulgence learned to read the language of brands.

Thorstein Veblen's phrase ‘conspicuous consumption’ seemed made for the moment: people bought things partly to make their social position visible. That phase has not disappeared. China remains an enormous market for luxury goods, and a Hermès bag or a German car still communicates wealth. Yet among affluent consumers, particularly the better educated, the signs of status are becoming subtler. The coveted luxury may now be a secluded villa among bamboo groves, glamping on the Mongolian steppe in a private yurt with a portable shower, a helicopter ride over an unspoilt landscape or a hunting trip in Africa. One of my most unusual meals was dinner inside a karst cave, beneath dramatically lit stalactites. For those with 5.1 million yuan to spare, Trip.com is even offering a suborbital spaceflight planned for 2027.

Market researchers have noticed the shift. McKinsey's 2026 study of luxury consumers in China and the United States organised their expectations around four ideas: desirability, exclusivity, moments and discovery. Oliver Wyman found that younger Chinese travellers were redirecting spending from luxury labels towards food, local culture and wellness. Even as China's market for personal luxury goods contracted in 2025, spending on experiences proved more resilient.

Status consumption has changed its vocabulary. The old message was: ‘Look how much money I have.’ The new one is: ‘Look how discerning I am; look what I have discovered; look how freely I can use my time.’

Social media makes apparently private experiences highly visible.



Designer goods, watches and imported cars became powerful symbols of wealth as China’s consumer culture expanded during the reform era. Photo: INITI

A secluded retreat promises escape from the crowd, but also supplies images for social media platforms such as WeChat Moments or Xiaohongshu: an empty terrace at dawn, tea beside a mountain stream, a dinner made with seasonal ingredients. The display is quieter than a diamond-studded watch, but no less legible to those who understand the code.

Knowing which remote guesthouse to book, independent designer to wear or regional cuisine to seek out demonstrates cultural knowledge as well as money. Obvious extravagance can now appear crude. Luxury must look discovered rather than purchased, even when a substantial bill lies behind it.

Our family visit brought home another aspect of this trend: the affluent are buying escape. China's economic rise has produced spectacular cities, but also crowded public spaces, punishing competition and exhausting work. A rural retreat offers distance from noise, schedules and scrutiny. Its greatest luxury may be the feeling of having nowhere else to be.

Time is part of the purchase. To travel slowly, cultivate a hobby or spend several days doing very little requires more than disposable income. It requires confidence that one's job, business and savings are secure. In a society built through relentless labour and sacrifice, the ability to be unproductive has become a mark of privilege.



Luxury glamping retreats offer affluent Chinese travellers a way to enjoy remote landscapes and exclusive experiences away from crowded cities. Photo: Saiyuen



Tea houses and mountain views in Meijiawu Tea Village, Hangzhou, reflect the growing appeal of scenic escapes and carefully curated experiences among China's affluent consumers. Photo: Go China Freely

This helps explain an apparent contradiction. By the usual economic measures, China still struggles with weak household consumption and a high savings rate. Yet culturally, it is unmistakably a consumer society. Goods and experiences help people construct identities, express aspirations and locate one another within the social hierarchy. A country can consume too little as a share of its economy while allowing consumption to occupy an enormous place in its imagination.

Purchasing power determines the worlds one can enter. Money buys a quieter neighbourhood, better schooling, more dependable medical care, foreign travel and freedom from many inconveniences of public life. At the highest levels, it provides insulation from crowds, uncertainty, pollution and everyday pressures.

Consumption also offers personal choice in a society where other forms of individual agency remain constrained. Through clothes, travel, food and leisure, people can declare what kind of person they wish to be seen as. But the market's range of identities comes with an entrance fee.

I do not begrudge my sister her success and I do appreciate her generosity in taking us away. I enjoyed the villa, the rooftop pool and the gentle green hills, far from the madding crowd. For a family that once knew genuine hardship, gathering several generations in comfort is worth celebrating. China's consumer revolution has brought pleasure, choice and a degree of personal freedom unimaginable in my childhood.

Yet the resort also embodied the hierarchy that revolution created. Rural simplicity had become a premium product; nature had been landscaped, serviced and enclosed. The affluent no longer needed to prove they could escape the countryside. They could demonstrate that they could return to it on their own terms.

As we prepared to leave, the villa's white walls shimmered in the pool and the bamboo-covered hills rose beyond the lawn. The scene was beautiful, but revealing. In today's China, status is increasingly measured by where one can go, how one can spend one's time and which version of China one can afford to inhabit. What will these new barriers mean for a society founded on the promise of equality, however imperfectly that promise was kept?



Lijia Zhang, author of the article, at the luxury resort outside Nanjing that inspired her reflections on changing ideas of status, leisure and luxury. Photo: Courtesy of Lijia Zhang

Lijia Zhang spent a decade working in a Chinese missile factory, the subject of her memoir *Socialism Is Great!* Her debut novel *Lotus* explores the life of a Chinese sex worker.



BRICS leaders pose for a group photo at the 18th summit in Delhi, as members seek greater economic cooperation despite differing priorities. Photo: Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Does BRICS actually work?

BRICS, a grouping of ten large emerging economies – Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates – is bigger and richer than ever. At its September meeting in the Indian capital Delhi it finally agreed a joint text. Rahul Jaywant Bhise considers what the text left out – and whether its largest members, India and China, want the same thing from the bloc.

In May, BRICS foreign ministers met in Delhi and could not agree a joint statement. Iran and the United Arab Emirates, two of the bloc's newer members, were on opposite sides of a war, and the ministers could not bridge the gap. Four months later, leaders returned to the same city and adopted a 140-paragraph declaration on the first day of their summit. It was widely hailed as a breakthrough, and in one sense it was. It is also worth asking what the breakthrough cost.

The case for scale

The numbers behind BRICS are real. On IMF figures, the ten members together produce about 40 per cent of the world's output, adjusted for local prices, against about 28 per cent for the G7. Its two giants are growing far faster than the rich world: the IMF's April forecast has India at 6.5 per cent this year and China at 4.4 per cent, against 1.8 per cent for advanced economies as a group. Together the ten members are home to nearly half the world's people.

The G7 still has the bigger economy when measured at market exchange rates. But BRICS can no longer be dismissed as a banker's acronym. Countries of the Global South keep wanting to join, which is a vote of confidence no communiqué can manufacture.

Agreement by omission

The declaration, adopted in the group's twentieth anniversary year, condemns unilateral aggression without naming a country. It calls for a ceasefire and humanitarian access in Gaza and condemns attacks on nuclear facilities under international inspection. Negotiators reportedly settled the text only hours before the leaders sat down.

Even India's headline win shows the method. The declaration condemns the April 2025 attack near Pahalgam in Indian Kashmir, in which 26 people, most of them tourists, were killed. India blamed Pakistan and launched military



strikes across the border before tensions eased. The text calls for action against cross-border terrorism but does not say who was behind the attack. Delhi won condemnation, but no blame was assigned.

What was postponed matters more. Moving away from the dollar is central to BRICS's strategy, yet the declaration merely asked a 'payment task force' to keep studying how members' payment systems could link up and how trade could be settled in local currencies, adding that no single approach suits every member. That is a shrug, not a plan. This is how groups that work by consensus survive disagreement: they write the sentences everyone can sign and leave out the ones that matter.

A club with a war inside it

The fault line is the Iran war. The United States and Israel attacked Iran in February. Iranian missiles have struck the UAE, which suspended all trade and financial transactions with Iran in August. Saudi Arabia, invited to join but never formally confirmed, sent its foreign minister to Delhi. Russia, a founder member, is fighting a war in Ukraine.

Harsh V Pant of the Observer Research Foundation put the problem bluntly, saying BRICS's expansion, long counted an achievement, 'today looks like a big constraint'. Every new member brings another quarrel into a body that runs on consensus.

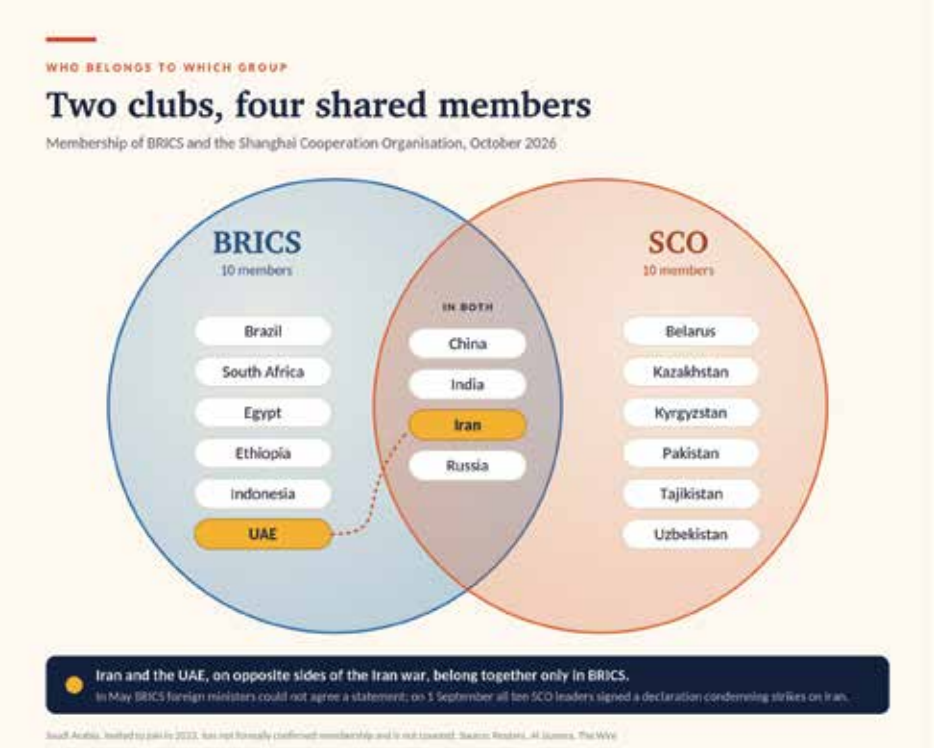
Two Asian giants, two bets

Much depends on the two Asian members, and on which of them can credibly speak for the Global South. India's claim rests on bringing developing countries together and carrying their concerns into forums they cannot always enter alone. China's rests on delivery: trade concessions, technology and finance, offered without waiting for agreement. BRICS is where both claims are tested at once.

India's instinct is to treat BRICS as one forum among many. Delhi has deepened ties with Washington, Japan, Europe and Israel while keeping its long relationship with Moscow. On 1 September, Modi signed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's Bishkek Declaration alongside Xi, Putin and Iran's Masoud Pezeshkian. It condemned military strikes on Iran, though without naming Washington or Israel. The UAE is not an SCO member, which is why that kind of language comes more easily there than in BRICS. India wants a bloc that voices Global South grievances without becoming an anti-Western alliance, which would cost Delhi more than it would gain.



Tensions between Iran and the UAE over the war highlight the geopolitical divisions within BRICS, with the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz at the centre of regional concerns. Map: RINewsToday



Beijing's stake is different. Xi Jinping's visit, his first to India in seven years, showed how much weight China places on the bloc – and Beijing takes the chair in 2027. A BRICS with its own banks and payment systems is an obvious hedge against a system run from Washington. Yet less than two weeks after the summit, Xi was at the White House for a state visit with Donald Trump. Beijing, like Delhi, hedges in both directions.

Between India and China there is a thaw, but it is diplomatic more than economic. Reports around the summit noted few signs of recovering trade and business ties, and the border is still disputed. Two countries that do not yet trust each other with their supply chains are unlikely to share a financial system.

The money question

That is why talk of a common BRICS currency has always been the loudest and least serious part of the story. A shared currency needs common rules on government spending and borrowing, close political ties and deep trust, and BRICS has none of the three. What is plausible is slower and less glamorous: more trade paid for in members' own currencies, payment systems that connect, and lending in local currencies. Even without a BRICS currency, such steps could slowly reduce the world's reliance on the dollar.

So, does it work?

It depends on what you ask of it. As a club that gives members status and a way to hedge their bets, BRICS works well, and the waiting list proves it. As a place for negotiation it just about works: Delhi showed that diplomacy can still find wording everyone accepts. But as a counterweight to the West, it does not yet work. A counterweight must be able to act together when its members disagree, and the foreign ministers' meeting in May showed what happens when they cannot.

The real test comes in 2027, when China takes the chair. Three questions will show what BRICS really is. Will members start paying for real trade in their own currencies instead of dollars, or will the payments study simply drag on? Will Beijing push to admit more members, and so more quarrels? And will Delhi, no longer in the chair, still go along with what Beijing proposes? The answers will depend less on the bloc's size than on how well its two Asian giants understand each other.



Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi represent the two Asian powers whose competing priorities will shape BRICS's future. Photo: India Foreign Ministry/AP

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



The US dollar remains the world's dominant reserve currency, but growing geopolitical tensions and efforts to develop alternatives have fuelled debate over the future of the global financial system. Photo: Bloomberg

De-dollarisation – fact or fiction?

In September Saudi Arabia quietly confirmed what currency traders had long suspected: it was walking away from mBridge, the China-led digital platform built to let central banks settle cross-border payments without touching the US dollar. Riyadh had joined with some fanfare in 2024, part of a broader hedge against Washington's financial reach, even as it continued describing its own BRICS status inconsistently – a full member one week, merely 'an invited country' the next. Its quiet mBridge exit, confirmed to the *Financial Times*, is a small but telling data point in a much bigger argument: is the world really abandoning the dollar, or just making noise about it? Sam Tully weighs the evidence.

Whether you are taking a taxi in Kabul or tipping a porter in Kolkata, if you hand over a large enough US dollar bill, you will find a happy recipient. That is one small example of the power of the dollar, which is still the world's only genuinely universal currency. Even in Asia, home to two of the world's most populous countries with huge economies, and venerable currencies of their own, the Chinese renminbi and Indian rupee are still years away from being as freely tradable as the greenback.

There are other 'reserve currencies', including the euro, yen and even the pound sterling, whose own eclipse as the world's dominant currency was really sealed by the Bretton Woods agreement in 1944. Ever since then the dollar has dominated the foreign currency reserves held by central banks all over the world, and is by far and away the most freely traded currency, used to trade in everything from oil to iron ore, soya beans to semiconductors.

But there are winds of change. A roiling of global tariffs, ongoing wars at key choke points for trade, disrupted policy outlooks, rising inflation, expanding deficits in the US and Western economies and substantive realignments of key international relationships are all contributing to the increasing narrative of 'de-dollarisation'.

At the moment one key focus is on oil prices, for example. By definition the crude oil price, whether Brent Crude or West Texas Intermediate, is denominated in dollars. Those prices have risen sharply, partly because of the war in Iran and the resulting closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Iran, one of the key protagonists in this war, has also



The world's central banks hold US$13.1 trillion in foreign exchange reserves; the dollar still accounts for well over half. Source: IMF COFER data, via Visual Capitalist, Q4 2025.

been subject to biting economic sanctions made even more effective by the United States' ability to block any transactions that require dollar settlement. If Iran wants to trade its own oil, it has to find other ways to do it.

Historically a reserve currency status relied on some key characteristics. These included scale and a ready and transparent market to buy or sell, even in very large amounts – generally referred to as 'liquidity'. It also relied on trust, that there would be visibility of economic and fiscal policies which would manage the expectations for a stable outlook for that currency. This would provide comfort to another central bank that the store of value held in that reserve currency would not erode significantly over time.

In the case of the United States, a combination of fiscal constraint, Federal Reserve independence and a commitment to global free trade underpinned that trust. This was cemented by the financial architecture of currency trade and settlement, centred in New York. With US federal debt now north of $40 trillion and rising, dramatically changing and inconsistent tariff policies, and some question marks over the commitment to maintaining the Fed's independence in rate setting, the world has changed significantly and it is therefore no surprise that alternatives are being considered.

Trust in the US dollar has been further eroded by the willingness of the United States to impose sanctions, even against other nations where it has traditionally enjoyed good relations.

There are ready-made alternatives to the dollar, including the renminbi, euro and Japanese yen among others. Even so, these currently represent a small if rising share of central bank holdings across the globe and each have challenges of their own. The renminbi is subject to capital controls and policy making is opaque. The euro has scale but while monetary policy in the 21 countries of the eurozone is coordinated, fiscal policy is not, and there have been significant and disruptive divergences. Also, economic growth is at best tepid. The yen also suffers due to low growth expectations in Japan and low rates due to very high levels of domestic debt.

Other alternatives to holding the dollar as the main reserve currency include gold, the safest haven historically, and recently central banks have been buying more gold and even transferring physical gold reserves from the USA to Europe. Gold, however, does not pay interest, and liquidity, particularly for physical bullion, is no match for currency.

There is also cryptocurrency, which should be a hedge against inflation but has proved to be exceptionally volatile – another characteristic anathema to central bankers.

For countries in Asia and others in the 'Global South', there is a rising



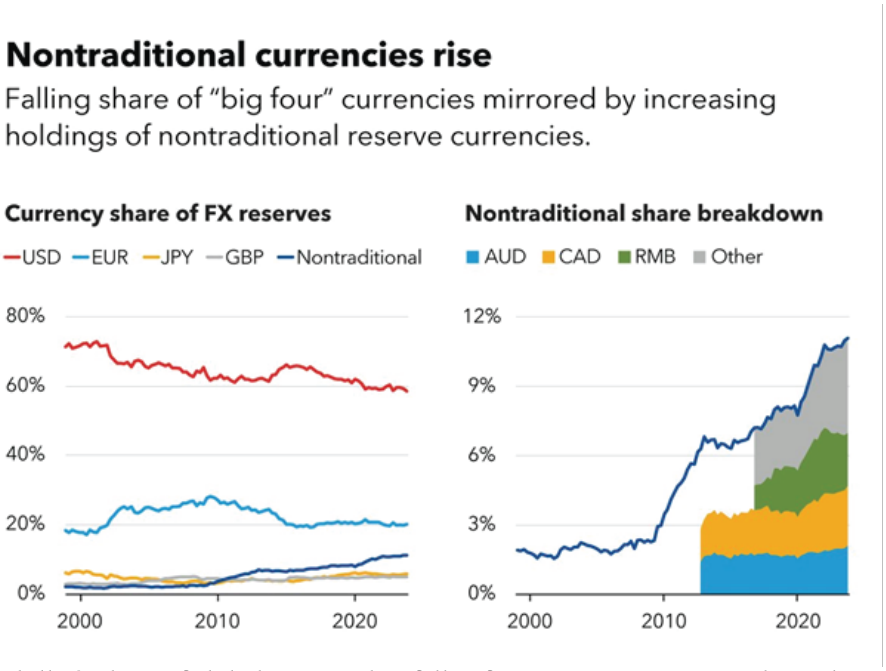
Oil tankers passing through the Strait of Hormuz highlight the link between global energy trade and the US dollar's dominance. Photo: Reuters

sense of urgency to come up with alternatives to the dollar, both for their own reserves but also for trading and settling between their economies without having to always use existing international financial infrastructure.

This has underpinned proposed measures at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS to develop alternative settlement arrangements involving a combination of currencies including the renminbi, rouble and rupee, and, in BRICS's case, the rand. Saudi Arabia – invited to join BRICS from 2023, though it has never confirmed full membership, variously describing itself since as a member and as merely an invited country – joined mBridge, the China-led cross-border settlement platform, in 2024. It completed a proof-of-concept trial in May 2025 before formally withdrawing in September 2026, according to the Financial Times, while continuing to peg its riyal to the dollar. Another favoured option is the expansion of bilateral currency swaps as an alternative to dollar settlement, such as the longstanding rupee-rouble arrangement between India and Russia.

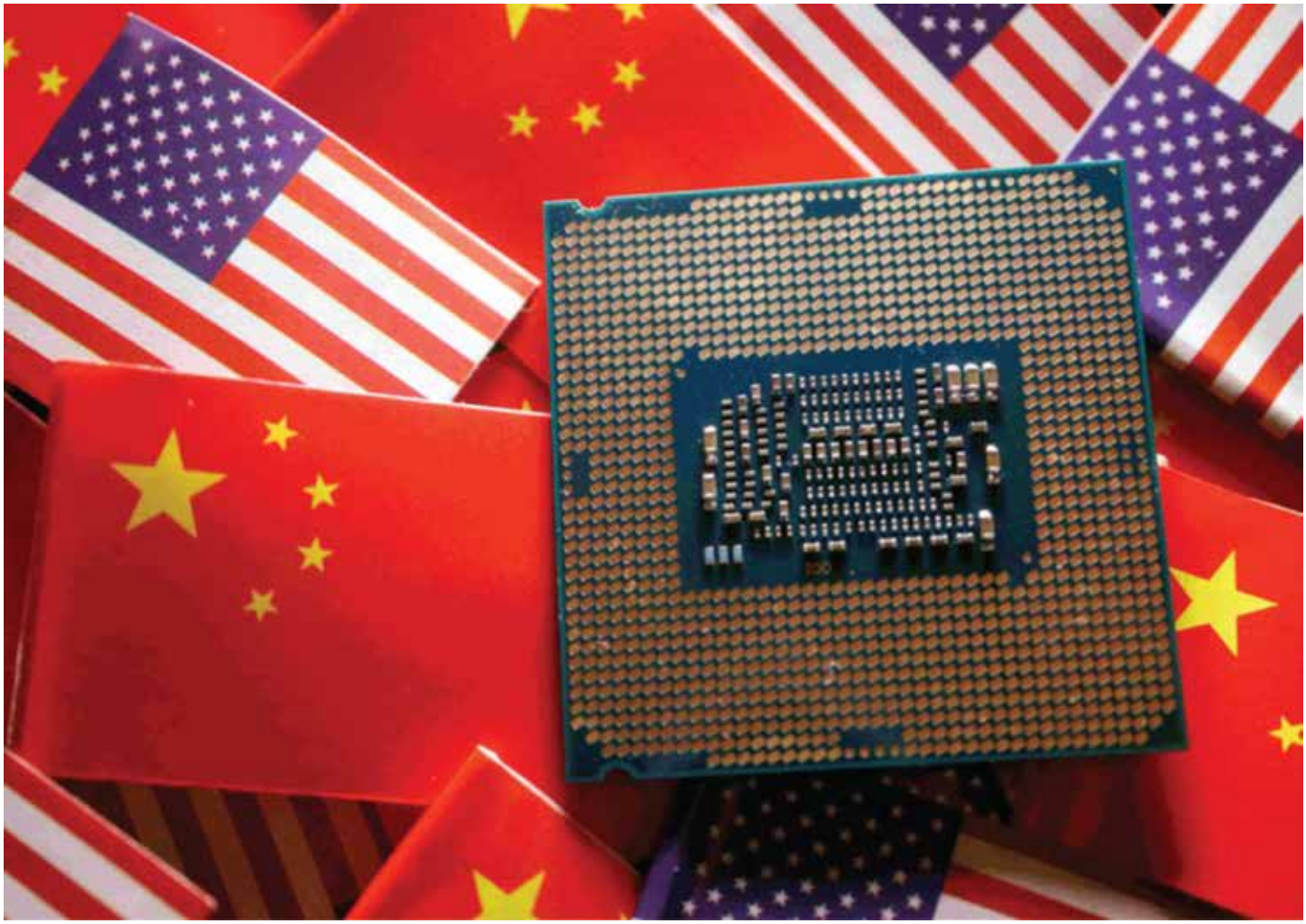
There are also numerous inherent frictions to scaling these alternatives. Geopolitical strains within the new blocs, as well as economic imbalances, might only be enhanced. India and China are a case in point. India is currently watching the US and China draw closer even as its own trade deficit with China – which reached around $112 billion this year - has more than doubled since 2020. Even as it seeks to grow its own manufacturing base, it is hugely reliant on the import of key elements in the supply chain from its northern neighbour.

So, there is a move away from the US dollar for sure, and there are even voices within the US policy establishment who would welcome a weaker dollar to boost their own exporters, for example. Given the scale of its dominance, the depth of the international financial infrastructure and architecture that supports this, and barriers to scaling up alternatives, its status may be declining – but this will take time, though perhaps less than we might think.



The dollar's share of global reserves has fallen from over 70 per cent in the early 2000s to around 57 per cent today – with the slack taken up largely by smaller, 'non-traditional' currencies rather than the euro, yen or pound. Source: IMF COFER; Arslanalp, Eichengreen and Simpson-Bell (2022, updated)

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



Advanced semiconductors power artificial intelligence, making them central to the technological rivalry between the US and China. Illustration: Florence Lo/Reuters

Chip smuggling in Asia

The race for AI supremacy between Washington and Beijing is driving high volume cross-border smuggling of the crucial technology needed to build it, with authorities across Asia struggling to stop billions of dollars-worth of advanced semiconductors from evading US export restrictions to get to China. Helen Davidson reports.

Semiconductors are the chips that power electronics, everything from basic consumer goods to rockets and missiles. GPUs are an advanced type of chip, originally created for graphics and gaming but now crucial for complex processes like artificial intelligence, and are in high demand. 'Without them, current large-scale deep learning models simply could not exist,' said the non-profit monitoring group, C4ADS.

Not all chips are created equal, and while China has made significant advances in its pursuit of technological self-sufficiency, its industry is still behind the developments of the US, with companies like Nvidia holding between 75 per cent and 95 per cent of the advanced AI chip market. Most of these chips are made in Taiwan by the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC).

The US, claiming a need to protect national security and to keep its competitive edge over China, has since 2022 enforced various export restrictions on selling advanced chips to the country. These have evolved over time, amid lobbying from the tech industry, but mainly focus on restricting particular characteristics of chips. Nvidia's H200, for example, is allowed to be sold to some Chinese customers under specific

circumstances, while the company's much more advanced flagship Blackwell is not.

But analysts say China is illicitly procuring the US chips it wants in other ways.

Epoch AI, an AI research non-profit, estimated that in 2025 between 290,000 and 1.6 million advanced chips were smuggled into the country. The midpoint of that estimation would equate to about one third of China's total computing output. 'China has demonstrated a sustained and adaptive ability to acquire restricted US-designed chips, exploiting gaps in jurisdictional coordination and enforcement regimes,' said a recent report by C4ADS.

According to C4ADS, restricted tech is getting to China via multicountry dropshipping routes, shell companies, and shipments disguised as legitimate acquisitions by research institutions which ultimately have ties to the Chinese state and military. Investigations by authorities, analysis groups and media have found billions of dollars in shipments of restricted chips that appear to be going to Southeast Asian companies and data centres with links to Chinese tech firms.



Taiwan is a major hub for advanced chip manufacturing, with TSMC producing semiconductors used in technologies worldwide. Photo: Ann Wang/Reuters



Data centres in Malaysia are part of Southeast Asia's growing technology infrastructure, creating challenges for authorities seeking to distinguish legitimate chip imports from shipments suspected of bypassing US export restrictions. Photo: EPA

Export data analysis by Epoch AI found that between April 2024 and June 2025, there was a six-fold mismatch between Chinese and Malaysian records of shipment values into China, suggesting the Malaysia-based exporters were deliberately under-reporting the value of items to disguise them as unrestricted low-value tech. Malaysian authorities struggle to monitor it all, given the large number of data centres operating in the country which are importing large amounts of tech legitimately.

Singapore authorities first charged individuals with fraud offences over the procurement of servers under false pretences, to ship to Malaysia and then potentially China, in February 2025. In July this year, authorities went further, seizing a US$42m luxury house allegedly bought with proceeds from the illegal smuggling of Nvidia chips, filing a new money-laundering charge, and charging four linked companies.



Singapore authorities have pursued money-laundering allegations linked to suspected illegal Nvidia chip smuggling, highlighting the financial stakes of the trade. Photo: Gokul/Unsplash

In another high-profile case, US authorities are investigating Apex Logistics, a Singapore-based subsidiary of Swiss shipping giant Kuehne+Nagel, over allegations two employees mislabelled hardware to avoid export restrictions. The US Department of Justice has also charged senior employees of Super Micro in relation to an alleged scheme, worth US$2.5bn, to send AI servers to China via Southeast Asian shell companies.

In August prosecutors in Taiwan, the primary production hub, charged nine people for illegally exporting 'high-end' GPUs to China. One of those charged worked for Nvidia as a manager, and two for Super Micro. But Taiwan has few avenues to pursue chip smugglers, with no laws specifically banning the transfer of the tech to China, and instead has to use other laws.

'It's difficult for companies like Nvidia to track chip smuggling,' said Dr Kyle Chan, a fellow at the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution. 'They know their immediate customers well but have much less visibility into indirect customers. After the first transaction to immediate customers, it's hard to follow what happens next with these chips unless they've been intercepted later.'

The issue puts countries like Singapore and Malaysia in a bind. Southeast Asian nations are common intermediaries for legitimate shipping to China, and are in a constant struggle to maintain strong relationships with two opposing superpowers – China and the US.

'The White House has consistently pressured the region to crack down on chip smuggling, and Singapore and Malaysia have already implemented tighter controls in 2025 for the export, transshipment, and transit of high-end chips for AI,' Jason Blessing, research fellow at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, told Democracy Asia. 'At the same time, countries like Singapore and Malaysia still have incredibly tight economic relationships with China that are unlikely to change any time soon.'

Publicly, China says it does not actually want the foreign chips. By the time the Trump administration agreed to carve out Nvidia's H200 chip from the fully restricted list, Beijing was warning its local industry not to buy it. Nvidia's share of the Chinese market had gone from around 95 per cent to effectively zero.

'China's approach to the chip market is emblematic of its broader approach to economic statecraft: assert the need for self-sufficiency in key sectors, highlight the dangers of and prohibit US alternatives, and then leverage those same US products and technologies through illicit means to economically undermine and try to leapfrog the United States,' said Blessing.

Companies like Nvidia and AMD would prefer to sell to China, the world's largest market. Chinese authorities are reportedly mulling allowing domestic purchase of



Cargo containers at Kwai Tsing Container Terminals in Hong Kong, illustrating the scale of international shipping and trade across Asia. Photo: South China Morning Post.

the H200, but it is 'old tech' by now.

In September Politico reported the two companies were lobbying US lawmakers to reject planned legislation – which has broad bipartisan support – to tighten the restrictions further. 'US firms continue to be restricted by a combination of outdated US export controls, which cover gaming products released nearly half a decade ago, and China's own limits on US imports,' an Nvidia spokesperson told Reuters the same month.

C4ADS recommended US authorities increase resources for enforcement of the restrictions, and pay more attention to China-based buyers that appear legitimate but have ties to Chinese defence or intelligence. It also called for tighter due diligence requirements for companies. But even if export controls and improved due diligence succeeded, the physical restriction model itself has a fundamental digital flaw. China can still access the computing power remotely. Major Chinese tech firms like ByteDance, Alibaba and Tencent are increasingly working with cloud providers in places like Singapore and Malaysia, which run on legitimately acquired US chips.

'Even if export controls prevent China from directly acquiring advanced chips, the regime is still able to access the power of these chips in third-country data centers across Southeast Asia,' Blessing said. 'As long as China maintains a demand for high-end chips and is willing to pay for evasion, we can expect that their strategy and methods will continue to evolve.'

Helen Davidson was based in Taiwan for five years, covering geopolitics, defence and economics.

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Singapore's Marina Bay skyline reflects Asia's economic dynamism, where technology investment and expanding markets coexist with financial pressures and uneven growth. Photo: Solomonik Viktor

Bisinomics

Asia

Reuters reported that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected 'Asia's economic growth would moderate next year and warned of heightening risks from the Iran war-induced energy shock, a potential correction in the AI boom and spill-overs from rising global bond yields'. The wire service added that 'the global lender also said uncertainty over the US monetary policy path could keep Asian financial markets volatile'. The IMF continued: 'The US monetary stance is expected to continue to tighten later this year. The combination of monetary policy tightening and fiscal pressures in most major advanced economies is likely to keep upward pressures on yields across Asia and the Pacific.'

The IMF now expects Asia's economy to grow 4.8 per cent in 2026 and 4.4 per cent in 2027, higher than projections made in April, but lower than the 5 per cent expansion in 2025. It added, 'Risks to the outlook remain tilted to the downside… With public debt and borrowing needs remaining high across much of the region, an abrupt tightening of fiscal conditions could further strain public finances by raising debt-servicing costs'.



The IMF expects Asia's growth to slow from 5 per cent in 2025 to 4.8 per cent in 2026, with further moderation projected for 2027. Photo: Tony Webster/CC BY 2.0

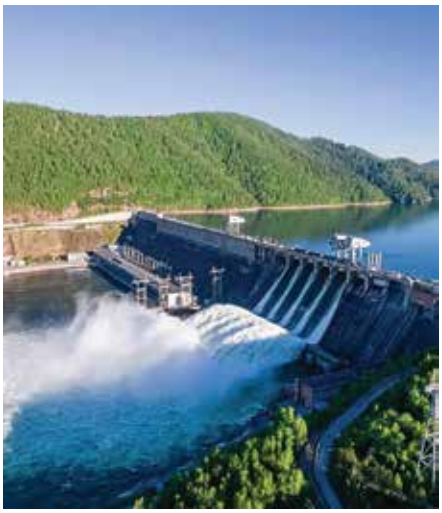
Somewhat related to that, the headline of a story in The Asian Business Review was 'Asia insurance enters a new risk cycle: Retirement gaps, agentic AI, and catastrophic cover'. It went on to elaborate: 'Asian insurers are rethinking customer protection as Singlife targets retirement gaps, life insurers test agentic AI, and the catastrophe protection gap remains near 90 per cent.'

The Economist summarised: 'The Asian economy in late 2026 is driven by an AI and semiconductor investment boom, counterbalanced by heavy industrial pressures from China, sluggish growth in Southeast Asia, and currency stability concerns.'

Central Asia

The European Investment Bank (EIB) indicated it is seeking to expand cross-border investments in Central Asia, while requiring projects to meet environmental standards. EIB Vice-President Marek Mora told Euronews, during a visit to Astana, Kazakhstan: 'We would be, of course, very much interested not only in financing the individual country projects, but if there was a cross-country project, it would be even more interesting for us because we would also see a potential for development of the whole region.'

A good example of multi-country cooperation in the region is the construction of the Kambar-Ata-1 hydropower plant in the Kyrgyz mountains. This is being jointly developed by Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, with memoranda of understanding worth 900 million euros (about US$1 billion) signed between the EU, the EIB and the three states. The enterprise will be completed around 2035 and will generate 5.6 billion kWh of electricity a year. That will make a major contribution towards energy security in the three nations.



Central Asia is betting on large hydropower dams; Kambar-Ata-1 is due for completion around 2035. Photo: The Caspian Post

There are ancillary benefits too. The power plant is being built on the Naryn River – Kyrgyzstan's longest – which merges with the Kara Darya River in Uzbekistan to create the Syr Darya River. This flows through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan before reaching the Aral Sea. It will supply water to agriculture as well as provide drinking water. The power plant will also regulate seasonal flow of the Naryn River, storing water during periods of snow and glacier melt and releasing it during the dry months. This will in turn ensure more stable and predictable water levels in the Syr Darya River.

China-North Korea

Nikkei Asia reported that China and North Korea opened a new border bridge on 15 October in what it called 'the latest sign of deepening ties between two Cold War-era allies'. The bridge crosses the Yalu River. A Chinese readout quoted Premier Li Qiang as saying the bridge 'will not only significantly promote economic and trade cooperation between the two countries but also further strengthen people-to-people exchanges and deepen the emotional ties between our peoples'. He said: 'China-North Korea relations are entering a new phase and embarking on a new chapter'.

The bridge links the Chinese city of Dandong, a trade hub near the Yellow Sea, with the North Korean city of Sinuiju. Justin Hastings, a professor of international relations at the



Officials attend the opening ceremony of the new Yalu River Bridge, strengthening transport links and supporting trade between North Korea and China. Photo: KCNA via Yonhap

University of Sydney, was quoted as saying that the bridge is more than symbolic and will provide real logistical benefits to both sides. He said the new infrastructure will complement the older bridge, which is 'very limited, trucks in different directions and trains had to take turns going across'. Hastings added that 'the main bottleneck for trade and investment in North Korea is the North Korean investment environment and North Korea's general unwillingness to open up.'

Japan

'Sanaenomics' – Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's favouring of aggressive fiscal stimulus and national economic sovereignty – is targeting massive public-private investments across dozens of critical sectors to build domestic resilience, particularly against geopolitical pressures from China, The Economist reported. A historically weak yen has driven up import costs. To combat this, the Bank of Japan raised interest rates to 1.25 per cent in September, its second increase this year. However, The Economist warned that defending the yen requires a delicate unwinding of the global 'carry trade' – where investors borrow cheap yen to purchase high-yielding foreign assets – a shift that risks triggering global market volatility if handled too abruptly.

India

According to Credence Research Inc., India's women's apparel market is projected to grow from US$28.79 billion in 2024 to US$45.49 billion by 2032. The growth is driven by rising disposable incomes, greater workforce participation among women and a growing demand for branded clothing. Inevitably, e-commerce, social media and celebrity endorsements are influencing fashion choices across casual wear, formal wear, sportswear, nightwear and inner wear.

India's recent trade agreements with Britain and the European Union, which cover duty-free garment exports from India, could further boost the sector.

India's quick commerce market is also projected to grow nearly sevenfold, from US$13 billion in FY2026 to US$90 billion by FY2031, according to a joint report by Redseer and Google.



Japan's efforts to support domestic investment and defend the yen reflect the challenge of balancing economic growth with rising import costs and financial-market risks. Photo: beauty-box/Shutterstock

In general

'Singapore's electronics boom, India's struggle to scale banking AI, Southeast Asia's data-centre expansion, tight Manila logistics space, and a cautious wage growth show how capacity constraints are shaping business decisions across the region,' reports The Asian Business Review.

It is also worth noting that Singapore's digital economy rose to S$144.1 billion (US$113 billion) in 2025 and is now 19.3 per cent of GDP, whereas Indian banks face a margin squeeze despite 18.8 per cent credit growth.



Honohon, the official mascot of the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games, celebrating sporting achievement and competition across Asia. Photo: Yong Teck Lim/Getty Images

Mixed outcomes from Asian Games

The 20th Asian Games concluded on 4 October in the Japanese city of Nagoya, the third Japanese city to host the Games, after Tokyo in 1958 and Hiroshima in 1994. The main attention – for different reasons – was on the South Korean and Indian team performances, as John Duerden reports.

South Korea and India finished third and fourth in the medal standings of the Games but their main takeaways, from the second biggest multi-sports event in the world after the Olympics, were very different. Indians are concerned that the country's historic underachievement in sports is continuing despite recent investment, while in Seoul it is all about the army.

On 3 October, South Korea's football team won gold to give 20 of the 23 players exemption from the mandatory 18-21 months of military service. Within hours, public opinion was ablaze and government ministers were talking of changing the law that was introduced in 1973. This rewards artists and athletes for enhancing national prestige. For athletes, winning any medal at the Olympics, or gold at the Asian Games, is enough to reduce 18 months of military service into a mere three weeks of basic training with some community service. For football players, it is especially valuable. Careers are short but those at the top of the sport can have glory and large amounts of money, especially if they go to the big European leagues and do not have to return home early to enlist.

It is a sensitive issue. The rest of society have to interrupt their careers or studies to enlist and stand on a frozen mountain near the border with North Korea. They do not take kindly to others using money, influence or even achievement to dodge the draft. The career of MC Mong, a popular



South Korean players celebrate their baseball gold at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games, highlighting the country's strong performance at the tournament. Photo: Yonhap

rapper and entertainer, never recovered from allegations, which he denied, that he had pulled out perfectly healthy teeth to gain exemption. Over the years, many athletes have celebrated gold but knew not to talk too much about the other prize even though it was obviously more valuable. That did not happen this time and, now, there may not be another.

Shortly after victory, Yang Min-hyuk of English Premier League club Tottenham Hotspur said: 'The medal and winning the championship weren't important. I played the game with only one thing in mind — the reward of a military-service exemption.' Captain Lee Gi-hyuk showed his gold medal, boasting 'I'm not going to the military'. Park Seung-soo of Newcastle United posted a photo on social media where he was wearing a 'discharge cap' given to soldiers who have completed their military service.

The players apologised quickly but the damage was done with social media ablaze and politicians getting in on the act, such as Ahn Cheol-soo of the People Power Party. 'Some players' remarks after the match were outrageous,' Ahn posted on social media. 'Even the captain bragged about not having to serve in the military. Are all the young people who enlist every year fools?'

By the middle of the following week, Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism Choi Hwi-young told a parliamentary committee that it was time for a change: 'The values attached to fairness and public perceptions of military service have changed. I agree that the system should be comprehensively reviewed once again.' There was already movement towards ending exemption anyway and the backlash could provide convenient cover for politicians. A report in 2025 recommended an army of at least 500,000 but that has shrunk to around 450,000 due to one of the lowest birth rates in the world. Ending exemptions for athletes and others may not make a huge difference but symbolically it matters.

In 1973, tours of duty lasted three years and medals were rare for Koreans. Much has changed. 'South Korea now stands shoulder to shoulder with the world's leading nations,' the Korea Herald editorialised. 'The days when finishing first in Asia could meaningfully enhance the country's national prestige are long gone. It is time to reconsider...'

India would have liked more national prestige at the Asian Games, especially as it is in the race, as is South Korea, to host the 2036 Olympics. On 15 October, India's Sports Ministry met to review the Asian Games medal haul of 21 golds, seven fewer than in 2022. For a country of 1.4 billion,


Mandatory military service remains a major part of South Korean society, creating a sensitive debate over exemptions for elite athletes. Photo: South China Morning Post



Indian athletes take part in the closing ceremony of the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games, following India's fourth-place finish in the medal standings. Photo: The Times of India

the lack of global sporting glory has long been a sore point especially as China dominated once again with 169 golds.

India has had success in team events such as cricket, hockey and kabaddi but there was only one gold in athletics, compared with six at the previous Games. 'It underscored a stark reality,' *The Hindu* said. 'The country needs to raise its bar in medal-fetching individual sports such as athletics, swimming, gymnastics, fencing and cycling, which determine success in multi-disciplinary Games.'

That is easier said than done. Historically, public investment in sport and facilities has been patchy on the subcontinent with a reliance on individual states – such as Odisha – to lead the way. The national dominance of cricket, sucking attention, sponsorship and broadcasting dollars, though it should help that cricket becomes an Olympic sport from 2028.

But Narendra Modi's government has been spending. The flagship Khelo India initiative was launched in 2017 to strengthen grassroots sports participation, talent development and sporting infrastructure. In July, a further US$3.75 billion was allocated to the scheme for the next five years. A ministry source told domestic media: 'The problem is not spending; it is the absence of proportionate outcome and any accountability for the money spent.' He went on: 'There was a significant gap between investment and performance across nine disciplines involving 34 athletes, mainly in shooting and badminton. It was the youngsters and debutants who saved India's campaign in the last few days. These questions will have to be answered.'

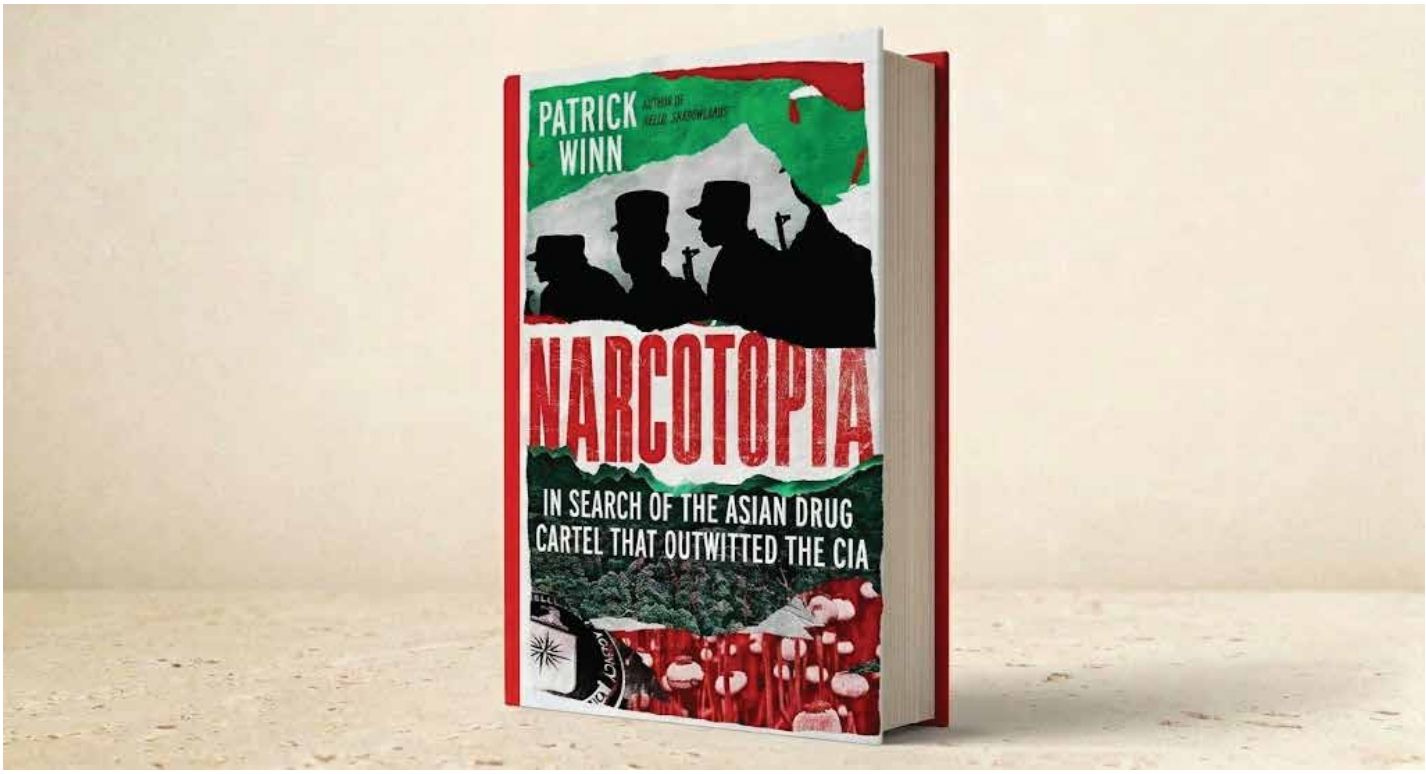
The official vision sees India as a top 10 ranking Olympic nation by 2036 and top five 12 years later. As the country was ranked 71 in 2024 without winning even one gold medal, there is a long way to go even if hosting the Games, as India wants to do in Modi's home state of Gujarat in 2036, usually helps. Athletes would, however, be more motivated than ever on home soil as would South Korea's, even if the prize of military exemption is no longer on offer.



India's Khelo India initiative aims to strengthen grassroots participation, develop talent and improve sporting infrastructure, but questions remain over results and accountability. Photo: Shivaji Juvekar/Press Information Bureau - Government of India

John Duerden has covered Asian sports for over 25 years for *The Guardian, BBC, World Soccer, Associated Press* and more and has written books on the subject.


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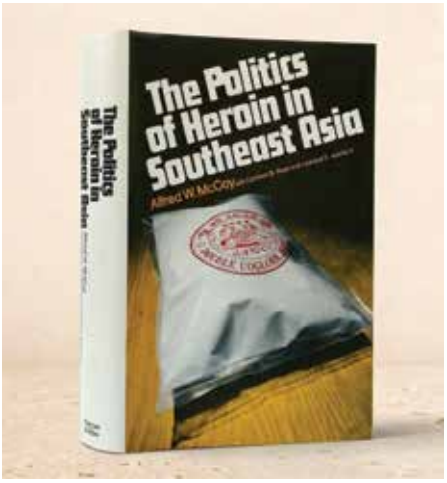
In *Narcotopia*, Patrick Winn traces Myanmar's transformation from a major opium and heroin producer into a centre of synthetic drug production, exploring how conflict, local power structures and cross-border networks sustain the illicit drug trade.

Myanmar's reputation as a major drug producer consolidated

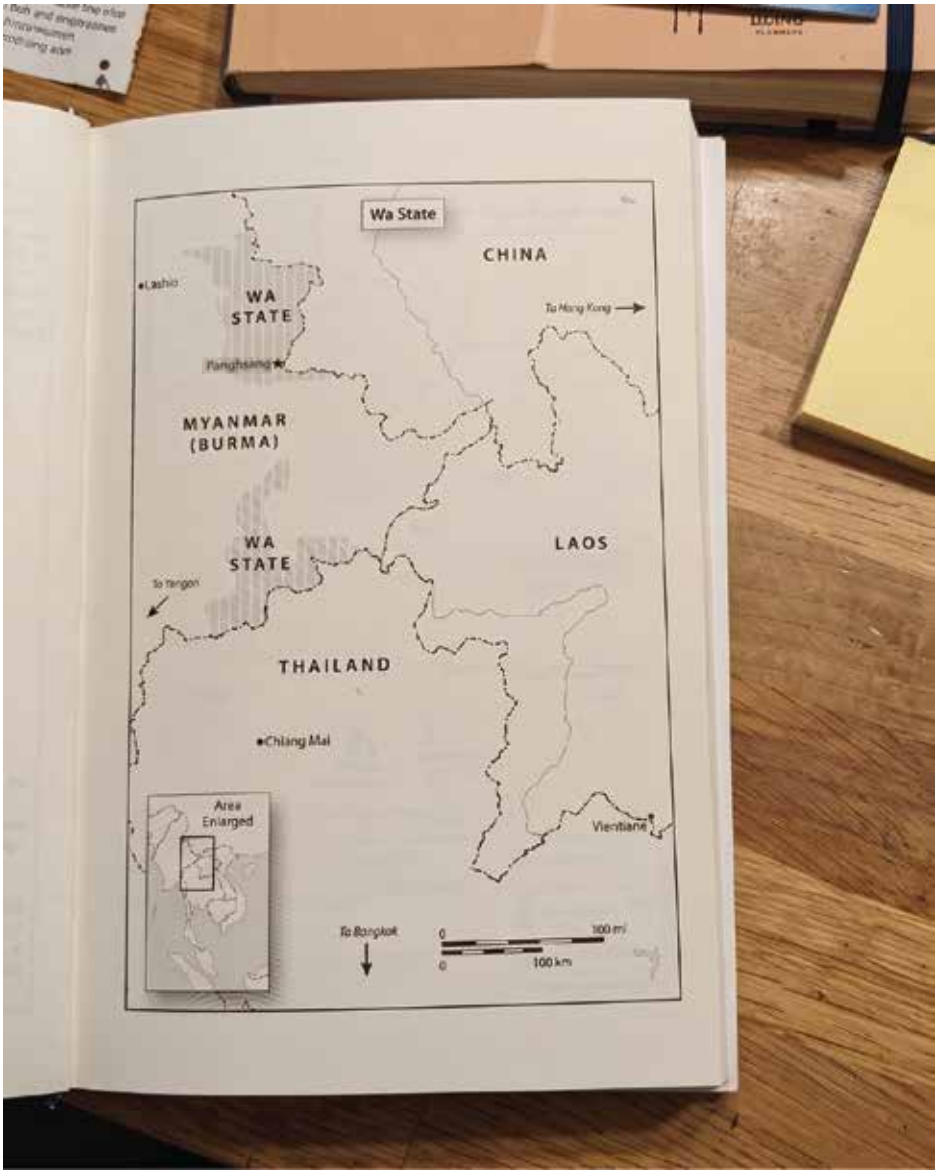
Narcotopia by Patrick Winn is published in the UK by Icon Books and is reviewed here by Nicholas Nugent.

Back in the early 1970s, as America's war in Vietnam ground towards its end, a book was published which became famous for the insight it gave into the production and flow of narcotics in Southeast Asia. *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* by Alfred McCoy told how the growing of opium in Burma and subsequent production into heroin fuelled its use across Southeast Asia, not least among American soldiers serving in Vietnam. Heroin was produced in and trafficked from the 'Golden Triangle', where Burma, Laos and Thailand meet. The region was notorious for feeding heroin addiction throughout the region and back in the United States, to where returning soldiers smuggled the drug.

The book is also revealing about the origins of Burma's drug production. It had been facilitated by US agencies, notably the CIA, as a consequence of earlier guerrilla activity by the US-backed Kuomintang (KMT) – Chinese Nationalist forces that had retreated into Burma against the fledgling Chinese communist republic, across Burma's north-eastern border. The spread of heroin in Asia and the West was directly fuelled by America's war against communism. Heroin was not just a drug: it was a source of income and power across remote regions of north-eastern Burma.



Alfred McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, the landmark book that documented the opium and heroin trade in Southeast Asia and its links to the region's political conflicts.



A map from Patrick Winn's *Narcotopia* showing Wa State North and South, territories central to the book's account of Myanmar's illicit drug economy.

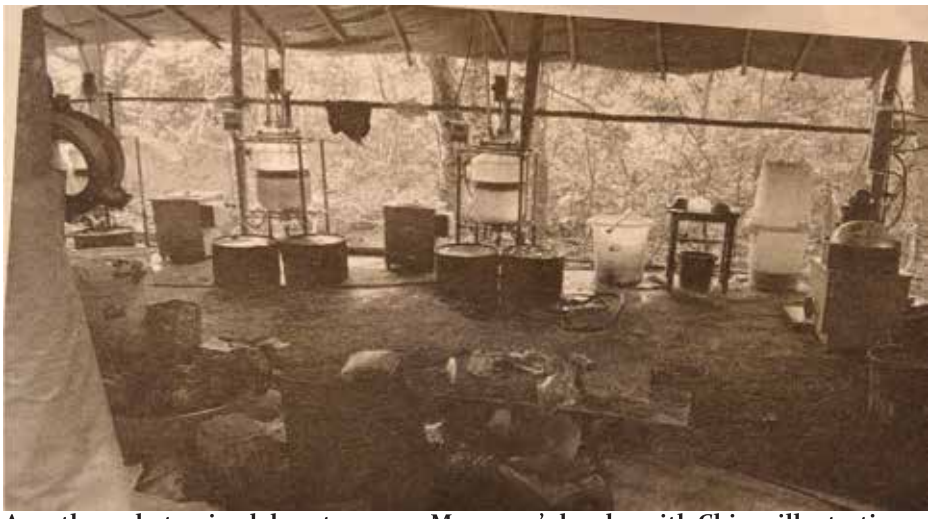
Narcotopia by another American writer, Patrick Winn, picks up the story of the role played more recently by Burmese tribes, notably the Wa people of Shan State in the country now known as Myanmar. Much of the book is about the rivalry between different arms of the US government, the State Department, responsible for embassies around the world, and two other branches of government operating from those embassies: the Central Intelligence Agency or CIA, the US's spy network, and the Drug Enforcement Administration or DEA, the agency responsible for trying to combat the trafficking of narcotics. According to *Narcotopia*, these agencies with their different objectives were sometimes working against each other in a chaotic manner.

Just as interesting is what the book tells us about Myanmar's remote and often mountainous borderlands, which came to be known by a Chinese nickname as Shanzhai Zhongguo – literally 'mountain fortress China', for the region straddles Myanmar's north-eastern border with China's Yunnan province. Many of its inhabitants are ethnic Chinese. In its largest town, Panghsang, people use Chinese money, the yuan, and observe Beijing time, as if it were an enclave of China within Myanmar. This reviewer has visited another such Shan State 'enclave', that of Mong La, which also uses Chinese time and money; there the biggest 'industry' is gambling with casinos attracting Chinese visitors from across the border where gambling is restricted.

From McCoy's book, the world learned of the notorious Shan drug lord Khun Sa. In the new book a leading figure is Saw Lu, who was brought up a Baptist Christian by American missionaries before joining a fight by the tribal militia, the United Wa State Army, against the Communist Party of Burma in a war facilitated by America and financed by the profits from drugs. Later, he played a role in trying to end the region's drug culture.

If you were to look at a map of Burma/Myanmar, you would not find Wa State since it was 'created' by the Wa, a community of 600,000 or so people once known as headhunters, who inhabit 12,000 square miles of what is officially Myanmar's Shan State. Wa State is the land Patrick Winn calls '*Narcotopia*' since, following the defeat of the Communist Party of Burma, it appears to exist for the sole purpose of producing and exporting drugs. The writ of the Myanmar government does not run there and Wa State has its own finance minister, whose main role is to collect revenue from the production and export of narcotics, and a foreign minister who – in theory at least – negotiates with the Myanmar and Chinese governments. Not only has this state existed for nearly 40 years, but it has expanded to claim a second territory known as 'Wa South' on the border with Thailand.

The conquest of Wa South was ostensibly to end opium growing and heroin production in the remote and inaccessible highlands in favour of a more sedentary and farming-based existence in the



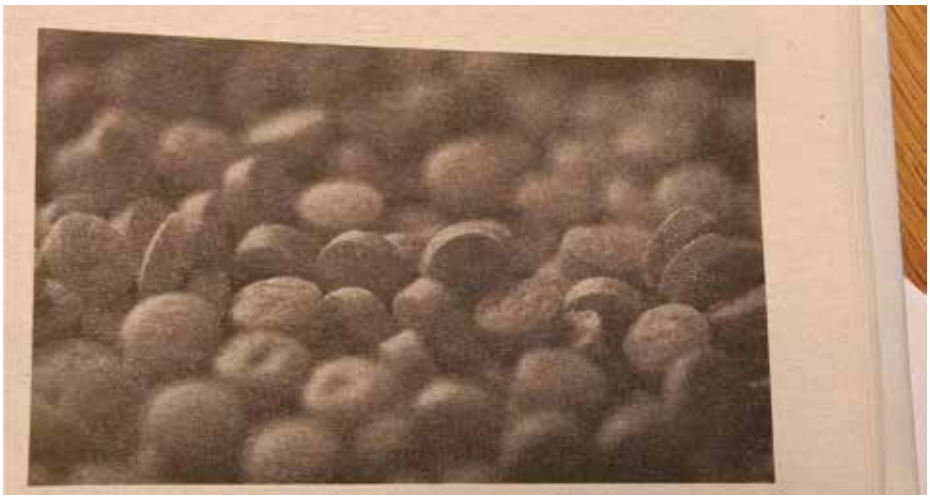
A methamphetamine laboratory near Myanmar's border with China, illustrating the shift from opium cultivation to synthetic drug production. Photo: Myanmar Police, reproduced from *Narcotopia*

lowlands. However, the upshot of the move was the development of a new jungle-based industry producing a synthetic narcotic known locally as yaba – 'crazy medicine' in the Thai language – and elsewhere in different variants as 'shabu', 'speed', 'ice', 'crystal meth', 'glass' or 'chalk' and, more technically, methamphetamine. An advantage, from the producer's point of view, is that since it is not crop-based it cannot be detected from the air, as a field of opium poppies could be.

Methamphetamine tablets are produced in jungle 'laboratories' from chemicals brought across the border from southern China. The relative cheapness, compared with heroin, of yaba tablets with their distinctive 'WY' stamp makes it a favourite drug across much of the region, from Bangladesh where it extends the working day of truck drivers enabling them to work longer hours and earn more, to Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines where it is often the recreational drug of choice. The drug is of less appeal in the distant United States where the authorities are more concerned by cocaine and fentanyl smuggled across its land borders.

The United Wa State Army, which engineered the migration of Wa citizens into territory previously inhabited by other Shan tribes as well as the move from heroin to methamphetamines, is one of many ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) fighting the military junta which rules Myanmar. Since the military coup of February 2021, which ousted the semi-civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi, these ethnic armies have become more dedicated to their political objective of ending military rule with considerable success in capturing territory – though not enough to topple the regime.

Patrick Winn's book is fascinating for what it tells us of one of the most lawless parts of Asia which has been fighting different wars from those that make headline news, sometimes on behalf of government agencies and at other times against prevailing authority. If there is a lesson to be learned from the tale it tells, it is that the war against drug production, trafficking and addiction is unlikely to be won unless or until local political rivalries are resolved.



Methamphetamine tablets produced in a jungle laboratory in Myanmar, reflecting the rise of synthetic drugs described in *Narcotopia*. Photo: Myanmar Police, reproduced from *Narcotopia*

Nicholas Nugent is editor of *Democracy Asia*. He has reported from Burma/Myanmar for the *BBC*.

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