Myanmar found guilty of genocide

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December 2026

Xi Jinping in charge




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China's President Xi Jinping is tightening his grip on the Communist Party, the military and the state, raising the prospect of a fourth term and a more centralised era of rule.

From purging senior officials and preparing for a possible confrontation over Taiwan to reviving Mao-era influence abroad, Xi is reshaping China's priorities and its place in the world.

But as his power reaches new heights, the absence of challengers, trusted generals or a clear successor may also expose the risks of one-man rule.

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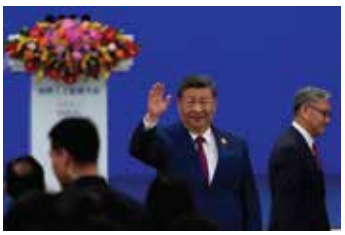

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China's president, Xi Jinping, appears to have emerged the winner from the three-way summit with Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump in Shenzhen on 19 November. Just as significant, if not more so, the Fifth Plenum of the Party's Central Committee in October had cemented his all-powerful position at home, firming up an expectation that he will be chosen for a fourth term 'at the helm' in the second half of 2027, and drawing comparisons with 'the great helmsman' Mao Zedong. Howard Zhang looks at evidence that the transition from the Deng Xiaoping era is complete.

On the day the three leaders were meeting in Shenzhen, the International Court of Justice in The Hague found the government of Myanmar guilty of genocide against the Rohingya community of Rakhine State, as a result of military action in 2017 that killed an estimated 10,000 Rohingya and drove hundreds of thousands more across the border into Bangladesh. It was the first time the court had found a state itself guilty of genocide. As Nyein Chan Aye reports, the court's order to allow the refugees to return is unlikely to be acted on since Myanmar's military government has lost control of most of Rakhine State to the Arakan Army in its civil war against ethnic armed groups.

> "From Beijing's shifting power dynamics to the Rohingya genocide ruling in The Hague, this month's edition follows some of Asia's most significant political developments. We look at mounting pressures on Indonesia and Pakistan, the growing role of technology in warfare, China's ambitions in the Global South, and the future of electric mobility in India. We also turn to the Mekong, explore Asia's first Eurovision Song Contest, and revisit the remarkable life of Sonia Gandhi through her new memoir."

We follow developments in Indonesia, which is enduring political and economic troubles that are putting pressure on the country's increasingly unpopular president, Prabowo Subianto. We report on the predicament in Pakistan of the country's former cricket captain and prime minister, Imran Khan, who has been in prison for more than three years.

India's Army is mechanising its mules, long relied upon as beasts of burden in mountainous terrain but now being replaced by robots. Is this a sign of things to come elsewhere, with many predicting that the technological advance represented by AI will ultimately replace human workers with machines? We report on the latest meeting of the six-nation Lancang-Mekong Cooperation forum on the mighty River Mekong, which flows from China through Southeast Asia, where it is responsible for irrigating the land that feeds millions; and we ask, with a report from Argentina, whether the Global South wants China to speak for it.

In Business, we talk to the Indian businessman who, in 1979, became the Islamic Republic of Iran's shipping adviser and report on how the Indian carmaker Mahindra & Mahindra is competing to make its mark as India accelerates its move towards electric vehicles (EVs). In Lifestyle, we report on the first Eurovision Song Contest Asia in Bangkok.

Finally, Bookshelf this month features the much-anticipated memoir of Italian-born Sonia Gandhi who, besides being the daughter-in-law and wife of two previous Indian prime ministers, nearly became the country's prime minister herself.

Nicholas Nugent

World court finds Myanmar guilty of genocide
On 19 November the International Court of Justice in The Hague found that Myanmar had committed genocide against the Rohingya during the military's 2017 operations in Rakhine State. An estimated 10,000 people were killed and more than 700,000 fled to Bangladesh. It is the first time the court has found a state directly responsible for genocide. The case was brought by The Gambia in 2019. The court ordered Myanmar to make reparations, including allowing refugees a safe, voluntary and dignified return. The ruling is final and cannot be appealed, but enforcement rests with the UN Security Council, where China and Russia hold vetoes.

Three presidents, one table, few results
Xi Jinping, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin held their first three-way meeting on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Shenzhen on 19 November. In a joint statement released by the Kremlin, they agreed to raise oil production and reaffirmed that a nuclear war cannot be won. There was little else to show. Putin, attending APEC for the first time since 2017, gained most from the photo opportunity, analysts said. He ruled out direct talks with Ukraine, citing a Ukrainian strike on a key bridge in Crimea, and disputes over tariffs, rare earths and technology were left unresolved in public. Trump rated the meeting 12 out of 10.

Hormuz still shut as blockade tightens
Qatari mediators pressed on with indirect talks between Washington and Tehran over an Iranian offer to reopen the Strait of Hormuz within two days if the US meets seven demands, including lifting sanctions and its naval blockade. Tehran called the American reply 'unconvincing' as Trump confirmed strikes on Qeshm Island near the strait. On 10 November the Revolutionary Guards said at least three ships had hit mines and caught fire. On 20 November the US military warned that tankers trying to slip the blockade through ship-to-ship transfers could be stopped, boarded or seized.

Hasina's return plan sets Bangladesh alight
The banned Awami League called a nationwide 'lockdown' on 19 November, the climax of a week of protests against the government's refusal to issue a new passport to the exiled former prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, who plans to return in December. At least four people were killed in the two days before, and the ancestral home of Muhammad Yunus, the former interim leader, was set on fire in Chattogram. Police arrested 565 people in Dhaka, and 97 platoons of border guards were deployed in districts loyal to Hasina. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman blamed India for the unrest.

North Korea writes off reunification
On 11 November North Korea published a revised constitution that drops all references to reunification and defines South Korea as a separate country on its southern border. It also expands Kim Jong Un's authority over nuclear weapons. The changes enshrine Kim's declaration in late 2023 that the two Koreas are two hostile states, though the text stops short of naming the South a hostile state. Seoul says it accepts the existence of two states but rejects the North's framing of them as hostile. The new text even changes the proportions of the national flag.

South China Sea code misses its deadline
At the ASEAN summit in Manila, the bloc and China failed to conclude a code of conduct for the South China Sea under the Philippines' chairmanship, despite provisional agreement on about 80 per cent of the draft. Talks pass to Singapore, which chairs ASEAN in 2027. Until a code is signed, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr said, both sides will keep to their 2002 declaration. Leaders offered Myanmar's military-backed government a conditional path back to full participation, allowing its leader to attend summits. Hours before the summit, Australia and the Philippines signed a defence pact to fast-track military cooperation and bolster deterrence against China.



Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump meet at the APEC summit in Shenzhen on 19 November, as questions grow over China's leader and his expanding political authority. Photo: Andres Martinez Casares/Reuters

Is Xi Jinping the world's most powerful man?

As the presidents of China, the US and Russia met at the APEC summit in Shenzhen on 19 November, a little-noticed Communist Party meeting in October suggested Xi was the most powerful man in the room – for now at least. Howard Zhang reports.

Few expected the Shenzhen summit to yield anything concrete, but three strongmen shaking hands in front of the cameras is a sure headline grabber. Each arrived with his own troubles. Trump, fresh from a bruising midterm defeat, will see his powers curtailed once the Democrats take control of Congress in January. Putin faces no institutional pressure, but his failure to win in Ukraine has dented his strongman image. Xi may have a faltering economy and simmering social discontent to manage, but since September he has purged yet more political and military figures, tightened his grip on the Party machinery and begun laying the ground for a fourth term in office. Arguably no leader in Shenzhen is as fully in command as Xi.

It is worth taking a closer look at the Fifth Plenum of the Party's Central Committee, a meeting that some say marked China's farewell to Deng Xiaoping's legacy.

What happened at the Fifth Plenum?

The Plenum, held from 26 to 29 October, confirmed the expulsion of 33 senior officials, including the generals Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli, the largest number at any plenum since reform began in 1978. Only 279 full and alternate Central Committee members attended, against 376 elected in 2022, the lowest attendance rate since the Mao era. No official reason was given, but analysts attribute most of the empty seats to expulsions and investigations – a measure of how far the purge has reached. The Central Committee runs China between Party congresses, and its members include ministers, provincial

leaders, the bosses of key state-owned enterprises and the top brass of the military.

Most China watchers read the plenum communiqué and later announcements as Xi gaining near-absolute control over the Party and paving the way for a fourth term at the 21st Party Congress next year, though a few scholars argue that potential challengers remain, especially in the military.

The most striking instruction, spelt out in later regulations, barred local Party chiefs, the 'number ones' with real sway over appointments, budgets and economic decisions, from demanding personal loyalty from their subordinates. Many read it as Xi insisting that loyalty can be owed to only one man, at the very top.

The anti-corruption chief Li Xi cited the ancient philosopher Han Fei: 事在四方, 要在中央, affairs may be conducted everywhere, but essential authority rests at the centre. No American president, and not even Putin with his looser web of security chiefs and regional bosses, commands a machine of that reach. According to Li Xi, disciplinary authorities punished 7.9 million people, including 963 senior officials, between November 2012 and September 2026, and the cases keep coming.



Chinese President Xi Jinping with senior Communist Party leaders at the closing session of the National People's Congress in Beijing on 12 March 2026, reflecting his grip on China's political leadership. Photo: Tingshu Wang/Reuters

What is Xi preparing China for?

The natural question is what Xi plans to do with all this power, and his own speeches offer a clue. In October 2013, less than a year after becoming general secretary, Xi told Taiwan's former vice-president Vincent Siew, on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Bali, that the political divide across the Taiwan Strait could not be passed on from generation to generation, words widely read as a signal that he meant to settle 'reunification' in his own time. He has since spoken of changes unseen in a century, urged the Party to prepare for the worst and told officials to dare to struggle, and in 2023 he told the National Security Commission to prepare for extreme scenarios. He wants a Party able to mobilise the nation through a prolonged confrontation, whether over sanctions, technology or Taiwan. Nothing in these speeches explicitly says Xi intends to start a war, but preparing China for one runs through all of them.

If Xi is planning for a confrontation, why does he keep purging even the military, including almost all of the top generals? Some experts argue the purges are due to political loyalty issues and may delay Xi's ambitions over Taiwan; others contend that his drive for absolute top-down control means war could come at any time, pointing to mounting military and paramilitary activity around the Strait.



Chinese President Xi Jinping inspects the People's Liberation Army garrison in Macao, highlighting his role in overseeing China's military leadership. Photo: Xinhua

Farewell to Deng's China?

Xi could hardly have chosen a more pointed venue than Shenzhen to showcase his power. It was here that Deng Xiaoping turned China from revolution to economic reform, ending class struggle at home and putting economic cooperation ahead of world



Deng Xiaoping visits Shenzhen's Splendid China Folk Village during his 1992 Southern Tour, which helped shape China's economic reform era. Photo: AP

revolution abroad, and here that history has now come full circle.

In Xi's 'new era' China, national security has again overtaken economic development as the top priority in Party documents, and in November he told state-owned enterprises to integrate Party leadership throughout corporate governance. Security laws once again treat citizens as potential 'foreign agents', and surveillance reaches from public squares down to digital wallets.

Challenge to the world

Xi's domestic model is also becoming an argument abroad. In November Li Xi claimed China had dispelled the belief that only multiparty democracies can prevent the abuse of power and corruption, and Xi has called Chinese-style modernisation a major advance over Western modernisation. China's new cross-border anti-corruption law carries that argument into other countries' legal systems, where its limits on sharing evidence could trap international businesses between conflicting obligations.

Xi has pressed on despite worldwide pushback against state-backed export drives in electric vehicles and solar panels that have helped hollow out industries in Germany and elsewhere, and against persistent allegations of intellectual property theft and espionage, the latest being US officials' claim that a suspected Chinese intelligence asset targeted Nvidia's Jensen Huang, which Beijing calls groundless.



The Chinese-backed Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway in East Africa, a major overseas infrastructure project linked to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Photo: Handout

Xi has also revived a Mao-era influence push, this time through the Belt and Road Initiative, state media and Confucius Institutes instead of arming guerrilla movements, and not only in the Global South. China's reach extends into Western societies through transnational repression; the Madrid-based human rights organisation Safeguard Defenders reported in November that China's so-called overseas police stations have grown into nearly 1,250 operations in at least 91 countries.

With all that said, as three strongmen stride across the stage in Shenzhen, it is worth remembering that Xi's vow not to hand the Taiwan question down to the next generation was made at another APEC summit, in Bali in 2013, when it still sounded like a distant ambition. He has spent the thirteen years since building a Party, army and state that could act on it. Xi may stand at the pinnacle of his power, but history's solace is that no power lasts for ever; the purges that make him unchallengeable today also leave him without a designated successor, without generals who dare to argue and without anyone to share the blame. Deng's generation, who had lived through the last time one man held this much power over China, understood that better than anyone.

Howard Zhang is a geopolitical analyst and former BBC editor specialising in Indo-Pacific issues.



Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh face an uncertain future following Myanmar's 2017 military crackdown and ongoing barriers to safe return. Photo: Aurélie Marrier d'Unienville

Myanmar found guilty over the Rohingyas

In a landmark judgment, the International Court of Justice has ruled that Myanmar's government committed genocide against the Rohingya community of Rakhine State during the military's 2017 operations, in which an estimated 10,000 people were killed and hundreds of thousands fled to Bangladesh. The court ordered Myanmar to allow refugees a safe, voluntary and dignified return, but their homeland is no longer under the Myanmar government's control. Most of Rakhine is now controlled by the Arakan Army, whose treatment of the Rohingya remains contentious. Nyein Chan Aye reports.

Rakhine is home to the mainly Buddhist ethnic Rakhine, its largest community, and the predominantly Muslim Rohingya, its second largest. Many Rakhine and other Myanmar citizens reject the name 'Rohingya', calling them 'Bengalis' and portraying them as migrants from Bangladesh. Rohingya consider themselves indigenous to Rakhine. Myanmar's military and ultra-nationalists have further inflamed these divisions through discriminatory policies.

More than 750,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh during the military's 2017 crackdown, but hundreds of thousands remain in Rakhine. Across most of the state, the military no longer governs. With Myanmar's military confined to three enclaves in Rakhine, the Arakan Army, an ethnic Rakhine movement fighting Myanmar's government for self-rule, commands the rest. This raises the further question as to whether the Rohingya and other minorities belong in a state dominated by ethnic Rakhine. Last month's ruling was the first time the International Court of Justice has found a state responsible for committing genocide. It also ordered Myanmar to make reparations and to investigate and punish those responsible.

The battle for Sittwe

After the 2021 coup, the Arakan Army resumed its offensive in November 2023, seizing most of Rakhine. In September, the military counterattacked from Sittwe towards Ponnagyun and from Kyaukphyu, with thousands of troops and air and naval support. 'Within a month the ground offensive had stalled,' said Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, a PhD candidate at Cornell University. A military landing on Ngapyi Island met resistance; fighting continued



Rakhine State lies along Myanmar's western coast, bordering Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal. Cox's Bazar, where many Rohingya refugees have sought shelter, lies across the border. Map: News Arena Network

into November as the Arakan Army pressed Sittwe.

The military retains Sittwe, Manaung Island and part of Kyaukphyu – 'around 10 percent of Rakhine State by area', according to Thomas Kean of International Crisis Group. The Arakan Army controls 14 of 17 townships and Paletwa in neighbouring Chin State. 'For the military, losing almost an entire state is unprecedented,' Kean said. Taking Sittwe would make the Arakan Army the first of Myanmar's many ethnic armed groups to capture a state capital.

Kyaukphyu hosts Chinese pipelines; a deep-sea port is planned. 'Whoever holds Kyaukphyu has leverage over China,' Kyaw Hsan Hlaing said. The military has struggled to retake ground but continues attacks on civilian areas, displacement camps and infrastructure. Kyaw Hsan Hlaing said: 'I read that as an effort to make Arakan Army rule as painful as possible for the people living under it.'

Governing under siege

The Arakan Army calls its approach 'fight while building, build while fighting'. Its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), runs courts, police, taxation, schools and clinics. 'It has built more of an administration than I expected,' said Kyaw Hsan Hlaing. 'The problem is how it governs.' Since late 2023, the military has restricted trade, aid, telecommunications, electricity and banking in Arakan Army-held areas. This year, it has tried to choke off cash by disrupting mobile-money agents, Kean said.



The United League of Arakan has established administrative structures in areas controlled by the Arakan Army, including courts, schools and healthcare services. Photo: ANU Myanmar Research Centre

A resident reported medical syringe prices rising from 1,000 to 5,000 kyat; a displaced man in Mrauk-U put consultations at 20,000 kyat. He described makeshift schools packing '20 to 60 kids into a single house'. The ULA has announced medical and nursing schools and Arakkha National University despite wartime shortages and insecurity, the Center for Arakan Studies reports.

Routes through Bangladesh and India's Mizoram State offer relief. The centre's November report estimated 500,000–600,000 displaced people in Arakan Army-held areas. 'The long-term challenge is to turn military success into an administration that earns public trust,' said Aung Marm Oo, editor-in-chief of Rakhine-based Development Media Group.

The ULA's Arakkha Lottery pledges half its proceeds to roads, schools and clinics. Aung Marm Oo called it 'a test of the administration's transparency and accountability', urging public accounting.

The Mrauk-U man put it differently: 'Rather than asking whether people "trust" the ULA, I'd say the public relies on them. If you ask anyone here whether they want the old government back, nobody will say yes.' Kyaw Hsan Hlaing said young men and women face two years' conscription and travel restrictions. Another resident said recruitment deprives Rakhine and minority families of breadwinners.

A question of belonging

For Rohingya in Maungdaw and Buthidaung, Aung Kyaw Moe, chair of the Rohingya Consultative Council, said people remain in 'survival mode', with restrictions on movement, livelihoods and aid.

Anasar, a Rohingya activist in Bangladesh, relayed a Buthidaung contact's account of barriers to farming, fishing and healthcare,



A family who fled from Buthidaung, Myanmar, at a refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, on 25 June 2024. Photo: Mohammad Ponir

and alleged unpaid labour carrying Arakan Army supplies. An August UN report documented allegations of forced labour, recruitment, detention and discriminatory restrictions under Arakan Army rule, alongside military abuses. In May, Human Rights Watch identified more than 170 Rohingya villagers killed or missing after an alleged Arakan Army massacre at Hoyyar Siri in 2024. The Arakan Army denies responsibility.

Its spokesperson's office told Democracy Asia: 'None of these allegations ever happened on the ground, they are all completely fabricated.' It did not answer questions about civilian administration or minority representation.

The Arakan Army promises an Arakan for all, appointing Muslim village officials, hiring teachers and reopening mosques in Maungdaw. Yet Kean said these gestures 'have been outweighed by continuing reports of abuses and discrimination'. Aye Thein, a University of Toronto researcher, doubts the ULA will repeat successive governments' strategy of dividing communities. But discriminatory restrictions, if substantiated, 'would undermine the political legitimacy of whoever is in control', he warned.

Arakan Army leaders reject 'Rohingya' as an ethnic designation but advocate rights for all legitimate residents. Aye Thein said the name matters, alongside 'the right to office, education, right to freely travel, and equality before the law'. He said Rakhine and Rohingya must eventually share power, though ULA leaders and Rakhine society seem unready.

The military forcibly recruited Rohingya in 2024; some Rohingya armed groups sided with it. Kean said support for the Rohingya militant groups ARSA and RSO has declined; they are increasingly viewed as 'criminal organizations profiting from the drug trade'. Sporadic attacks remain a danger, he warned, reinforcing the Arakan Army's view of Rohingya civilians as a security threat. Anasar questioned the groups' claims to defend Rohingya: 'I don't see anything like that on the ground.' Aung Thura Ko Ko, a visiting scholar at Cornell's Southeast Asia Program, urged authorities 'to distinguish armed actors from civilian communities'.

Who decides the future?

Bangladesh confirmed contact with the Arakan Army over the Rohingya crisis; trade links it to India's Mizoram State, while Beijing backs the junta publicly and maintains Arakan Army contacts to protect its investments. These contacts are not formal recognition, but Naypyitaw, Myanmar's capital, is no longer the only address for Rakhine. Aung Thura Ko Ko said Bangladesh's engagement 'could create opportunities for humanitarian cooperation, border stability and eventual refugee repatriation, although substantial obstacles remain'.

'In practice, it's building a state,' Kyaw Hsan Hlaing said, referring to the Arakan Army's ambition for a status 'not inferior to confederation'. He added: 'Militarily, I expect a stalemate through the dry season.' Sittwe remains the test. Kean warned a siege 'would drain its forces and put civilians at grave risk'. Inclusion depends on 'when and how the war ends' and whether Arakan Army leaders treat Rohingya 'as constituents rather than as a threat', he said.

For Aung Kyaw Moe, the test is whether Rohingya 'can live as equal members of society, rather than simply whether the authority governing their territory has changed'. Kyaw Hsan Hlaing put the wider question this way: 'The question I care about most is what kind of government this becomes. Right now, it is a one-party system.'

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.



Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto faces mounting political and economic pressure two years after taking office, amid falling market confidence and growing public dissatisfaction. Photo: Edgar Su/Reuters

Indonesia's Prabowo under pressure

The arrest of three senior police generals, among them President Prabowo's chief of staff, in a phone-tapping scandal, and the subsequent deployment of more than 20,000 extra troops to the capital, Jakarta, amid government talk of treason, have further unsettled the country's stock market. Just what is happening in Indonesia? Stephen Woodhouse has this analysis.

General Prabowo Subianto had his eyes on the presidency of Indonesia for many years and fought several unsuccessful campaigns before finally succeeding in 2024. Now, two years on, he is under increasing economic and political pressure, with claims that he has become the most unpopular president ever. Ratings by one leading pollster, SMRC, which had Prabowo riding high with an 81 per cent approval rating at the end of his first year, had sunk to 44.5 per cent by the time he completed his second year in office in October.

He won the 2024 presidential poll thanks to strong support from the previous president, Joko Widodo (known as Jokowi), who was known to hanker after a third presidential term from which he was constitutionally barred. A quid pro quo for Jokowi's support was that Prabowo would continue to give top priority to Jokowi's flagship project of building a new national capital, to be named Nusantara, in East Kalimantan. Another was that he would give a meaningful role to Jokowi's son, Gibran, who became Prabowo's vice president. Prabowo's failure to advance the Nusantara project has soured relations with his predecessor, and now Gibran has resigned as vice president, ostensibly because he lacked a high school certificate, a prerequisite for the role. Observers

interpret this as the former president withdrawing support from his successor.

The accusation that General Listyo Sigit Prabowo (who is not related to the president), national police chief until October, ran an illegal wiretapping operation that targeted the president himself, creates an ever more rocky relationship between the police force and the army, on both of which Prabowo depends. Listyo is a Jokowi loyalist of long standing, while President Prabowo was an army general during the military rule of former president Suharto from 1966 to 1998. Prabowo married Suharto's daughter, Titiek, in 1983; they divorced in 1998. The national police force has long been an uneasy bedfellow of the military.



President Prabowo Subianto with military and police leaders, whose increasingly strained relationship has become a source of political uncertainty for his government. Photo: Antara

While political shenanigans carry on largely behind closed doors, the dire state of the country's economy is no secret. Despite seemingly impressive growth figures, the Jakarta stock market has fallen by 40 per cent this year, with estimated withdrawals exceeding US$5bn. The index provider MSCI is threatening to downgrade Indonesia, which would reduce the status of Southeast Asia's largest economy from 'emerging market' to 'standalone'. MSCI is reported to have concerns about opaque share ownership, low free float and a lack of prosecutions for alleged market manipulation. Most of the nominal economic growth is concentrated in the raw materials and minerals sector, ownership of which lies largely in government hands and those of wealthy companies. Another major contributor is government expenditure on President Prabowo's increasingly unpopular and expensive school feeding programme and a village cooperative scheme.

It was a combination of the toxic impact of systemic corruption, collusion and nepotism – known by the Indonesian language acronym KKN – that led to the fall in 1998 of former president Suharto. Under Prabowo, KKN is widely perceived to be ever more rampant. The appointment to key positions of close relatives of the president, such as that of his nephew Thomas 'Tommy' Djiwandono as a deputy governor of the supposedly independent central bank, Bank Indonesia, has been viewed negatively by the general public and by international rating agencies, as have appointments to government positions of military officers perceived as being loyal to him, rather than necessarily competent. These have drawn vocal opposition from civil society groups.



Stock prices displayed on an electronic board at the Indonesia Stock Exchange in Jakarta, 16 October 2026, amid growing concerns over the country's market outlook. Photo: EPA

Among those critical of such appointments is the widely respected former deputy minister of foreign affairs and ambassador to the US, Dino Patti Djalal. He criticised President Prabowo's government for being reactive to crises that could have been foreseen and mitigated. Comments on Facebook and other social media are almost universally scathing about the president's performance.

Signs of the stress felt across Indonesia include a decline in the size of a 'comfortably off' middle class from 57 million in 2019 to under 48 million in 2024 and an unquantified increase in those earning below Indonesia's formal minimum wage of US$300 per month. Further signs include a rapid increase in online gambling and online borrowing (*pinjol*), which puts additional pressures on low-income households. Younger citizens are particularly vulnerable as obtaining regular formal employment is challenging, especially in manufacturing, with garment making hit hard by price competition from China. It is common practice to bribe potential employers in order to obtain employment.

Indonesia is highly dependent on imports of basic necessities such as petroleum products, soybeans, fertiliser and wheat flour, prices of which have increased sharply due to the war in Iran. The rupiah has fallen from about 15,500 to the US dollar when Prabowo took office to about 18,000 now. The president's younger brother, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, said in late October that if MSCI goes ahead with its threat to downgrade Indonesia's stock market status he anticipated a further fall to 21,000 to the dollar, with consequent pressure on the price of imports, the stock market and the economy more generally.

Indonesia's parliament is largely filled by Prabowo loyalists, so discontent is being expressed through extra-parliamentary channels, notably social media, which is full of anger from younger



Young Indonesians face difficulties finding secure formal employment, as manufacturing industries such as garment production struggle with competition and economic pressures. Photo: Reuters

people and the economically disadvantaged, who are concerned at economic inequality and the lack of employment opportunities. They are angry too at the failure to mitigate the human impact of the El Niño drought and haze, and at a feeling that President Prabowo is too supportive of President Trump and insufficiently pro-Palestinian. Street protests are increasing and observers note greater support for protesters by the police than from the army.

The bulwark of support for President Prabowo by the military and police appears to be fracturing. Parliament will soon be selecting a new vice president from two names put forward by the president. But it is little more than two years before Indonesians are due to choose a new president. With pressure mounting on Prabowo, alternative candidates are coming forward. Opinion polls suggest the governor of West Java province, Dedi Mulyadi, is far more popular than President Prabowo, who, polls suggest, is out of touch, dictatorial and surrounded by an elite that shows almost no concern for the economic plight of the masses. This contrasts with Governor Dedi's much-publicised social media concern for the poor.



Students protest against the Indonesian government in Jakarta, voicing demands over economic pressures, environmental concerns and government accountability. Photo: EPA

Stephen Woodhouse, who served as the United Nations Children's Fund representative in Indonesia, lives in Southeast Asia.



Imran Khan, Pakistan's former prime minister and 1992 Cricket World Cup-winning captain, has been in prison for more than three years. His continued detention has not ended his political influence. Photo: RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal

The prisoner

Former Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan has been in prison for more than three years as the military establishment tries to erase him from the national consciousness. Umber Khairi reports.

Imran Khan, once one of the world's most exciting cricketers and a former elected prime minister of Pakistan, has been in prison for over three years. Pakistan's military-controlled authorities ensure that he is never seen in public, and almost no images of him have surfaced since. The last public footage of him is from August 2023, when he was arrested at his home in Lahore. Despite a brutal crackdown on his party and supporters, support for Khan remains strong at home and abroad. Repeated appeals for his release – he is held in what his lawyers describe as solitary confinement at Adiala jail in Rawalpindi – have come from human rights groups, UN officials, former cricket captains, international parliamentarians and his family. Yet none has been heeded, as Western governments seem unwilling to antagonise Pakistan's Chief of Defence Forces, Field Marshal Asim Munir.

Health issues and court orders

Earlier this year, Khan – who is now 74 – complained of failing sight in his right eye. A report to the Supreme Court by one of his lawyers, Barrister Salman Safdar, who visited him in February at the court's request, said Khan had lost nearly 85 per cent of the sight in that eye. On 18 August, the court ordered that he be moved within two days to the privately run Shifa International Hospital in Islamabad. The authorities refused, saying this would be 'discriminatory' because it would grant the former prime minister special privileges. Instead, Khan has been treated at the government-run Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) in Islamabad, where he is taken in the dead of night to avoid publicity or photographs. According to the hospital, on his latest visit, in the early hours of 11 November, he was given his sixth



Security officers escort former Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan to the Islamabad High Court in May 2023, when he was briefly arrested. He has been in prison since August 2023. Photo: Akhtar Soomro/Reuters

injection to treat central retinal vein occlusion (CRVO).

The conditions he is held in are just as worrying. According to a report by Osman Samiuddin in *Equator* earlier this year, Khan is kept in a room six feet by eight feet, in an eight-cell block where the other cells are empty except one used as a kitchen. Visits by family and lawyers are rare and hard won. Relatives are told they must not 'do any political activity', a rule that has been used to deny further visits.

The erasure of Imran Khan

Since Khan was removed from power in April 2022 by a parliamentary vote of no confidence, which both his supporters and independent journalists say was engineered, Pakistan's military establishment has worked to erase both him and his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). TV channels were told not to say his name on air; absurdly, he was to be referred to only as 'Baani PTI', or 'PTI founder'.

Khan is also being airbrushed out of sporting history. He has been edited out of official footage of the 1992 Cricket World Cup, which Pakistan won under his captaincy. At a state event honouring Arshad Nadeem, the javelin gold medallist at the 2024 Olympics, a montage of Pakistan's greatest sporting achievements left out the 1992 win altogether. The state even prosecutes indirect references to him, such as his prisoner number, 804 ('aath sau chaar'). Supporters still allude to him most often as 'kaptaan' (captain).

Breaking the party

For more than four years, the military establishment has tried to divide and destroy the PTI. Before the February 2024 election, the courts stripped the party of its cricket-bat symbol because it had not held valid internal elections, forcing its candidates to stand as independents while Khan was in jail. Despite these restrictions, the PTI did extremely well in the election, largely because of well-coordinated campaigning and social media messaging.


Imran Khan led Pakistan to victory in the 1992 Cricket World Cup. His removal from official sporting footage has become part of the wider effort to erase his public legacy. Photo: Getty Images

Meanwhile, a compliant media reports supposed rifts among senior leaders over strategy and between Khan's family and the party, and even between his jailed wife, Bushra Bibi, and his sisters. Such insinuations steadily erode the party's credibility. The state's crackdown on PTI protests has been brutal. In November 2024, protesters marched on Islamabad, most of them from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), the north-western province where the PTI was in power. Live coverage was suspended. One independent journalist who toured hospitals that night to count the dead and injured was picked up from a hospital car park and charged with possessing narcotics. How many people were killed or detained on the night of 26 November has never been established.

On 11 October, the federal government neutralised the one province the PTI governed by imposing an emergency and governor's rule in KP. The province is now run by a federally appointed governor, and its elected chief minister, Sohail Afridi, was taken into 'preventive custody' immediately and has been in detention ever since.

The cases

Khan is serving sentences from at least three convictions, with other cases pending, so even a successful appeal would not free him. One conviction is for selling state gifts;



Supporters of Imran Khan and the PTI took to the streets in November 2024, as authorities intensified their crackdown on the party. Photo: WK Yousufzai/AP Photo

another, also with his wife, is for taking land as a bribe from the property tycoon Malik Riaz. That case is bizarre. In 2019, Riaz settled a money-laundering investigation by Britain's National Crime Agency. Under the deal, £190 million (about US$250 million) was to be returned to the state of Pakistan. Instead, it was used to pay a fine Riaz owed to a Pakistani court. Around the same time, Riaz gave more than 50 acres of land to a trust run by Khan and his wife for a university project – a gift Khan's enemies later labelled a bribe. Riaz was understood to have had good communication channels with both politicians and senior military officials for many years, and the arrangement could hardly have happened without a nod from, or a cut for, the powerful establishment.

Enemy of the state or political prisoner?

Observers see Khan's imprisonment as a fight for survival between him and the Field Marshal, much like that between Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia-ul-Haq decades ago: neither man is safe while the other is in power – or even alive. The enmity is partly personal. Khan backed a rival general to become army chief and, as prime minister, reportedly removed Munir as head of the ISI after about eight months, when Munir apparently suggested an inquiry into alleged corruption by Khan's wife. Munir has insisted that Khan is an enemy of the state and a traitor.



Pakistan's military chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, has become a central figure in the political struggle surrounding Imran Khan's imprisonment. Photo: ISPR/File

Khan's supporters say he remains in prison because Washington wants it so. The Americans, they argue, have distrusted him since he met President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in February 2022 and then publicised a confidential diplomatic cable that, he said, showed the US wanted him removed. Certainly, Western governments have done little to press Pakistan's military ruler to free him, and are unlikely to while the Field Marshal remains a useful ally in the US–Iran conflict and Pakistan's army stays close to Saudi Arabia.

Morsi's fate?

Some of Khan's PTI colleagues have warned that he could die in custody, as Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first freely elected president, did in 2019. Morsi died almost six years after the military overthrew him. Whatever the cause – some suspected poisoning – the international media barely noticed, and nobody in the 'free world' seemed perturbed that an elected president had died in a military ruler's custody. The cheerleaders of the Arab Spring had little to say. Given that precedent, Khan's release seems unlikely. What remains to be seen is whether the state can erase him from the memories of Pakistanis – or will simply turn him into a hero and a martyr.

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



The Indian Army is introducing AI-enabled robotic MULEs to take over some of the logistical duties traditionally performed by live mules in difficult terrain. Photo: Indian Army

India's Army phases out mules in favour of MULEs

The Indian Army's induction of AI-enabled robotic mules to replace some 4,000 live pack animals is yet another inevitable, but bittersweet, instance of modern technology changing how troops are logistically sustained in some of the country's most inhospitable terrain. This report from Delhi is by Rahul Bedi.

After almost two centuries of carrying ordnance, munitions, rations, fuel, medicines and other essential supplies to troops in remote mountain posts and other inaccessible locations across India, these sure-footed animals are gradually making way for their mechanical namesakes: four-legged, matte-black robots, rather aptly christened MULEs, short for Multi-Utility Legged Equipment.

The transition from mules to MULEs is more than a clever coincidence of nomenclature, as the latter will not only take over some of the former's logistical tasks but also undertake surveillance and reconnaissance, carry specialised equipment and potentially assist in bomb disposal. In short, the Army's dependence on four-legged transport in difficult terrain has not quite ended; it has simply acquired a very different set of legs.

These 51-kg robotic quadrupeds are the latest addition to an expanding logistical network of roads, helicopters and specialised vehicles that have steadily reduced the Army's reliance on animal transport. Yet none of these alternatives has entirely replicated the live mules' ability to negotiate narrow tracks, steep inclines and treacherous terrain while carrying substantial loads.

Furthermore, the prospect of their imminent replacement is being viewed with considerable nostalgia by serving and retired Army personnel, particularly those who have served in high-altitude formations and other remote areas.

Many of these soldiers recall how these animals repeatedly ferried vital supplies – and, often, hope and succour – to isolated troops when every other means of



For generations, military mules carried essential supplies to Indian soldiers stationed in remote mountain posts and inaccessible terrain. Photo: Deshakalyan Chowdhury/Getty Images

transport had failed. Hardy, sure-footed and remarkably resilient, they pressed on through bitter cold, snow and, at times, even enemy fire. Their ability to cart loads exceeding 80 kg over precipitous terrain, with relatively little supporting infrastructure compared with motorised transport, made them invaluable to the Army.

'Mules have been major force multipliers in both World Wars and in numerous local conflicts, ensuring the uninterrupted supply of stores and ammunition to frontline troops,' recalled a retired Army Service Corps officer, whose Animal Transport (AT) battalion received the Indian Army Chief's citation for bravery for its service under enemy fire during the 1999 Kargil War with Pakistan, fought in mountain terrain at altitudes exceeding 5,000 metres. Declining to be named, as he was not officially authorised to speak on the subject, the officer said that the mules' contribution in Kargil extended well beyond merely carrying loads: time and again, they had enabled troops to remain operational in areas where roads were non-existent, and which helicopters and mechanised transport could not reach.

The officer recalled the special relationship that developed over time between muleteers and their animals, which required familiarity, patience and an understanding of their individual temperaments. Consequently, most muleteers, he said, eventually came to regard their mules as 'comrades' rather than beasts of burden, an affection reflected in the names they were given. And though each mule was identified by an embossed hoof number, it acquired a more personal identity through names like Kalu (Blackie), Chhota (Little One), Tez (Swift), Golu (Chubby), Dheeth (Obstinate), Bhola (Simpleton), Nakhrewala (The Fussy One) and Dabang (Fearless). More colourful names included Bandook Singh (Gun Singh), Shaktiman (The Powerful One), Sheikh Chilli (The Fanciful Dreamer) and Majnu (The Lovesick One). 'These names,' the officer said, 'were not merely whimsical, but often reflected the animal's appearance, temperament or peculiar habits, giving the otherwise impersonal business of military logistics a distinctly human touch.'

India's Army inherited its animal transport system from the British Indian Army at Independence in 1947, when mules were indispensable to military operations in mountainous regions. At the time, it is estimated to have possessed over 20,000 mules, whose numbers subsequently increased with the raising of the Army's mountain formations. The Army Service Corps, in tandem with the Remount and Veterinary Corps, the Army's animal-care and veterinary service, was responsible for their management, breeding and training at multiple centres in northern and central India.

The Indian Army's mule companies rendered gallant service in both World Wars, operating across multiple conflict theatres. In the First World War, they deployed to the Middle East and East Africa, carrying supplies and dismantled artillery across terrain that wheeled transport could not negotiate. In the Second World War, four mule companies, known as Force K6, served with the British Expeditionary Force in France in 1939–40. After four years in Britain, they returned to India in 1944 to join the Burma campaign, where mules proved vital to sustaining troops in the jungle.

Thereafter, mules served in every war independent India fought with its neighbours – China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1947–48, 1965, 1971 and 1999. They were employed in two broad categories: General Service (GS) mules, which carried supplies, and Mounted Artillery (MA) mules, which transported ammunition and dismantled guns. Until the 3.7-inch mountain howitzer was phased out in the 1970s, teams of mules carried its components, in eight separate loads, to high-altitude locations where the guns were assembled.



The Indian Army's robotic mules ahead of the Republic Day parade rehearsal in Kolkata on 24 January 2025. Photo: Debajyoti Chakraborty/ Getty Images



Military mules supported Indian Army operations across difficult terrain, transporting supplies, ammunition and artillery equipment during successive conflicts. Photo: Bloomberg/Getty Images

Some mules, like Pedongi, who was named after the first battle area to which she was deployed in northeast India, became legends in the Army. After more than three decades of service carrying artillery equipment, ammunition and supplies to heights of more than 5,000 metres, she was listed in the 1997 *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's longest-serving military mule.

Captured by Pakistani forces during the 1971 war along with other Army transport animals, Pedongi escaped a fortnight later and made her way back across 20 km of mountainous terrain, carrying enemy ammunition and a machine gun. Decorated for her exploits, she became the mascot of the 53 Animal Transport Company, featured on Christmas and New Year greeting cards. Even a lounge at the Army Service Corps officers' mess in Delhi Cantonment was later named in her memory.

Another celebrated animal was the Grey Mule of the Madras Engineer Group – then known as the Queen's Own Madras Sappers and Miners – whose military career began in 1891, serving on the North-West Frontier (now in Pakistan) and in Tibet, and in Egypt and Palestine during the First World War.

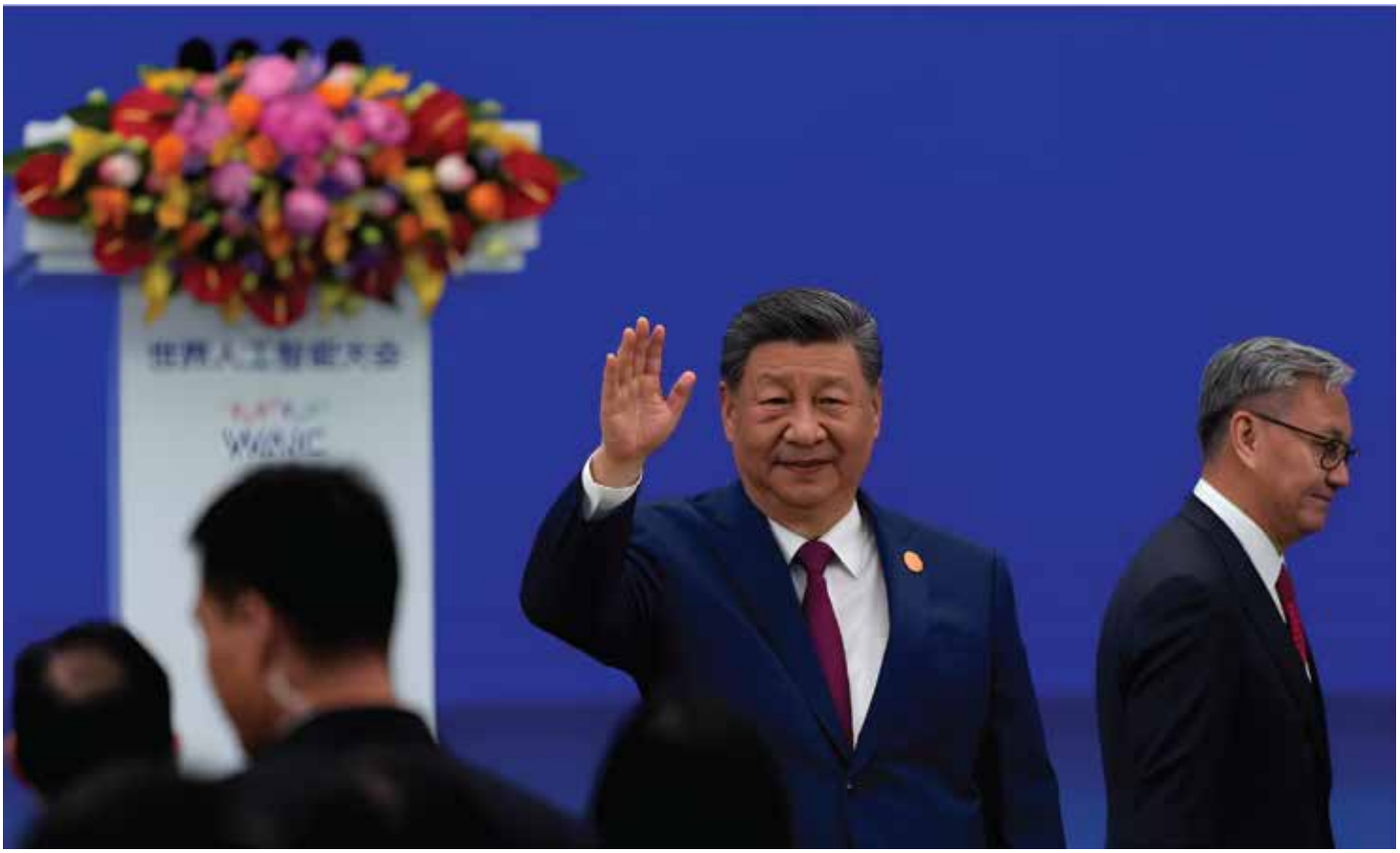
Sold off in Egypt after the war along with thousands of other military mules, it somehow found its way back home to Bangalore Cantonment in March 1922, its improbable homecoming echoing that of Warrior, the celebrated British cavalry horse whose exploits during the same war were recounted by his owner, General Jack Seely, in his 1934 memoir *My Horse Warrior*. Warrior's story is often likened to Michael Morpurgo's novel *War Horse* and Steven Spielberg's 2011 film adaptation, though Morpurgo's tale was not based on it.

Such stories, however, belong to a different military age. The modern Indian Army, increasingly reliant on automation, artificial intelligence and unmanned systems, has little room for the flesh-and-blood logistics that once sustained its operations. Admittedly, robotic MULEs will need neither fodder nor veterinary attention, and though they may eventually prove efficient and dependable, for several generations of Indian soldiers they will lack the individuality and character that made their predecessors part of Army folklore.



Indian Army mule handlers navigate rocky terrain during an exercise in the UK in 1940, illustrating the long-standing role of pack animals in military logistics. Photo: Lt E G Malindine

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



China is seeking a stronger leadership role among developing countries, but its growing influence does not necessarily mean the diverse nations of the Global South want a single voice to represent them. Photo: Reuters

China and the Global South

Beijing presents itself as a natural leader of the developing world. But does the Global South want anyone to speak for it at all? Lijia Zhang reports.

I learnt a new word while travelling through South America earlier this year: *chino*. In Argentina, it can mean a Chinese person, but also a Chinese-run convenience store. These shops seemed to be everywhere in Buenos Aires. When my friend Diego García, a publisher, showed me around his neighbourhood in Palermo, we stumbled upon the opening of a new one.

China's presence was visible on a rather different scale at Ezeiza International Airport, where I spotted the logo of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China. In 2012, ICBC acquired an 80 per cent stake in Standard Bank Argentina, securing a foothold in the country's financial sector. Diego offered a useful perspective on China's growing role in the region: he said Argentina did not have to choose between China and the United States, and should work with both, pursuing its own interests.

As a Chinese-born writer working on a book about my South American journey, I found his observation illuminating. Too often, discussions of China's influence reduce other countries to prizes in a geopolitical contest. Diego put Argentina's interests back at the centre.

Must the countries of the Global South choose a single leader at all? From Beijing or Washington, their relationships can look like a contest for allegiance. For the countries themselves, the priority may be to widen their choices.

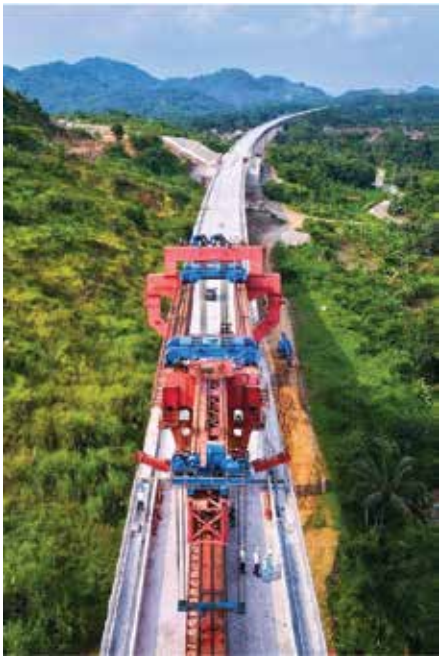
The Global South is a loose term encompassing roughly 130 countries, depending on the definition. Unlike BRICS, it has no official membership list or common institutional framework. We often ask whether Beijing can lead it, but less often whether these diverse societies want anyone speaking on their behalf.

China has much to offer developing countries. Its transformation from widespread poverty into an industrial powerhouse provides valuable experience, even if its path cannot simply be replicated elsewhere. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, it has financed infrastructure and expanded economic ties across the developing world.

For countries struggling with inadequate transport, unreliable electricity and limited financing, such engagement can be valuable. Western criticism of China sometimes overlooks the needs its projects address. Governments seeking roads, power stations or investment cannot afford to wait indefinitely for an ideal partner.

Beijing has repeatedly emphasised solidarity with developing countries. In March 2025, Foreign Minister Wang Yi described China as a natural member of the Global South and urged these countries to 'speak in one voice' to defend their common interests. Six months later, President Xi Jinping unveiled his Global Governance Initiative at a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation gathering in Tianjin, calling for a more equitable international order. Chatham House's Yu Jie has interpreted his wider initiatives as evidence of Beijing's determination to reshape rules historically written by Western powers.

This ambition has an audience. China's challenge to Western dominance resonates with nations that have experienced colonialism, intervention and exclusion. Many regard international institutions as unfairly tilted towards wealthy Western countries, giving them disproportionate influence over decisions affecting everyone. There is nothing inherently wrong with China aspiring to lead, since its economic strength and diplomatic clout give it considerable weight. It



China-backed infrastructure projects, such as the Jakarta–Bandung High-Speed Railway in Indonesia, illustrate how the Belt and Road Initiative has expanded China's economic presence across the Global South. Photo: Xinhua

can champion developing countries' demands for a fairer international order.

But championing a cause does not confer a mandate to speak for everyone who shares it. The Global South has no elected leader, common political programme or single set of interests. Economic might cannot substitute for consent. Nor does trade automatically buy political allegiance. Countries may welcome Chinese investment without adopting Beijing's diplomatic positions or political model. Their willingness to cooperate should not be mistaken for a willingness to follow.

Shared historical grievances do not always produce shared contemporary interests. An oil exporter and a small island state threatened by rising seas may agree that international institutions are unfair while disagreeing about decarbonisation. A commodity exporter may welcome Chinese demand while a manufacturer worries about competition from Chinese imports.

Even within a country, interests differ. A government may celebrate an infrastructure agreement while local businesses seek more contracts and workers demand better conditions. Listening to the Global South must mean taking these voices seriously, too. Who, then, decides what the Global South wants? On reforming international financial institutions, Beijing may advance widely shared demands. On trade, security or climate policy, agreement must be negotiated rather than assumed.



President Xi Jinping poses with business and political leaders at the APEC CEO Summit in Shenzhen, reflecting China's efforts to strengthen its role in international economic cooperation. Photo: Reuters



Diego García attends the opening of a Chinese-run convenience store, known locally as a *chino*, in Argentina, where such shops have become part of everyday commercial life. Photo: Lijia Zhang

India illustrates the limits of any presumed Chinese leadership. Another major developing economy, it has ambitions of its own to shape the international order. It participates in BRICS alongside China while remaining a strategic rival. Delhi is hardly likely to accept Beijing as its natural spokesperson.

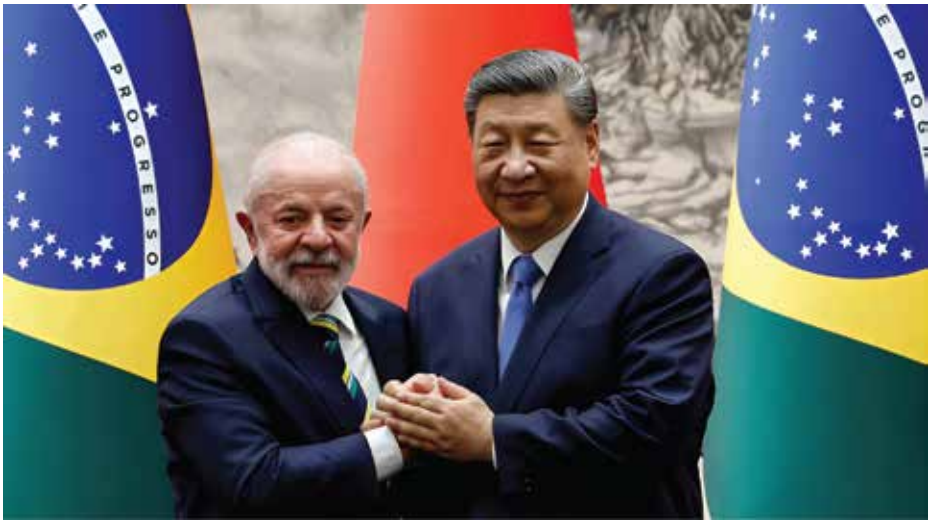
Brazil offers another perspective. It cooperates closely with China while insisting on an independent international role. During a visit to Indonesia in October 2025, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said neither country sought a second Cold War. Cooperation need not entail joining a geopolitical camp.

There is an irony here. China has long defended its sovereignty and resisted attempts by powerful countries to dictate its choices. Other developing nations are equally protective of their independence. Beijing should understand that instinct better than most.

A multipolar world would offer limited improvement if it merely replaced one dominant voice with several competing ones. The test is whether smaller countries gain influence over decisions, rather than simply acquiring more powerful suitors.

China can help make that happen. It can build coalitions around specific shared interests: fairer development finance, access to technology and support for adapting to climate change. Partnerships should leave room for disagreement, scrutiny and adjustment when projects fail to meet local needs. Leadership also requires accepting outcomes one would not have chosen. A partner's decision to work with Washington, question a Chinese project or oppose Beijing in an international forum need not invalidate the wider relationship. Independence has meaning only when it includes the freedom to say no.

My South American journey reminded me how much disappears when we view other societies primarily through their relationship with our own country. As Diego suggested, Argentina wants to work with both China and the United States, on its own terms. Perhaps that is the measure of genuine leadership: not how many countries follow Beijing, but how much freedom they retain to choose their own path, including the freedom to disagree with China.



Chinese President Xi Jinping and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva meet in Beijing, illustrating Brazil's growing cooperation with China while maintaining its own independent international position. Photo: Tingshu Wang/Reuters

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. She is working on a book about her South American journey.



The Mekong meets the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar at the Golden Triangle, where decisions made upstream affect communities and ecosystems downstream. Photo: KPBS

The Mekong's downstream dilemma

Southeast Asia's mighty Mekong River – known in China as the Lancang – flows from China and along the Myanmar–Laos and Laos–Thailand borders to irrigate the rice-growing plains of Cambodia and southern Vietnam. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework, or LMC, has just held its 11th foreign ministers' meeting in Beijing, ten years after its first leaders' summit, to discuss concerns about this important waterway. One of the main issues discussed concerns Thailand and Myanmar, countries whose shared border rivers flow into the Mekong. Water flow specialist Udisha Saklani asks how much say downstream countries have in what happens upstream.

On 4 November 2026, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, called for a new 'golden decade' of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. Thailand, which co-chaired the meeting in Beijing, asked for closer cooperation on water quality and cross-border pollution. It had made a more specific proposal the previous year, asking the forum's water and environment centres to work with the Mekong River Commission on river contamination. The Thai authorities have repeatedly detected elevated levels of arsenic in the Kok and Sai rivers. The Kok flows from Myanmar's Shan State into northern Thailand and joins the Mekong. The Sai forms part of the Thai–Myanmar border and reaches the Mekong via the Ruak. Tests commissioned by Thailand pointed to upstream rare earth mining as a likely source of contamination in the Kok. Along the upper Sai, human rights activists have alleged that Chinese crews mined gold. The Thai authorities have yet to identify the sites responsible for the contamination.

Thailand has shared its test results with the Mekong River Commission and taken the issue

up directly with Myanmar. It has worked through both regional bodies before, when countries downstream were pressing China for year-round river data. How that agreement came about shows what they can achieve, and where the limits lie.

What downstream countries have gained

The Mekong flows from the Tibetan Plateau to the sea in southern Vietnam. Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam established the Mekong River Commission in 1995. China and Myanmar became dialogue partners the following year. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework brought all six countries into the same forum as members. The first leaders' summit took place in Sanya, China, in March 2016.

China has since 2002 supplied the commission with data during the flood season. That left a gap in the dry months, when a fall in the river could reflect low rainfall, water being held back in reservoirs, or both. The drought of 2019 made the question harder to ignore. A study published the following year argued that China's dams had held back large volumes of water. Beijing disputed the finding. The commission questioned parts of the analysis and pointed to low rainfall.



The Kok, Sai and Ruak rivers converge with the Mekong near the Golden Triangle, connecting waterways across Myanmar, Thailand and Laos. Map: SBS News


A farmer sits in a drought-stricken rice field in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, where reduced river flows can worsen saltwater intrusion and threaten agriculture. Photo: Vietnam.vn

By then, Thailand's water agency and its regional partners had used a grant from the LMC Special Fund to examine gaps in data sharing. The Stockholm Environment Institute, which led the technical work, says it helped lay the groundwork for the agreement that followed. At the 2020 LMC summit, Vietnam's then prime minister called for better river data. China's premier pledged to share it year-round. Two months later, China signed the agreement with the river commission, where it remains a dialogue partner. The technical work was funded through the LMC, and the agreement was signed through the commission. That gave downstream countries two ways to press the issue. How much their efforts weighed in Beijing's decision is harder to say.

Those readings are one part of what countries downstream need to know. In Cambodia, the Mekong's seasonal rise sends water back into Tonle Sap Lake, sustaining a major fishery. In Vietnam's delta, low river flows can allow saltwater to reach farther inland, threatening crops and freshwater supplies. For both countries, the timing of flows matters as much as the volume.

The gain for downstream countries is real, but partial. River-level readings show what has happened, not what dam operators plan to do. Information about how much water China's reservoirs store and when they release it remains limited. In January 2021, China notified the commission of a planned cut in outflow from



Dams along the Lancang River in China influence the timing and volume of water flowing downstream into the Mekong basin. Photo: CGTN

Jinghong during maintenance. By the time the notice arrived, the outflow had already fallen sharply, and the river at Chiang Saen in northern Thailand had dropped by about two metres over three days.

Downstream governments have asked China to change the flow itself. In March 2016, during a severe drought, Vietnam asked for more water from the Jinghong dam to ease saltwater intrusion in the Mekong Delta, and China increased the release. In both that episode and the 2020 data agreement, downstream governments knew whom to ask. China was in a position to respond, and it did.

The next test for the LMC

The Kok joins the Mekong along the border between Thailand and Laos. In May and June 2026, arsenic levels were within the commission's standard at all three sites it monitored in northern Laos, including one downstream of the Kok confluence, although a site in Bokeo had briefly exceeded it in February. For Laos, continued sampling helps establish whether contamination is reaching its stretch of the river. Thailand needs to find out where it is entering the Kok and Sai.

On 12 November, Thailand and Myanmar agreed to convene their joint working group on water quality as soon as possible; the group met on 25 and 26 November. Some of the suspected mining sites lie in parts of Shan State where Myanmar's government has limited control due to the ongoing civil war. That makes access an early test of what the two governments can do. The reported involvement of Chinese crews along the upper Sai also gives Thailand a reason to raise the issue with Beijing. The LMC is where it can put the same request to both governments.

A decade of LMC has helped downstream countries get more information about the Mekong River. The Kok and Sai show where that achievement runs up against a harder problem. Thailand can document what is coming across the border, but the test for the LMC is whether it can help Thailand turn that evidence into an investigation upstream and action at the source.



Thai officials collect water samples from the Kok and other rivers in northern Thailand to monitor arsenic and other heavy metals suspected to have originated from mining activities upstream in Myanmar. Photo: Sayan Chuenudomsavad

Dr Udisha Saklani is a lecturer in human geography and climate at King's College London.



Ravi Mehrotra, founder of Foresight Group, built an international shipping and energy business after beginning his career in Iran during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Photo: Foresight Group

'I was Ayatollah Khomeini's shipping adviser'

Ravi Mehrotra was trapped in Tehran when the Islamic Revolution enveloped Iran in 1979. Mehrotra, a marine engineer from India, was at the time the acting managing director of a joint venture between the Shipping Corporation of India and the Iranian government. Ashis Ray heard his story.

Mehrotra telexed his head office in Bombay (now Mumbai) to ask if he should return to India. His headquarters replied: 'We have no problem with the revolutionary government. If it is too bad, you cannot live (there), then you come back. Otherwise, you continue, we'll see (when) the dust settles.'

The new regime in Iran anointed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shia cleric, as its supreme leader. According to Mehrotra, Khomeini told the head of his Revolutionary Council, 'I need a shipping adviser with three conditions; who has to be non-Iranian, non-Muslim and non-American.' Mehrotra added: 'They searched around. I was the only foreigner in Iran those days which [sic] fitted these three requirements.'

Soon after, members of Iran's dreaded Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps descended on Mehrotra's workplace and dragged him away to what he described as a 'dark room' with 'a beam light' focused on him for 'interrogation'. Here, according to him, a man speaking 'perfect American English' came and sat before him.

'He threw a pad in front of me and a pencil. He said: "Write your terms." I said: "Terms for what? I don't know what you are talking about." He said: "What you expect if we hire you." I threw back (the pad). I said: "I am a very proud Indian, you cannot buy me out. My country has not done anything wrong to me; I will not sell myself. If I come and join at high wages, they'll say I've sold myself."'

Three or four days later, Mehrotra recounted, 'Again the same team landed with all the guns in my office. "Come with us (they ordered); it's very important, come."' This time the Iranian with an American accent explained, 'He (Khomeini) banged his hand on the table (and said) I want him only. If he has refused it, he is the right person.'

Mehrotra remembered he responded: 'I am a Government of India employee. Go to Delhi, take government permission. It doesn't matter whether I work for joint venture or work for you; they will transfer me.' Then, beaming from ear to ear, he recollected: 'After 72 hours (a) telex came from (the Indian) Ministry of Shipping (which said): "Our prime minister Morarji Desai is really happy that the first foreigner in Iran to be hired is an Indian. Go ahead immediately and join." So I joined.'

Oil exports were Iran's lifeline, but it lacked maritime shipping capability. This is where Mehrotra came in. In a mere five years, he expanded Iran's shipping fleet nearly sevenfold, from 21 to 144 vessels. But he was not happy with what he witnessed during that period: 'They (were) becoming more religious instead of (running a) democratic government. So, I went to resign and said I want to leave. If you are happy then let me go.' He departed for London in 1984 to establish Foresight Shipping, now known as Foresight Group.



Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became Iran's supreme leader after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, during which Ravi Mehrotra was appointed as a shipping adviser. Photo: Bettmann/Bettmann Archive

Mehrotra declared animatedly, 'I had not taken a single paisa from anyone, but I helped everyone in shipping... That is how I am the most well-known face in maritime history.' He said he arrived in Britain 'with no money', but with worldwide connections. He helped shipowners to achieve their goals through his contacts in return for a broker's commission. 'Somewhere 1 per cent, somewhere 1.5 per cent to create some capital for myself.'

Meanwhile, the war between Iran and Iraq intensified, with Iraqi forces attacking Kharg Island, the nerve centre of Iran's energy exports. Non-Iranian tankers stopped loading oil from there. Mehrotra received an SOS from Iran saying, 'Iran will finish. Handle this. Come back.' Mehrotra stated he replied, 'Sorry I cannot come back. But if you give me the job, I can handle it... So, Foresight, which was not known to anyone, suddenly became a world leader in shipping.'

The Khomeini regime placed a rolling £100 million bank guarantee at Foresight's disposal. The latter leased ships on Tehran's behalf, earning a 2 per cent commission, which amounted to £5–6 million a year. Western



Ashis Ray interviews Ravi Mehrotra about his extraordinary journey from Iran's shipping industry to building Foresight Group. Photo: Democracy Asia

shipping companies refused to do business directly with Iran but had no objection to being chartered by Foresight, a London entity.

'Everyone thought I was a bag carrier of Khomeini; so, no banker asked me (any questions) when I started buying ships for myself. That is how Foresight started.' When the Iran–Iraq war concluded in 1988, Mehrotra felt Foresight's purple patch would now end. 'That is how I diversified into oil drilling,' he recalled. Foresight's tankers – among the world's largest – carry crude oil and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) across the oceans. Its oil and gas rigs are installed from the Persian Gulf to India to China. Then came this year's West Asia war.



Foresight Group expanded from shipping into oil and gas, with its tankers transporting crude oil and liquefied petroleum gas across international waters. Photo: Foresight Group

'Two ships (chartered to Indian public sector undertakings) were inside (the Persian Gulf) fully loaded and they could not go out. I was in real trouble, because keeping the gas on the ship for long... is a sitting bomb... Government of India used their best offices with the Government of Iran and gave us a 12-hour window to pass through in the night and that is what we did. So, our ships are out, but our two oil rigs which were working with the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company are still stuck inside. That is the loss we are bearing... whereas the shipping is a godsend bonanza... Where one ship was doing three voyages a month, now it takes three months to do one voyage. So, the "ton-mile" of the cargo has increased so much, the rates have gone through the roof. So, the shipping will compensate the loss in the drilling.'



The West Asia conflict has disrupted shipping through the Persian Gulf, leaving vessels and offshore oil rigs exposed to operational risks while driving up freight rates. Photo: Shady Alassar/Getty Images

Today, Foresight's turnover is US$2 billion. It aims to grow this to US$50 billion by 2084, which would be its centenary year. How will it navigate this route? The amiable 83-year-old Mehrotra's answer was, 'Diversification.' Indeed, he is due to visit the United States to meet the provost of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to chart a course.

Ashis Ray was CNN's founding South Asia bureau chief and editor-at-large in London. He is the author of *The Trial that Shook Britain: How a Court Martial Hastened Acceptance of Indian Independence.*



Mahindra's Born Electric SUVs, the BE 6 and XEV 9e, have helped the Indian automaker strengthen its position in the country's rapidly growing electric passenger vehicle market. Photo: Auto Mahindra

India's EV challenger

Rayeesa Daulah reports on how Anand Mahindra's Born Electric ambition could reshape India's automotive future.

When Anand Mahindra, chairman of India's second-largest carmaker, applauded his country's technology ecosystem, he was speaking from a lived experience of AI ambition to reach the top. Stanford University's Global AI Vibrancy Tool had recently ranked India third in the world, behind only the US and China. 'With our software talent, systems integration expertise and enormous domestic market for AI use cases, surely India has a promising hand to play?' he asked in a post on X on 10 November.

Indeed, Anand Mahindra's ambition for India to catch up with China in the AI vibrancy race ostensibly matches that for his own company to emerge number one in India's electric vehicle (EV) race. Just as India overtook its Asian peers, Japan and South Korea, in the AI race, India's rugged utility-vehicle maker leapfrogged to become the nation's No. 2 automaker in 2025, overtaking Hyundai Motor India and Tata Motors for the first time.

The company also delivered a 'blockbuster EV year', securing third place in India's fiercely competitive electric passenger vehicle (e-PV) market and catapulting its market share from about 7 per cent in 2024 to 19 per cent in 2025. With a surge in sales of its new-age, purpose-built premium Born Electric BE 6 and XEV 9e electric SUVs, unveiled in November 2024, Mahindra narrowed its gap with its formidable rival, India's No. 2 EV seller in 2025, JSW MG Motor India, which is backed by China's SAIC.



Anand Mahindra, chairman of Mahindra Group, speaks about the company's electric vehicle ambitions as India's EV market continues to evolve. Photo: People Matters

And why would MG be a formidable rival? Because in 2025 MG was the biggest market disruptor, grabbing a spectacular 29 per cent share in India's e-PV market and coming closest to narrowing the gap with India's No. 1, Tata Motors. Credit goes to the sales surge of its popular mid-sized electric crossover, the Windsor.

But that story would soon take a new twist when, in the first half of

2026, Mahindra & Mahindra outperformed 2025's star, MG, to become India's second-largest seller of electric passenger vehicles, behind only Tata Motors.

According to government (Vahan) registration data, during this period Mahindra's electric vehicle sales jumped 147 per cent year on year to 34,131 units, giving it 23 per cent of India's e-PV market. It was also the fastest-growing of India's three leading EV manufacturers in recent times, generating significant global investor interest, especially due to its electric-first INGLO platform.

In September 2026, Dr Velusamy R, president of Mahindra & Mahindra's automotive business, expressed pride at the company having 'crossed the milestone of 1 lakh (100,000) billing of our Electric Origin SUVs since launch'. The company's total vehicle sales that month, including commercial vehicles and exports, were 114,874, up 15 per cent.

This is a significant market reversal from two years ago when Tata Motors dominated India's EV market with EVs derived from its internal combustion engine (ICE) models, such as the Nexon EV SUV and the Tiago EV hatchback. Despite a decline in its market share from 62 per cent in 2024 to an average 39 per cent in 2026, Tata Motors remains India's No. 1 e-PV maker, considerably ahead of Mahindra and MG. Tata is reportedly innovating aggressively to restore its market share in the fast-transforming, high-growth Indian EV market with an expanded EV portfolio of 10 new electric SUV models and strategic partnerships.

But so is its disruptive and ambitious challenger Mahindra & Mahindra, spearheaded by a digitally astute and innovation-driven chairman, Anand Mahindra, who also chairs Tech Mahindra. Tech Mahindra, the group's IT services arm, runs much



The MG Windsor helped make JSW MG Motor India a major force in the Indian electric passenger vehicle market in 2025. Photo: Autocar India

of its technology work, particularly AI-led services. The wider Mahindra Group spans cars, farm equipment, renewable energy, financial services and hospitality. That breadth is why Tech Mahindra is part of Mahindra's EV story.

Tech Mahindra helps strengthen the entire ecosystem of Mahindra's EV manufacturing platform and sales. It supports Mahindra's EVs with advanced EV engineering, smart factory systems, connected vehicle technology, market trends anticipation, supply chain optimisation and digital customer service solutions. All these help scale production and improve market competitiveness in a high-growth Indian auto and EV market.

In fact, Mahindra's INGLO platform, designed for mainstream adoption and global appeal, turned the company's 2024 Born Electric gamble – the BE 6 and XEV 9e SUVs – into two of India's most sought-after EVs in 2025 and 2026.

According to EVINDIA, which describes itself as India's largest EV community and marketplace, Mahindra's Electric Origin SUVs have achieved something that no Indian EV has ever achieved. Mahindra has made electric the object of desire and a lifestyle statement for Indians, much as Tesla did for the Americans, it says. Most BE 6 or XEV 9e buyers in India were first-time buyers, new to Mahindra, ranging from premium EV-loving urban professionals and tech-first families to business leaders and top government officials. All proudly chose a made-in-India Electric Origin SUV that looks global and feels world class.

They were not only motivated by its design and luxury brand positioning, but also by its long-range performance and the appeal of a world-class EV that challenges not only India's best



Media personnel photograph the Tesla Model Y at the company's first Mumbai showroom in July 2025. Despite its high-profile entry, Tesla captured only a small share of India's EV market. Photo: Francis Mascarenhas/Reuters



Mahindra is preparing to take its Electric Origin SUVs beyond India, with a potential UK launch planned for 2027 or 2028. Photo: Car Top

brands but also America's Tesla, China's BYD and the Chinese-backed MG. Tesla, which launched in India in July 2025, captured only 0.17 per cent of India's EV market. Many say Tesla's appeal was 'lost in translation' in Mahindra's Born Electric noise.

However, as a fallout of the Trump tariffs and the recent thaw in China–India relations, it is the Chinese carmakers selling in India that are becoming strong competitors to Indian top sellers Tata and Mahindra in India's fast-growing EV market. According to JATO Dynamics data, Chinese-backed brands BYD, MG Motor and Volvo had captured a combined 33 per cent share of India's EV market by October 2025. It is a market that is projected to reach US$191bn by 2034, according to Straits Research market intelligence.

Driven by government incentives, stringent emissions norms, declining battery costs and rising conventional fuel prices, the fierce competition for market share among India's top EV makers, including Tata, Mahindra and MG, will only intensify. Only the technologically fittest – those able to build the right ecosystem and win early mainstream buyers in urban and peri-urban India – will survive.

Of course, Indian EV makers, Tata and Mahindra alike, depend heavily on China, which supplies about 75 per cent of India's lithium-ion battery imports. This remains the greatest risk to India's EV future, notwithstanding the country's lithium reserves in Jammu and Kashmir and the National Critical Mineral Mission.

Having got its ecosystem right and with its blockbuster success in India, Mahindra is now eyeing a UK market entry with three of its most sought-after electric SUVs, the BE 6, XEV 9e and BE 07, the last of which goes on sale in India next year. Mahindra has already tested British buyers' interest in customer clinics, especially among those seeking value-driven electric SUVs with strong engineering and distinctive design. Competitive pricing owing to lower import duties facilitated by the India–UK free trade agreement will likely influence British buyers. Mahindra is working to meet British safety and cybersecurity rules; it is aiming to launch in 2027, though that could slip to 2028.

With Mahindra Group's unique corporate ecosystem that operates within a diversified conglomerate spanning technology, software, logistics, finance, manufacturing and industrial engineering, Mahindra is approaching India's electrification as an integrated ecosystem challenge rather than merely an automotive challenge. That is why, in Tech Mahindra's latest annual report, Anand Mahindra pointed out what makes his company excel. 'It's the ecosystem, stupid!' he wrote.

Mahindra is still chasing Tata Motors, India's undisputed EV leader. And Anand Mahindra's electric ambition may even challenge that status quo. Whether it ultimately surpasses Tata Motors, or becomes India's Tesla or BYD, seems irrelevant when the company is pursuing a vision much bigger than vehicle sales. It is attempting to build a globally respected Indian mobility brand befitting the electric age and confident enough to compete on the world stage.

If its current momentum continues, the company's boldest year may still lie ahead.

Rayeesa Daulah is a retired diplomat who writes on business, geo-economics and culture.



US President Donald Trump meets Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Shenzhen, China, on 19 November 2026. Photo: Daniel Torok/Official White House Photo

Bisinomics

APEC

Twenty-one economies – 12 of them Asian – are members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation or APEC. Formed in 1989, it represents more than 60 per cent of global GDP. Its leaders' summit was held in November at Shenzhen. However, instead of restricting itself to addressing economic crises arising from the series of economic shocks starting with the outbreak of the Covid pandemic in 2020, followed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the conflicts pitting the United States and Israel against Iran, host China opted to feed US president Donald Trump's ego.

The *Guardian* flagged, 'Beijing will have home advantage'. In his second term at the White House, Trump has fancied 'G2' or 'G3' confabulations on global affairs or a one-on-one with China or a tripartite with China and Russia. So, what occupied centre stage at APEC was a trilateral meeting between Trump, Chinese president Xi Jinping and Russian president Vladimir Putin.

In 1945, US president Franklin Roosevelt, British prime minister Winston Churchill and the supremo of the Soviet Union Josef Stalin met at Yalta to carve out



The leaders at the Yalta Conference in February 1945: (from left) British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. The conference shaped post-war arrangements in Europe. Photo: Public Domain

spheres of influence in Europe after the Second World War. The outcome of Yalta 2.0, though, was unlikely to be binding on Ukraine or Iran; not even on Taiwan, which China adamantly wants to appropriate.

By pandering to Trump, Xi may in his national interest have extracted a degree of near-term stability in China's economic relations with the US. The US's interest is in nuclear arms control, perhaps code for containing Iran; while the Kremlin's object was to retain its bargaining power vis-à-vis Ukraine.

Xi's push for a Free Trade Area of Asia-Pacific (FTAAP), while winning brownie points from most attendees, faced resistance from the US, the *South China Morning* Post reported.

China

On the eve of the APEC parleys there was sobering news for the Chinese leadership. 'China's economy showed fresh signs of sluggishness in October as factory production slowed and consumption remained weak, calling into question how long the world's second-largest economy can rely on exports to underpin growth,' *Reuters* signalled.

It continued, 'An AI-driven export boom has powered China's economic growth this year and looks set to shelter overall growth from external and domestic headwinds in 2027. But imbalances in the country's growth model may persist, or even widen, as solid manufacturing and overseas demand lessen policymakers' urgency to shore up weak domestic demand.' Yet, the bottom line was China's trade surplus reached $1.04 trillion in the first 10 months of 2026.

ASEAN

The APEC meet was preceded by Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) heads of government assembling in the Philippines, which, too, Trump attended, following his first overseas trip after the chastening results in midterm elections in the US. ASEAN's agenda appropriately focussed on AI supply chains and governance and green energy transition.

Traditionally, most of ASEAN's 11 member states have maintained close ties with the US. But Jayant Menon, a Singapore-based economist, was quoted by the *Guardian* as saying that such nations have been 'laying the groundwork for a future with reduced dependence in the United States'.

An alternative ASEAN-China equation, though, is hampered by tension between four of its constituents – Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam – plus non-member Taiwan – with the People's Republic over territorial disputes in the South China Sea.



Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney meets Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. during the ASEAN summit in Manila. Photo: Reuters

ASEAN-Canada

But the Manila meet announced 'substantial conclusion of the ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement (ACAFTA) negotiations', a Canadian government release communicated. It's another feather in Canadian prime minister Mark Carney's cap. Indeed, he was present at the 49th ASEAN summit as a guest of the chair President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. of the Philippines.

'In a more dangerous and divided world, a dense web of connections holds strong,' Carney said. ASEAN has a population of 700 million people and a $6 trillion economy. ACAFTA is expected to add nearly $2 billion to Canada's GDP.



Workers at a manufacturing facility in China. Manufacturing and exports remain important drivers of the country's economic growth. Photo: Reuters

Japan

Meanwhile, news from Asia's second biggest economy was downbeat. 'Japan's economy contracts for the first time in a year,' the *Financial Times* headlined. It added, 'Weak consumer spending and record-breaking rains (the longest stretch of wet weather since records began in 1886) damp GDP growth and complicate interest rate plans.'

In the July to September quarter, Japanese government data showed an annualised 0.1 per cent contraction in real GDP compared with the previous three months. That was Japan's first drop into negative growth in four quarters; but fell short of a 0.3 per cent forecast by a poll of economists.

India

Public sector Coal India is the world's largest coal miner. Mahanadi Coalfields, headquartered in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, was in November its third subsidiary to go public this year. It is seeking a valuation of up to $9.55 billion.

'The sale is part of the Indian government's divestment programme aimed at raising funds, broadening ownership in state-run companies and improving government standards,' *Reuters* reported.

India's dependence on fossil fuels is unlikely to dissipate in a hurry, since its renewable energy output hasn't quite taken off. In fact, Coal India's present endeavour is to improve efficiency to reduce reliance on coal imports.

Nvidia Affair

Jensen Huang, co-founder of AI giant Nvidia, resigned as the company's chief executive after admitting he had engaged in an extramarital affair with Alice Huang (the two are not related), a senior executive at the Singapore-headquartered data centre firm Megaspeed.

Alice was a guest at a dinner hosted by Jensen at a restaurant in Taipei on 22 May 2025 during Computex, the island's top tech expo. 'At one point,' *Agence France Presse* described, 'Jensen Huang can be seen putting his



An open-cast coal mine in Odisha, India. The government is pursuing changes in the ownership and operations of state-run coal companies. Photo: The Energy and Resources Institute



Nvidia co-founder Jensen Huang, whose company remains central to the global artificial intelligence and semiconductor industry. Photo: Reuters

arm around Alice Huang as she kisses him on the right cheek, press livestreams show.'

According to *AFP*, 'US intelligence reportedly circulated a memo this spring alleging Alice Huang was an asset of China's Ministry of State Security.' Beijing has denied the charge.

Jensen Huang, lately a close informal adviser to Trump, spent years lobbying against curbs on sales of advanced AI chips to China. Last year, Trump cleared Nvidia's H200 chips for export there over objections from China critics in the US Congress.

At one point in November, the scandal sent Nvidia shares plunging by as much as 13 per cent, wiping off $600 billion of its market value. Its results for the third quarter of 2026 showed a revenue of $115.8 billion, a robust 20% up from the previous quarter and 103% up from a year ago.



CARMELLE of the Philippines lifts the first Eurovision Song Contest Asia trophy in Bangkok. Photo: Eurovision Song Contest Asia

Eurovision finds its voice in Asia

Sequins, key changes and a crystal microphone: Eurovision has finally come to Asia. Rahul Bhise reports on a night of 11 countries, one Filipino winner and a very conspicuous empty chair.

It took 70 years, but Eurovision has finally learnt to say *sawasdee*. On 14 November, at the One Bangkok Forum, 11 countries sang their hearts out at the first Eurovision Song Contest Asia – and a 19-year-old from the Philippines walked off with the trophy.

CARMELLE won with 'Sobra-Sobra' (Too Much), a dance-pop and rap number that, despite its title, turned out to be exactly enough. She topped both the jury and the public vote, finishing on 211 points, 41 clear of the hosts, Thailand's MANG x DAOU. Vietnam came third, with Malaysia and Laos rounding off the top five. Dara, who won this year's European contest for Bulgaria, handed over the trophy – a neat passing of the sequinned baton.

Eurovision for beginners

For the uninitiated, Eurovision is Europe's song contest, held every year since 1956: three minutes per song, a great deal of glitter and an entire continent pretending not to care while watching every second. It gave the world ABBA, who won with 'Waterloo' in 1974, and launched Céline Dion, who won for Switzerland in 1988.

The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), which owns the contest, has now exported it to Asia. The rules barely changed in transit: juries and viewers share the points, and nobody can vote for their own country. The winner gets a trophy, no prize money and, unlike in Europe, no obligation to host next year – news that will relieve any finance minister who was watching.

India: not singing, but voting

India had no entry, but Indians still had a say. Viewers in countries without an act could vote, with

their ballots pooled into a 12th 'rest of the world' jury. Each got eight free votes, to be spread across at least three songs, and ten more could be bought by those whose love ran deep. Votes came in from 183 countries and territories. Those watching on YouTube also got the full Eurovision experience: the stream froze at intervals during the first half.

The Democracy Asia awards
Eurovision hands out one trophy, which seems stingy. Here, in running order, are 11 more.


Tóc Tiên representing Vietnam at Eurovision Song Contest Asia 2026 in Bangkok. Photo: Ralph Larmann

Best opening act: Vietnam. Tóc Tiên – singer, actress, TV host and a household name for two decades – opened the show with 'EM TIÊN', a song her fans chose by public vote. Democracy in action. It finished third.

Most tactful title: Cambodia. Performing in the capital of a neighbour with which it has an unresolved border dispute, Cambodia's Monetrey sang a ballad called 'I Let You Go'. Diplomats, take notes.

Heritage award: Laos. Thinla mixes Morlum, the traditional music of Laos, with pop, R&B and dance, and has already sung at ASEAN summits – surely a tougher crowd. 'BAE' came a strong fifth.

Busiest man in show business: Mongolia. Beck is a singer, actor, host, model and producer, which raises the question of when he sleeps. He found time to sing 'Chamguigeer (Without You)'.

Press prize, declaring an interest: Bhutan. Nyendra, 24, studied journalism at the Royal Thimphu College, then sensibly chose music instead. He co-wrote 'Lhayi Semo' and sang in English and Dzongkha. Every journalist staring at a deadline will understand.

The actual trophy: the Philippines. CARMELLE, from the Bicol region, has been in training for years: runner-up on The Voice Kids, winner of Tawag ng Tanghalan and a housemate on Pinoy Big Brother. In Bangkok, the juries and the viewers agreed on her, which by Eurovision standards is practically a miracle.

No instruments required: Bangladesh. Beatmosphere, an a cappella and beatbox collective formed in 2009, makes drums, basslines and electronic effects with nothing but voices and bodies. Normally nine strong, it slimmed down to six – the most Eurovision allows on stage – for 'Tumi Ele'. Its excess baggage bill must have been the envy of the arena.



Bangladesh at Eurovision Song Contest Asia in Bangkok Forum. Photo: Ralph Larmann


MANG x DAOU rehearsing for Thailand at Eurovision Song Contest Asia in Bangkok. Photo: Eurovision Song Contest Asia

Gracious hosts: Thailand. The T-pop singer MANG teamed up with Daou Pittaya, a singer, actor and MC, for 'Aroma', and finished a very respectable second in front of a home crowd.

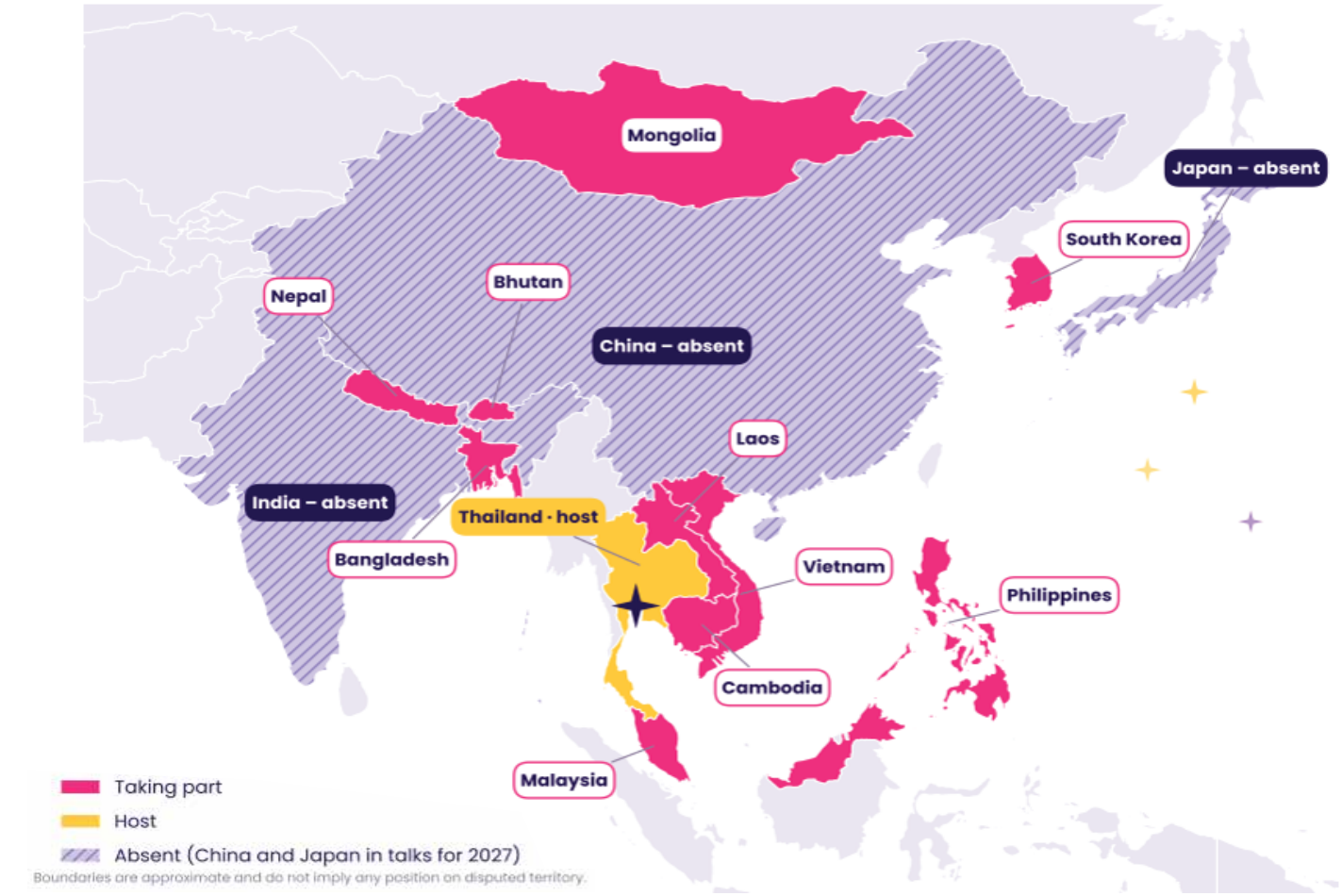
Most likely to fill a stadium: South Korea. JUNHEE, a K-pop veteran, brought the gleaming, upbeat pop his country exports so well with 'DEEP DIVE'.

Longest journey: Nepal. Pratik Himal Rai's 'Ananta Maya', a mix of ballad, slow rock and Nepali folk, was Nepal's first entry in any Eurovision contest.

Best closing act: Malaysia. Aina Abdul, winner of The Masked Singer Malaysia in 2020 and known for her style as much as her voice, closed the night with 'Bluest Sky' and came fourth.

The empty chairs
Every good party has a few no-shows. China and Japan were in talks, but these ran past the production deadline; the executive producer, Assaf Blecher, says he is 'very, very optimistic' both will come next year. Australia, which competes in the European contest despite being nowhere near Europe, stayed at home this time.

India is the real mystery. It was not in Bangkok, and nobody has said why. Yet last year India and



The 11 countries that competed, and the big absentees: China, Japan and India. Source: EBU

China both sent singers to Intervision, the Moscow contest Vladimir Putin revived as a socially conservative rival to Eurovision. Vietnam won that one – and came third in Bangkok. Asia now has two song contests courting it, and some countries are happy to sing at both.

The edit nobody asked for

Malaysia's broadcaster, TV3, quietly edited its version of the show, apparently cutting Thai drag performers from the opening act and hiding the Philippines' jury spokesperson, the comedian Vice Ganda, who is gay and non-binary, behind a Eurovision logo – reportedly just as Vice Ganda was handing Malaysia's own Aina Abdul 12 points. The contest's director, Martin Green, said organisers were 'surprised and disappointed', and that the edits seemed confined to Malaysia, where same-sex relations are a crime. The irony was hard to miss: the show was staged in Thailand, which legalised same-sex marriage last year. Eurovision has been here before: in 2018, China's Mango TV lost its right to show the contest after cutting Ireland's entry, which featured two male dancers.



Aina Abdul rehearsing for Malaysia at Eurovision Song Contest Asia in Bangkok. Photo: Eurovision Song Contest Asia

Same time next year?

So, did it work? On the night, mostly yes: lavish staging, a guest spot from the Thai star Jeff Satur and a winner everyone could agree on. China and Japan may join next year. If India ever does, there is a catch: Indians will no longer be able to vote for it. Until then, we will keep doing what we did in November – voting for everyone else.

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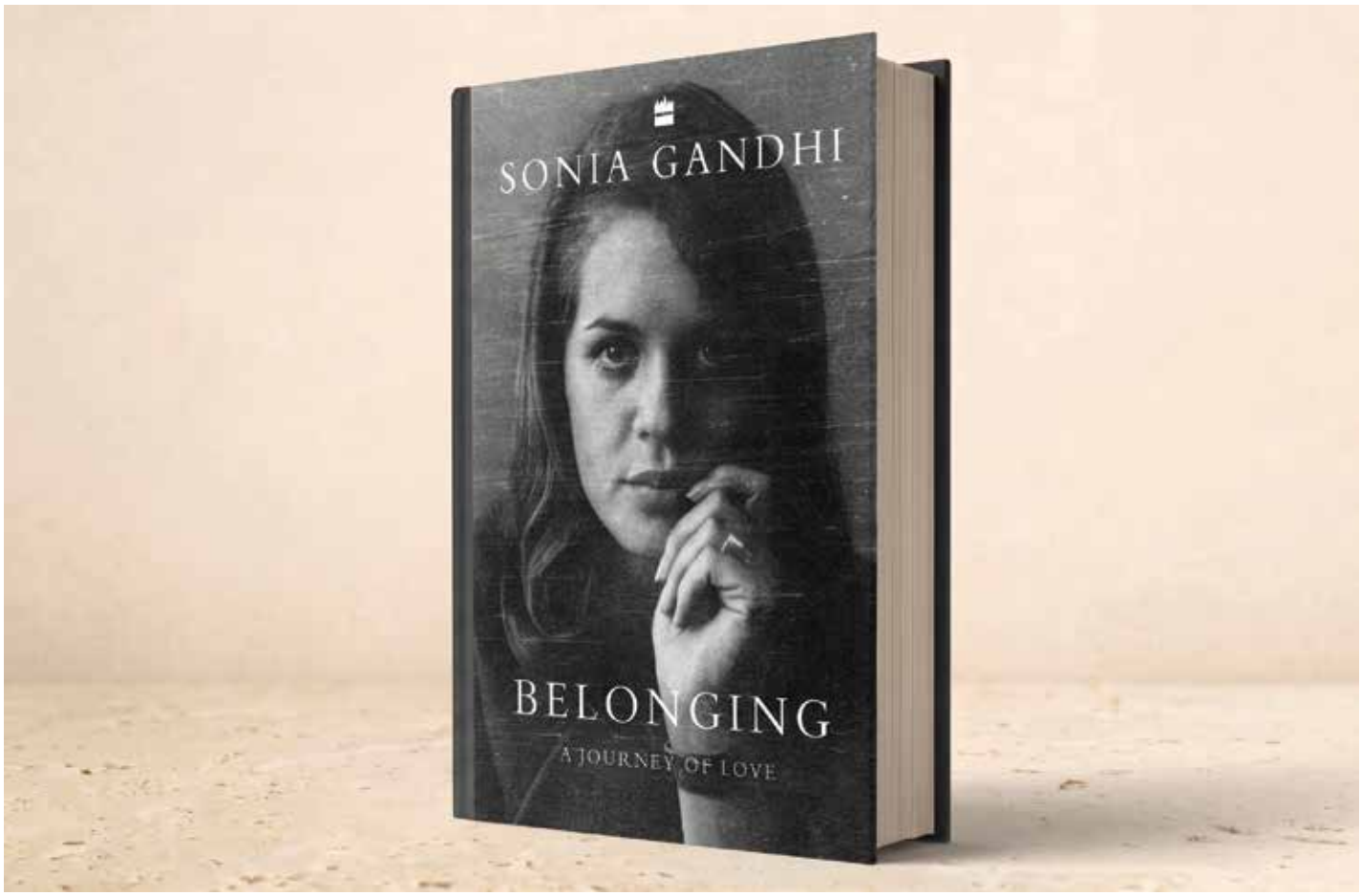

Sonia Gandhi recounts her personal journey from Italy to the centre of Indian politics in her memoir, *Belonging: A Journey of Love*.

Sonia's story

It is not uncommon for a European woman to fall in love with an Asian man, marry him and make his country her own. But for such a woman to be on the brink of becoming prime minister of a nation which was then the world's second most populous, only to refuse the exalted post, is almost unheard of. That in essence is the remarkable narrative of Italian-born Sonia Maino, now better known as Sonia Gandhi, whose love for her husband Rajiv Gandhi catapulted her to faraway India, where she lived through the assassinations of her mother-in-law and her husband, before assuming the presidency of their political party, the Indian National Congress, herself. Ashis Ray has been reading Sonia's story.

Belonging: A Journey of Love by Sonia Gandhi is published in the UK by William Collins, in the US by Alfred A. Knopf and in India by HarperCollins.

A private person despite being a public figure, Sonia Gandhi tells her story publicly for the first time in her just-published memoir, Belonging. Not everyone agrees with everything she says – her political opponents certainly don't – and her publishers could have done a better job of editing and fact-checking the manuscript. But the imperfections are minor compared to the rich material she has presented.

'My parents, Stefano and Paolina Maino; my two sisters; and I were an ordinary middle-class family known only in Orbassano, a small town in the Torino province in the northern part of Italy,' she writes. Her first twenty-one years, spent in Italy, have been the least known part of her life to anyone outside her family and close friends. This part of her tale therefore provides a better understanding of her. Besides, it is quite engrossing.

Her father, a Second World War veteran, known to his comrades as 'Maino il Leone – Maino the Lion' – returned home from the Soviet front without a livelihood. From odd jobs to start with, he made his way up in the construction industry to establish his own business. But he was a disciplinarian who took time to reconcile himself to his second of three daughters' relationship with Rajiv.

After meeting Rajiv while studying at a language school in Cambridge, Sonia disarmingly admits it was love at first sight. 'My heart was pounding hard, so hard I was sure it could be heard. My face was on fire, my hand trembling as I extended it forward to him. Luminous, dark eyes, in a face of striking openness, met mine for the first time. "How do you do?" I replied. I knew, that very instant – it was *un colpo di fulmine*, a bolt of lightning.'



Rajiv Gandhi and Sonia Maino during their student days, shopping at the Harrods book department in London. Photo: Dilsher Virk, reproduced from *Rajiv Gandhi: Son of a Dynasty* by Nicholas Nugent



Sonia Gandhi, photographed by her husband, Rajiv Gandhi.

In India, she entered a joint family household headed by a formidable mother-in-law who was also prime minister of India. She was nearby at their shared home when Indira Gandhi was shot dead in 1984 by her Sikh security guards not long after the Indian Army had stormed the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Sikhdom's holiest shrine, to evict militants demanding a separate Sikh homeland carved out of India.

To her credit, the chronicling of Indira's controversial imposition of a state of emergency in India in 1975 is factual and fairly unbiased. Sonia accompanied Indira and Rajiv on numerous official tours of Asian countries. One such was to Kabul. She writes: 'People were strikingly handsome; most of the women sported Western clothes and hairstyles, some wore waist-length chadors, and many were engaged in important occupations in universities, hospitals, and government departments.' What a sea change has occurred since!

She went to China with Rajiv in 1988. 'The high point of the visit was his meeting with President Deng Xiaoping. As both leaders reached the meeting spot, Deng held Rajiv's hand for three minutes – a historic handshake, taken note of by the world. He welcomed Rajiv warmly, saying that the past (the state of freeze in relations between the two countries since the Sino-Indian war in 1962) ought to be forgotten...'

In 1989 the destination was Pakistan, where she and Rajiv met Benazir Bhutto and her husband. 'The atmosphere was informal, as we were young and found much in common. I remember that, after a few friendly exchanges, whenever the discussion veered towards political matters, our host would increase the volume of the music playing in the background, thereby warning us that people were listening in to our conversation. Clearly there was an absence of trust between the



Indira Gandhi with her son Rajiv, daughter-in-law Sonia and grandchildren Rahul and Priyanka, alongside her younger son Sanjay. Photo: Express Archive

newly elected leader and the military administration that had always run things in Pakistan.'

News of her beloved Rajiv's death in 1991 was broken by her daughter Priyanka. 'She stood in front of me in the half-lit room. "Papa is dead," she said. I looked into her eyes, desperately hoping this was a nightmare from which I would awake. She looked back at me, her gaze piercing mine, mirroring my horror. I crumpled in my daughter's arms.'

In 2004, an opposition alliance led by the Congress party, of which she was now president, surprisingly defeated the ruling coalition led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. She describes a meeting of the Congress parliamentary party: 'I enter the hall to thunderous applause. The members of Parliament stand up in their places, thumping their palms on the wooden ledges in front of them... One of them reads out a speech imploring me once again to accept the post... I begin to read out my speech: "Throughout these past six years that I have been in politics, one thing has been clear to me. And that is, as I have often stated, that the post of prime minister is not my aim. I was always certain that if ever I found myself in the position that I am in today, I would follow my own inner voice. Today that voice tells me I must humbly decline this post."'

Sonia ends the book with an epilogue reflecting on her life today. 'I am now a member of Parliament on the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of Parliament. Rahul [her son] is a four-term member of Parliament and leader of the opposition... Priyanka has been elected as the representative of Wayanad in Kerala... Both my son, now fifty-five years old, and my daughter, fifty-three, have been this year, together with their party colleagues and our allies, at the centre of a fight for the very essence of our democracy... In these eight decades of my life I have travelled through many worlds, experienced life in all its facets. I have felt overwhelming joy and lacerating sorrow, I have encountered honesty and deceit, I've experienced kindness and cruelty. Yet through the traumas and difficulties I faced along the way, I have been sustained by love...'



Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping receives Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on 21 December 1988. Photo: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ashis Ray was CNN's founding South Asia bureau chief and editor-at-large in London. He is the author of *The Trial that Shook Britain: How a Court Martial Hastened Acceptance of Indian Independence.*



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