The legacy of ‘regime change’ in Iran

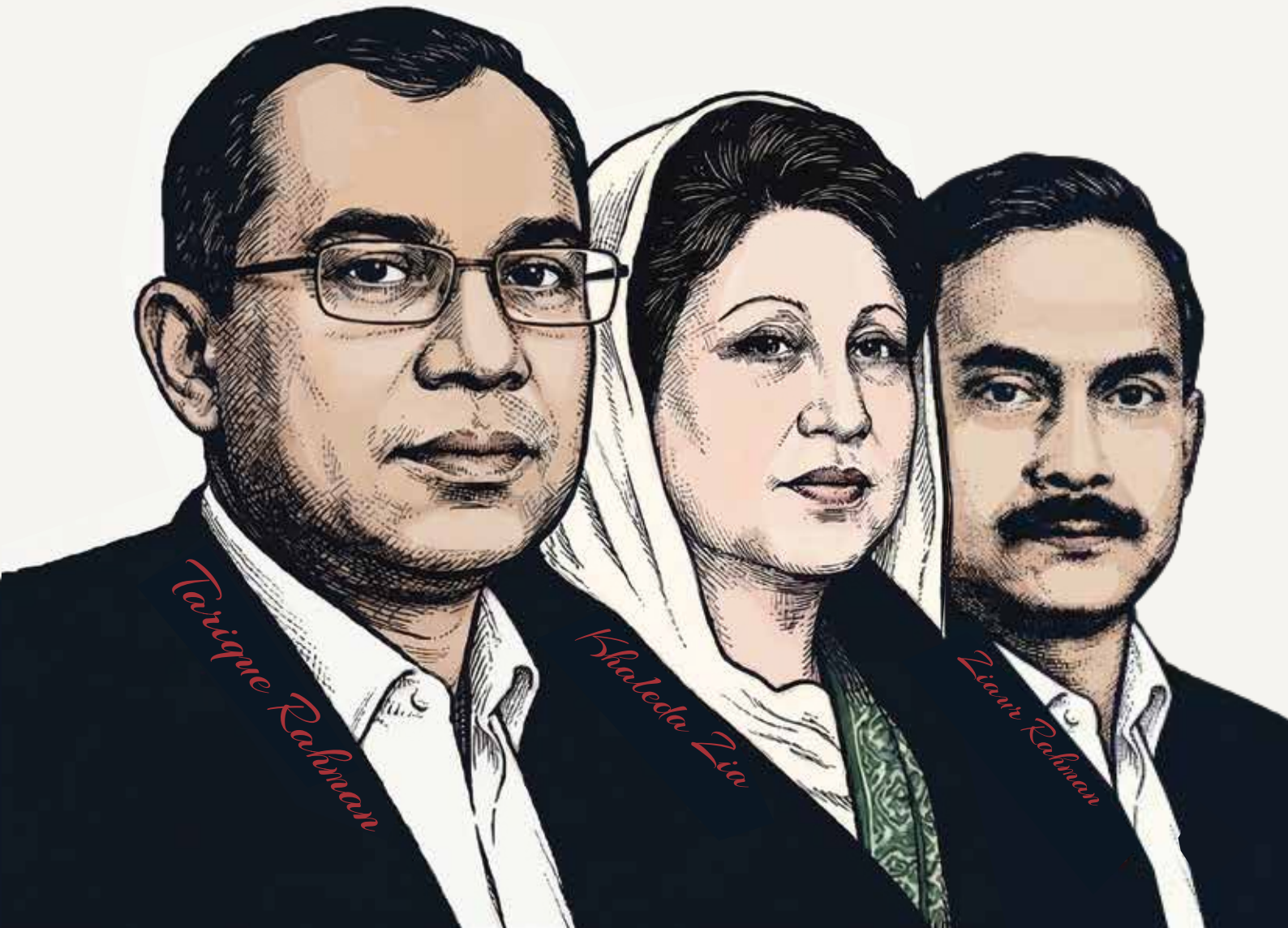
A border on fire: Pakistan, Afghanistan and an unending war

From beer baron to real baron – an interview with Lord Bilimoria

Democracy Asia
April 2026

Bangladesh’s democratic reset:

Hope returns, but the test lies ahead

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After years of boycotts, unrest and democratic drift, Bangladesh's 2026 election has reopened the political arena and handed the BNP a commanding mandate.

The peaceful transfer of power and renewed parliamentary competition have stirred cautious optimism that democratic life may be reviving. But elections alone cannot restore democracy. The true measure will be whether the new government protects dissent, strengthens institutions, ensures judicial and media independence, and turns public hope into lasting democratic reform.

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March was dominated by the outbreak of war in the Gulf after the US and Israel fired missiles at Iran. Israel's response to incoming missiles it blamed on Iran's Lebanon-based ally Hezbollah opened up a second theatre of war. The intensity of attacks in both directions across the Gulf and the blockade by Iran of the Strait of Hormuz caused oil and gas shortages in Asia and beyond. Did Israel and the United States intend to bring about 'regime change' in Iran and, if so, are they likely to succeed? In this issue we look back at how the Islamic Republic of Iran came into being, with an eye-witness account by a reporter who flew into Tehran with Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, and consider how leadership in the ayatollah-led regime now operates.

> "From missile strikes in the Gulf to ballot boxes this month shows that conflict and democratic change are unfolding simultaneously across Asia —with global consequences."

We assess the outcome of elections in Bangladesh and Thailand. In Bangladesh there are reasons to see the triumphant win of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Tarique Rahman as the start of a new democratic era though – as our cover reminds us – it is also the extension of a dynasty. The new prime minister is the third member of his family to lead Bangladesh: his father, Ziaur Rahman, founded the BNP and was the country's president from 1977 to 1981; his mother, Begum Khaleda Zia, held the post of prime minister from 1991 to 1996 and 2001 to 2006 and led the BNP until her death last December.

In Thailand, the surprising re-election of the Bhumjaithai Party is a triumph for its leader, Anutin Charnvirakul, as well as for the army. The party's aggressive attitude towards the country's neighbour Cambodia, with whom Thailand fought a border war last year, played a significant part in the election result. We analyse another border conflict, between Pakistan and Afghanistan, by reporting on its origins along a now disputed colonial border which divides Afghanistan's dominant Pashtun community and take a look at the role the army plays in Pakistan's governance.

We reflect on China's latest Five-Year Plan and consider its implications for the country's trade and foreign relations, while in Business we explore the competition between the United States and China over rare-earths. Bisinomics considers the economic implications of the Iran war. While it may be too early to reach firm conclusions the war and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz already have major implications for oil and gas importers throughout Asia and beyond. With fuel shortages being reported – hitting smaller nations such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Taiwan first – we need no crystal ball to see that the cost of living for ordinary people and viability of smaller businesses will suffer first.

For lighter reading, we reflect on how the graceful sport of cricket, popular across South Asia, has become politicised. We report on a new film by the dissident Iranian film-maker Jafar Panâhi, and our reviewer makes light of a heavy book on India's economy entitled A Sixth of Humanity.

Do write and tell us if you think we are getting the balance right between politics, business and lighter or lifestyle topics: letters@democracyasia.com

Nicholas Nugent

War in the Gulf

After three rounds of talks between the US and Iran, Israeli and US forces attacked Iran on 28 February, causing the deaths of the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and members of his family. This proved to be the start of a war that escalated rapidly when Iran fired missiles and drones at targets in neighbouring Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Syria, as well as at Israel and Jordan and as far as Turkey and Cyprus. Israel responded to attacks it blamed on Iran's ally, Hezbollah, with missile attacks on Beirut and southern Lebanon, turning the country into a second major war zone.

Subsequent bombing of Iran by the US and Israel killed other senior figures including the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council and former nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, and the commander of the Basij militia, Gholamreza Soleimani. Iran chose 56-year-old Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of Ali Khamenei, as its new Supreme Leader, the third ayatollah to hold the post since the Islamic Republic was founded in 1979.

As Iran threatened shipping in the strategic Strait of Hormuz and struck several tankers, there were concerns across Asia and beyond of fuel shortages as around 20% of global oil and gas supplies pass through the Strait. Shortages were felt throughout Asia with South Asia, which depends heavily on oil and gas from the Gulf, among the worst affected regions.

US-Japan-China

The recently re-elected prime minister of Japan, Sanae Takaichi, had talks with US President Donald Trump at the White House on 19 March. They discussed the situation at the Strait of Hormuz. Meanwhile, the US president called off his visit to China to meet Xi Jinping, planned for the end of March, because of the war in the Gulf.

Nepal

The Rastriya Swatantra Party led by 35-year-old rapper and former mayor of Kathmandu, Balendra 'Balen' Shah, won a comfortable victory at elections in early March. This brought to an end a period of unelected government under the country's former chief justice which took office six months earlier after Gen Z-inspired protests led to the resignation of the former prime minister.

Kazakhstan

A referendum on 15 March gained the support of 87 percent of voters for changes to the constitution aimed, it was said, at easing the transition when 72-year-old President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev ends his term of office in 2029.

Myanmar

Following elections held from 28 December to 25 January, Myanmar's parliament convened in Nay Pyi Taw on 16 March for the first time since the February 2021 coup d'état. Khin Yi, chair of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, was elected speaker of the lower house. According to *BBC Burmese*, more than a dozen retired generals sit in the lower house including the junta's prime minister, Nyo Saw. Elsewhere, *Frontier Myanmar* reported that a government airstrike on 8 March killed at least 116 prisoners of war and civilians and injured 32 others at a detention camp for captured military prisoners in Rakhine State. If confirmed, it would be the deadliest airstrike for nearly three years.

Supporters celebrate the outcome of the 2026 parliamentary election, widely seen as a turning point in Bangladesh's democratic journey. Photo: Reuters

Has democracy returned to Bangladesh?

With February's election giving the Bangladesh Nationalist Party a two-thirds majority in parliament and bringing to an end 18 months of a non-elected interim government, Professor Dr Mohammad Tarikul Islam questions whether democracy has been restored.

Unlike previous polls, the 2026 parliamentary election marks a turning point in Bangladesh, an important chapter in the country's political and social history. The election was generally viewed as a test of whether the nation could resume its democratic norms following years of contentious elections, boycotts, street clashes, and mounting public dissatisfaction. Nearly 60 percent of the country's citizens exercised their right to vote. Putting aside various concerns, the voting day was spent by the citizens in celebration, enthusiasm, and new dreams for the country.

Under the interim administration, the Election Commission was able to conduct an orderly and participatory process. In a country where elections mean creating panic in the minds of the people, this is no ordinary achievement. It has proven that Bangladesh is capable of holding peaceful and participatory elections.
But ballot papers alone cannot ensure democratic practices countrywide. The real question now is: will the moment of returning to democratic processes through peaceful elections be limited to the transfer of power? Or will it be a real shift towards just governance based on inclusion, institutional integrity, and gender equality?

The events leading to this election were extraordinary. For decades, Bangladesh has experienced cycles of political polarisation, institutional stagnation, and periodic mass mobilisations. Yet, the July 2024 movement was different. It was not confined to students or a particular demographic; it was a national awakening. Citizens from diverse backgrounds united under a single demand: reform, accountability, and an end to monopolistic political domination.

The election that followed this movement was not merely a contest for parliamentary seats; it was a referendum on the state itself. There was greater

opposition participation in the 2026 elections than in previous cycles, and there was obvious competition in several areas, although Bangladesh Awami League was banned from engaging in political activity or participating in the election following its overthrow in 2024.

Citizens line up at polling stations to cast their votes during the 2026 parliamentary election, reflecting strong democratic participation. Photo: Reuters

Turnout statistics indicated significant participation particularly among young voters. Confidence that each competitor had an equal chance is just as important to true healing as participation.

The election appears to have reopened democratic space. It brought back competitiveness, made power transfers easier, and increased political engagement. These accomplishments are not insignificant. Even small advances matter after a protracted argument. The victory of the BNP alliance, therefore, is more than a transfer of power. It is a moral affirmation of the people's agency and a symbolic reclamation of the democratic space that had been eroded over years of partisanship.

However, this victory carries a dual weight. There is joy and exhilaration of having exercised the right to vote in a fair, transparent, and meaningful manner. On the other hand, there is an overwhelming expectation that the new government must immediately address systemic deficiencies and restore public faith in the state machinery.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Tarique Rahman, has won more than a two-thirds majority in the 13th National Parliament. In a post-election press conference, Tarique Rahman called on everyone to remain united. He said: 'Paths and opinions may differ, but we are all one in the interest of the country.' He also valued the views of every democratic political party participating in the election to ensure no evil force can establish fascism in the country. These bold statements and acts from a political leader are rare from the perspective of Bangladesh.

The opposition party has been welcomed to form a shadow cabinet. Even the deputy speaker position has been kept for the opposition. The government is thinking of reforming government institutions on the basis of democratic and constitutional principles. The peaceful coexistence of the ruling party and the opposition party gives us a message of democratic practice, like Western democracy. If civil and constitutional liberties are ensured, then we may say that the 2026 election has opened a door for democracy in Bangladesh.

However, consolidation and restoration are not the same thing. If institutions continue to be personalised, if opposition voices feel uneasy, or if legislative frameworks limit free discussion, democratic recovery is vulnerable. Either new forms of dominance can be established or democratic norms can be

Youth participation is reshaping Bangladesh's democratic trajectory. Photo: Dhaka Tribune

rebuilt with a powerful legislative majority. The decision will depend on how power is used in the years to come.

Certainly, 2026 may be seen as the start of democratic transformation if the new administration fortifies parliamentary oversight, changes electoral legislation to improve openness, safeguard media independence, and guarantees judicial autonomy. However, the promise of restoration may wane if institutions become too tightly aligned with administrative authority and competition narrows once more.

To ensure continuity of the democratic journey, the government needs to follow some rules and norms. The aspirations of more than one-third of the population's youth add another dimension to this mandate. For young Bangladeshis, democracy is not just the right to vote every five years – it is equality of opportunity, merit and the assurance that talent will be recognised regardless of social or political background. To address this problem, the government needs to institutionalise transparent, merit-based recruitment in government jobs, while simultaneously creating entrepreneurship among the youth. Corruption has become the single most damaging factor in eroding public trust.

The BNP-led government entered office with a clear promise to restore democratic practices and ensure peaceful coexistence. While it is far too early to draw definitive conclusions, the initial signals have generated cautious optimism among citizens who have long sought a more competitive and participatory political environment. Early gestures toward dialogue, administrative restraint and institutional normality matter because they set the tone for what follows.

Tarique Rahman greets supporters in Dhaka after his party won the national parliamentary election. Photo: Mahmud Hossain Opu/AP

Restoration, if it is to be genuine, must endure beyond the initial celebratory period. It will be measured by how the government treats dissent, how parliament functions, how courts assert independence and how institutions resist partisan capture. The vote in 2026 was a significant step. If the current trajectory continues and reforms deepen over time, it may indeed be remembered as the beginning of a true democratic recovery. The coming five years will determine whether this moment becomes a milestone or merely a hopeful pause in Bangladesh's political journey.

Mass protests during the 2024 political movement reflected widespread public demand for reform and democratic accountability. Photo: Rajib Dhar/AP

Professor Mohammad Tarikul Islam teaches at Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka and is Visiting Professor at Oxford, Cambridge, LSE and Harvard.

Thailand's democracy continues to operate under the enduring shadow of military power and constitutional constraints shaped by past coups. Photo: AP

Election leaves Thai army in charge, helped by the 'Cambodia factor'

Thailand's snap election of 8 February produced two clear winners, the conservative Bhumjaithai Party and Thailand's armed forces. The party's aggressive support for the military during last year's clash with Cambodia proved a decisive factor. Pravit Rojanaphruk explains how the election has reinforced the army's role in a country where it is often described as a 'state within a state'.

Although Thailand has not experienced a military coup since May 2014, the country still lives with the legacy of that putsch and of a junta-sponsored constitution it brought in to favour conservative forces. In 2023, Pita Limjaroenrat, leader of the party that won the most seats, was blocked from becoming prime minister by the junta-appointed Senate, which under the constitution was allowed to join the elected lower house in voting for the prime minister.

By February 2026, the political landscape had shifted. While many commentators expected the opposition People's Party to win on a platform of military reform, it was Anutin Charnvirakul's conservative and royalist Bhumjaithai Party (BJT) that secured a decisive victory. Anutin's promotion of a hard-line stance toward Cambodia proved particularly popular.

The BJT won 191 of the 500 seats in the lower house – a massive leap from the 71 seats it held in 2023. Meanwhile, the People's Party (formerly Move Forward) saw its influence wane, dropping from 151 seats in 2023 to just 120 in 2026. The main opposition, which had questioned the military's necessity, became the biggest loser of the night.

The border conflict with Cambodia last year boosted the military's popularity after Thai forces secured several disputed areas. Lt Gen Boonsin Padklang, commander of the Second Army Region, became a national hero and later toured schools and universities giving motivational talks. This surge in military prestige is reflected in the numbers. Following the BJT victory, the Bangkok-based The Nation online reported on 13 February that online army recruitment for 2026 surpassed all expectations.

Anutin Charnvirakul's Bhumjaithai Party surged to victory in 2026, reflecting a shift toward conservative and pro-military politics.

A legacy of military intervention

Even before the undeclared war with Cambodia, the military was an omnipresent force. If tourism is what Thailand is famous for, its frequent military coups are what make it infamous. Since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand has experienced 13 'successful' coups, an average of one every seven years. When you include seven 'unsuccessful' coups, Thailand is seen to be one of the world's most coup-prone nations.

Despite winning the most seats in 2023, Pita Limjaroenrat was blocked from becoming prime minister by the junta-appointed Senate. Photo: The Nation

The 1991 and 2014 coups are particularly notorious. In 1991, Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan was seized on an aircraft while travelling for a royal audience. Prominent military reporter Wasana Nanuam wrote of the 1991 coup in her book about the National Peace Keeping Council: 'The seizure of power by the NPKC occurred at an opportune moment, as the public had grown weary of the government but admired the military leadership. Amid public despair toward the government, the prime minister, and politicians, the NPKC became a kind of hope. People watched to see whether it could accomplish more for the public than when state power was in the hands of politicians.'

The King allegedly advised General Suchinda not to make the people disappointed. Suchinda later became prime minister but resigned after soldiers shot and killed at least 52 demonstrators protesting in Bangkok. He granted himself

Boonsin Padklang, commander of Thailand's Second Army Region, engages with students during a school visit, as rising military prestige—fuelled by the Cambodia border conflict—boosts recruitment and public support for the armed forces.

amnesty before leaving office, and no army officer was ever held responsible.

In the most recent coup in 2014, General Prayut Chan-o-cha declared martial law at 3 am, ousting the Pheu Thai government, detaining politicians and critics – including this writer – for 'attitude adjustment'. Five years of junta rule under General Prayut Chan-o-cha followed before the country transitioned to a military-dominated, semi-elected government that lasted until 2023.

Today, former coup leaders hold prestigious positions; Gen Prayut and Gen Surayud Chulanont (who took power after the 2006 coup) both serve on the Privy Council, the King's advisory body. Given this history, foreign observers often ask: 'When is the next coup?'

From an early age, the military is embedded in Thai society, with children encouraged to engage with armed forces displays. Photo: Reuters

In June 2025, the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations noted that Thailand remains the only middle-to-high-income country with 'regular' military interventions. The pretext is almost always a combination of widespread corruption and a perceived threat to the monarchy, the latter claim being impossible to debate publicly due to strict lèse-majesté laws.
The military's influence is woven into the fabric of Thai society through several 'special characteristics': on National Children's Day, the armed forces display tanks and fighter jets, encouraging children to 'play' with weaponry and climb onto armoured vehicles.

Also, through propaganda and education: official history emphasises the military and monarchy as the sole defenders of the nation, often portraying historical wars with neighbours like Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia in a one-sided, heroic light.

The military's influence is reinforced by its institutional reach. The army owns two national television stations and controls many radio frequencies, while the defence ministry is almost always headed by a retired general. In contemporary Thailand, genuine civilian control of the armed forces remains elusive.

Pravit Rojanaphruk, who writes for Khaosod English, Bangkok, won the 2017 International Press Freedom award of the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Pakistan and Afghanistan are locked in a deepening confrontation shaped by militant violence, border disputes and decades of unresolved historical mistrust.

A border on fire: Pakistan, Afghanistan and an unending war

An air strike on a hospital in Kabul on 17 March, which Taliban officials blame on Pakistan, killed more than 400 people and took the conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan to a more serious level. Mediation by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey led both countries to declare a ceasefire for the Eid holiday, but there are no signs that the distrust between the neighbours is close to being resolved, as Iftikhar Firdous reports.

The relationship between the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan and Pakistan has come full circle. Pakistan was once accused by the West of supporting the Afghan Taliban, but now Pakistan accuses the Taliban of harbouring anti-Pakistan militants and facilitating cross-border attacks. This shift is shaped by a historical dispute over the colonial Durand Line, long regarded as the *de facto* border between the countries.

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, Pakistan's hope was to settle its 'terrorism' problem and bring an end to the centuries-old disputes. It did not take long for Islamabad's anxieties to be triggered when the Taliban first cajoled Pakistan into talking to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the largest faction of the Pakistani Taliban, that has claimed responsibility for thousands of attacks inside Pakistan – and then denied their presence in Afghanistan once the talks failed.

'There are no militants in Afghanistan, there are only refugees,' said the late Khalil Haqqani, the minister for refugees of the Taliban government. Haqqani was once seen as Pakistan's proxy within the Taliban and the statement was widely seen in Pakistan as a betrayal. The first time Pakistan bombed Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was just eight months after the withdrawal of US/NATO forces in April 2022.

Every time Pakistan accused its neighbour of allowing militants to cross into Pakistan to carry out attacks, the Taliban denied they are allowing them to operate inside Pakistan. Initially seen as a cautious diplomatic approach to avoid confrontation, Pakistan subsequently concluded that the Taliban do not recognize the Durand Line as the border

demarcation. The Taliban's official communication refers to it as the 'Fictional line, drawn by Durand'.

The dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been shaped significantly by the historical and political controversy surrounding the concept of 'Pashtunistan'. The roots of this dispute lie in the contested legitimacy of the Durand Line, now the 2640-kilometre-long international border first demarcated in 1893 between British India and the Afghan Emirate under Amir Abdur Rahman Khan. Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Afghanistan refused to recognize the Durand Line as a border, arguing that it divided ethnic Pashtun populations across two sovereign states.

The Pashtunistan movement emerged in the mid-20th century as a political demand advocating either an independent Pashtun state or the unification of Pashtun-majority areas within Afghanistan. Afghan leaders under King Zahir Shah and later governments supported the idea diplomatically, which contributed to strained relations with Pakistan.

Pakistan has consistently maintained that the Durand Line is a legitimate and internationally recognized boundary inherited under the principle of *uti possidetis juris* that newly formed states adopt the borders of the previous state, a doctrine often applied in post-colonial state formation.

The reported strike on a hospital in Kabul marked a dangerous escalation, bringing the conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan to a far more serious level. Photo: Reuters

Prior to the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent, leaders supporting the Pashtunistan movement argued that Pashtuns living in the North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and the tribal areas should be given the right to self-determination. They believed Pashtuns should have the choice to join Afghanistan, form an independent state, or remain with Pakistan. However, with the creation of Pakistan and the 1947 referendum, the issue was sidelined. It lingered mainly as a topic of discussion in the southern districts of what is now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

During the 1950s and 1960s, tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan intensified, leading to frequent border disputes. In 1973, Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan overthrew Afghanistan's monarchy, established a republic, and assumed the presidency. To unify the country and strengthen his rule amid internal threats from leftist groups, Daoud revived the Pashtunistan issue, advocating for Pashtun self-determination.

At the centre of the dispute lies the Durand Line, the 1893 frontier that Pakistan regards as an international border but many in Afghanistan have never fully accepted.

A displaced Afghan family shelters in Nangarhar after fleeing clashes between Pakistani and Afghan forces at a border crossing, 4 March. Photo: Reuters.

In 1976, Daoud and Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto agreed to reduce support for proxies and ease the Pashtunistan dispute, but this accord quickly collapsed after Daoud's assassination during the 1978 Saur (April) Revolution and Bhutto's execution in 1979.

Despite diminished prominence, the Pashtunistan question continues to affect Afghanistan–Pakistan relations, especially regarding border disputes and nationalism. The Taliban's rise brought new complexities, although in their first tenure during the 1990's they did not officially challenge the Durand Line. In recent years, disputes have manifested in skirmishes along the border and disagreements over refugee movements and security cooperation. Pakistan constructed a border fence and ended the autonomous status of the tribal areas, integrating them into mainstream Pakistan. This did not evoke much reaction from the Ashraf Ghani government at the time. The talks ultimately collapsed over a key demand: the Pakistani Taliban insisted on overturning the constitutional amendment that ended the autonomous status of the tribal districts. This effectively revived the Pashtunistan question in a new form, detached from its earlier leftist framing.In other words, the Pashtunistan question had effectively re-emerged in a new form, away from the leftist ideals.

What began as mutual mistrust and failed negotiations has hardened into a militarised frontier, with recurring attacks, ceasefires and reprisals destabilising the region. Photo: AFP

Each time Pakistan has asked the Afghan Taliban to control cross-border terrorism, the Taliban have characterised it as 'Pakistan's internal problem' while simultaneously calling for a political settlement. By the end of 2025, three and half thousand Pakistanis had been killed, mostly in the border regions.

Low-intensity attacks and intermittent ceasefires have paved the way for an escalating conflict that risks becoming prolonged and deeply destabilising for the region.

Iftikhar Firdous is a journalist and academic. His PhD focuses on analysing militant discourses and terrorist ideologies.

Pakistan's democratic process unfolds under the watchful presence of the military, reflecting the enduring imbalance between civilian authority and institutional power. Photo: Sohail Shahzad/EPA

The state of democracy in Pakistan

It is said that the army in Pakistan wields more power than its democratically elected government, a situation that has prevailed for much of its years as an independent state. Umber Khairi reports.

A Turkish politician once remarked that while 'most countries have an army; in Turkey the army has a country'. Much the same may be said of Pakistan, where the military has become increasingly influential, not by imposing martial law directly but by undermining and controlling the institutions and participants of democracy. In practice, no elected government has been able to function without the military's approval or survive once it challenges the armed forces.

Pakistan's most recent general elections were held in February 2024. So, in theory, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif now heads a parliamentary government. But the result remains bitterly disputed: independent observers were excluded and, before the poll, state actors tried to prevent Imran Khan's party from participating by disqualifying and smearing candidates, challenging the party's registration and banning its cricket-bat symbol. Activists and leaders were detained and harassed.

Khan and his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), had themselves come into power at the hands of the military through an earlier disputed election – in 2018. Although Khan entered politics in the late 1990s, he was unable to gain a following until a section of military intelligence, the ISI or Inter-Services Intelligence, took him on as a project around 2011, largely, it was understood, to counter the hold of three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his party and family in the Punjab, Pakistan's most powerful province.

Khan was initially useful to the military establishment because he did not identify with the political or parliamentarian class

and he routinely insulted politicians, labelling them crooks, thieves and traitors, which fitted well with the military establishment's ongoing narrative about politicians. He had agitated outside parliament for four months in 2014, bringing Islamabad to a standstill even though he was by then an elected representative. The episode showed how useful he had become to parts of the military establishment in destabilising civilian politics.

Pakistan's military leadership has long played a decisive role in shaping political outcomes. Photo: PPI

Khan was used to destabilise the government at the time – but once he himself was in power, he began to go 'off-piste' and became something of a thorn in the side of the military. He became embroiled in a power struggle within the army top brass, aligning himself too closely with one of the generals in the running to succeed the then Chief of Army Staff. A different general got the top post and soon both Khan and his allied general were in prison. Khan has been in prison for over two years, charged in a number of cases. Nearly all Pakistan's elected prime ministers tend to end up either in jail or in exile.

By cooperating with the army in return for office, Khan followed the path of many Pakistani politicians: a Faustian pact in which power is exchanged for compliance. All the mainstream parties are now, to varying degrees, part of this arrangement. They run national and provincial governments, but real power still lies with the military, especially in economic, defence and foreign policy.

The military view is simple: the armed forces are the reason Pakistan is still standing and they are the only ones who can keep it running. When the army chief General Pervez Musharraf overthrew prime minister Nawaz Sharif in 1999 – after the latter had sacked him – he cited the main reason as being that the political government had been 'intriguing to destroy the last institution of stability left in Pakistan.'

Pakistan's military views nearly all of its neighbours (except old ally China) with varying degrees of hostility and cites this as a reason why there should never be any cuts in defence expenditure. In terms of the economy, it is not just defence expenditure it is concerned about – the military has its own, ever-increasing interests. These have broadened and mushroomed over the years as the military is now invested in a number of sectors including real estate, dairy and food products, energy and banking. These growing commercial interests, termed 'MilBus' by researchers, have raised the stakes for the army in terms of controlling the government.

An uneasy partnership

The partnership is uneasy. The army favours central control,

The 2024 general election unfolded under tight control, with allegations of restrictions on opposition participation.

whereas the 18th amendment of 2010 devolved many powers to the provinces. Civilian governments have also tended to favour normalising relations with India and increasing trade, while the military has resisted this. Western governments, especially the United States, often profess support for democracy while preferring to deal with military rulers.

Pakistan has held five general elections this century. At least two elected governments vowed to prosecute former army chief and president Pervez Musharraf for illegally usurping power and violating the constitution. He was charged with treason and sentenced to death, but the Lahore High Court later annulled the verdict. Last year parliament granted the current army chief, General Asim Munir, lifetime immunity from arrest and prosecution.

Imran Khan emerged as a powerful political force before falling out with the same establishment that once backed him. Photo: AFP

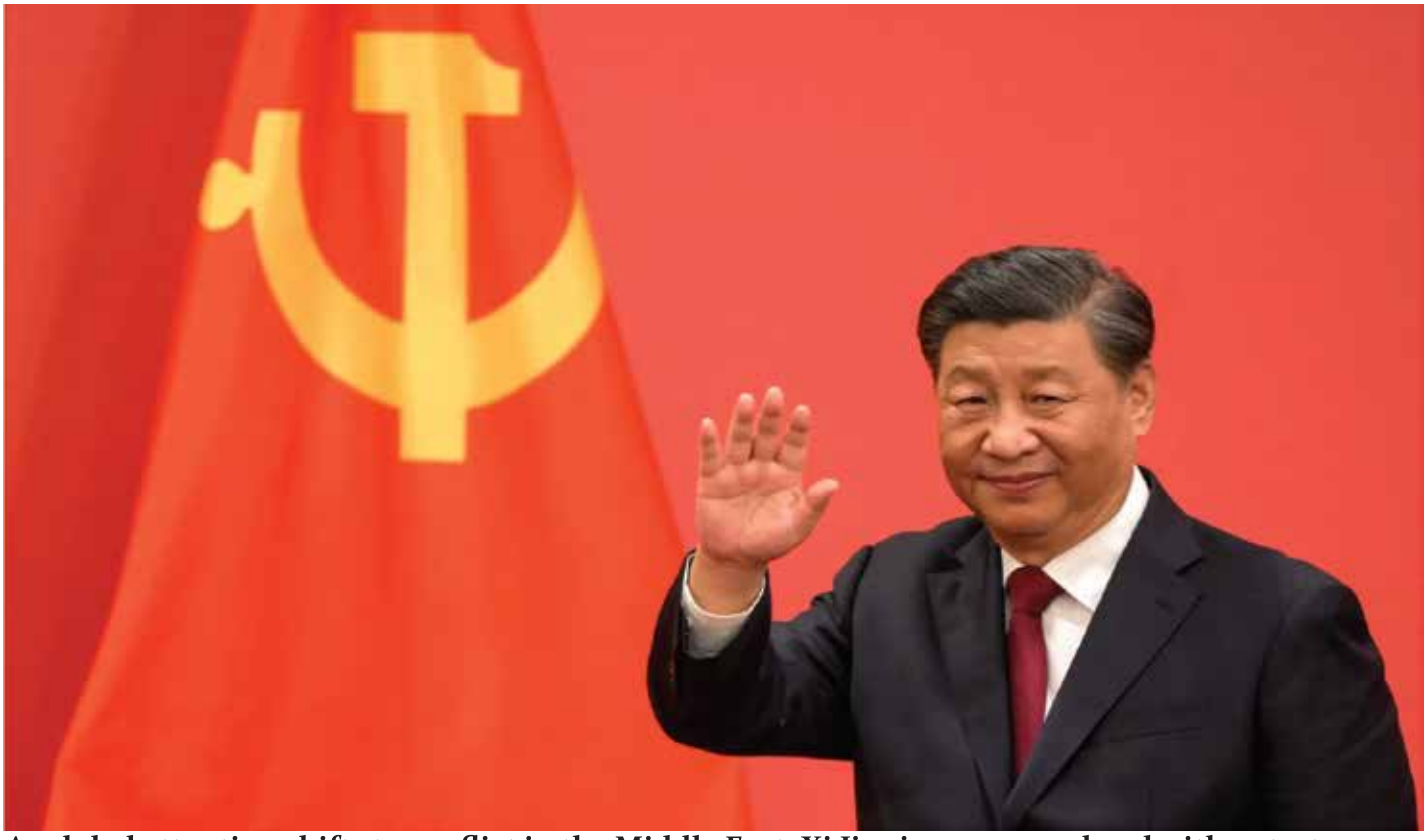
There are a number of red lines that the military insists not be crossed. One is criticism of the institution and its officers. Another is reporting on or criticising the troubled state of the Balochistan province where there is still a nationalist insurgency.

Shehbaz Sharif speaks in Parliament in Islamabad, where elected leaders govern within a system widely understood to be shaped by the military's overarching influence. Photo: AP

So, what exactly is the state of democracy in Pakistan?

Pakistan's democracy is an enterprise in which true power rests with the military establishment, the 'custodians' of the country. Yet, at the same time many systems and subsystems of democracy are functioning. Elections are held, citizens turn out to vote, voters make demands of their elected representatives and they expect their representatives to work for them. Even though this happens in a controlled and often repressive environment, the appetite for a democratic dispensation seems to exist. Despite these expectations people realise that the final arbiter will be the military. In this respect Pakistan resembles Myanmar: both maintain a civilian façade under military dominance. This hybrid model may yet evolve into a stronger democracy suited to Pakistan. Equally, by providing civilian cover for military rule, it may further weaken democratic institutions.

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



As global attention shifts to conflict in the Middle East, Xi Jinping presses ahead with a strategy focused on consolidating power at home and preparing China for long-term geopolitical and economic rivalry. Photo: AFP

While Trump gambles on Iran Xi doubles down in China

With President Trump preoccupied with the war in the Middle East this may not be the best moment to meet Xi Jinping of China, who has just endorsed the country's latest Five-Year Plan. Howard Zhang has been looking at the plan and at issues between the two superpowers.

The war in and around Iran has sent shockwaves far beyond the Gulf, rattling global energy markets and spreading turbulence as far as East Asia. For President Trump, the conflict may prove a defining gamble. If he neutralises Iran's nuclear capability — or even triggers regime change — he will have achieved something successive American presidents failed to accomplish for decades, with significant implications for future geopolitical balances.

While the world's gaze is firmly fixed on Iran, a quieter drama has been unfolding in China. In early March, a carefully choreographed scene played out inside the Great Hall of the People during China's annual rubber-stamp parliamentary session. Taken together with other signals emerging from Beijing, it suggests that President Xi Jinping is doubling down on his economic policies at home and strategic competition abroad. Four signals stand out.

Signal One: Xi's unchallenged authority

When President Xi sat down centre stage at the opening ceremony of the parliamentary sessions, the choreography was strikingly unusual.

The master of ceremonies first announced Xi's full set of titles: 'General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, President of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission – Xi Jinping...' The entire hall rose to its feet and applauded. Xi stood up slowly, nodded to acknowledge, and then sat down again. Only afterwards did the master of ceremonies add: 'and other leaders of the Party and the state'.

In the ritualised theatre of Communist Party politics, such details matter. In previous years,

the names of other senior leaders — at the very least members of the Politburo Standing Committee — would also be read out. Not this time. The omission spoke volumes.

Even by the rigid conventions of Chinese political stagecraft, the sequence was unusually explicit. The imagery recalled an earlier era of Communist political theatre under Mao, when the authority of a single leader was placed above the collective. After endless purges, most recently among senior officers, Xi now faces no visible rival within the system. In the realm of elite politics, he reigns supreme.

US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping shake hands. Photo: AFP

Signal Two: Acknowledging economic strain

Yet this political triumph masks a more uncomfortable reality. China's economy remains under strain, and even Xi's loyalist premier, Li Qiang, acknowledged the difficulties in his annual government Work Report. The GDP growth target was trimmed slightly to below the once-sacrosanct 5 per cent mark, a modest adjustment that may ease deflationary pressure.

Beyond that, the report offered little in the way of meaningful measures to boost household consumption. Instead, the emphasis remained on stabilising industry and investment. Reviving consumer demand would require deeper reforms and a greater shift of resources towards households — steps that could be read as an admission that the current economic model is faltering.

For now, the leadership appears unwilling to make that concession. Xi may reign supreme politically, but his economic response suggests a leadership managing weakness rather than fundamentally changing course.

Signal Three: Doubling down on industrial competition

If China's economic model is under strain, the leadership's response is not to abandon it but to double down. Across speeches, planning documents and commentaries in the Party media, one phrase appears repeatedly: 'coordinating development and security'.

The emerging framework of the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030) reflects this thinking. Rather than pivoting towards consumption, Beijing is concentrating resources on a small number of strategic sectors, hoping to outcompete the West. These include semiconductors, AI, robotics, biotech and advanced pharmaceuticals.

In effect, the leadership is mobilising state resources behind what policymakers call 'new productivity forces', betting that technological dominance and industrial scale will secure China's long-term economic position. Some UK analysts such as Charles Parton of the RUSI think tank see the plan less as a conventional economic programme than as a blueprint for navigating a prolonged period of geopolitical rivalry.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference closing session in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, where staged proceedings signal authority in party politics. Photo: Reuters

Signal Four: A subtle shift on Taiwan

The final signal concerns Taiwan. Official rhetoric opposing Taiwanese independence remains

Premier Li Qiang acknowledged economic pressures in China, signalling concerns over slowing growth and weak domestic consumption.

harsh. Yet recent messaging suggests renewed emphasis on political influence rather than confrontation.

Wang Huning — one of Xi's closest strategy and propaganda advisers — emphasised strengthening 'cross-strait exchanges' and united front work during the sessions. Such language points to renewed focus on political and economic integration across the Taiwan Strait, tools long used by Beijing to shape opinion on the island. Pressure will continue, but the emphasis is shifting back towards influence and persuasion rather than military action.

A quieter but harder China

Taken together, these signals suggest a China that may appear less confrontational on the surface but could prove more difficult for the outside world to manage.

Direct military escalation may be avoided for now. Beijing may rely more on tools operating below the threshold of open conflict: cyber espionage, intellectual-property theft, maritime pressure in contested waters and political influence operations abroad.

United Front networks are likely to play an even bigger role, particularly in Taiwan, across the developing world and parts of the West. Economic tools may also play a role, from subsidised exports that undercut competitors to strategic investments aimed at expanding China's influence.

The unanswered question

One issue nevertheless remains unresolved. The next Communist Party congress is expected in the autumn of 2027. The question of leadership succession will inevitably resurface. Will Xi retain all his formal positions for another term? Or might he follow the example of Deng Xiaoping by stepping back while continuing to wield decisive influence behind the scenes?

For now, Xi appears unrivalled. There is little sign of a designated successor. Yet history offers cautionary lessons. The world has seen what follows when towering figures such as Stalin or Mao leave the stage.

The signals emerging from Beijing suggest that the coming years will be devoted less to expansion than to fortifying the political and economic order Xi has built — and preparing China for a prolonged strategic contest with the West.

Mao Zedong shakes hands with Deng Xiaoping in Beijing in 1974, a moment that underscores the historical weight of leadership concentration and succession in China. Photo: AFP

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

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returns to Tehran in February 1979, marking a defining moment in the Iranian Revolution. Photo: Bettmann Archive

The legacy of 'regime change' in Iran

'I was on the plane which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to Tehran.'

There has been much speculation as to whether the bombing of Iran by Israel and the US and the killing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will mark the end of the Islamic Republic and restoration of democratic government. Richard Oppenheimer witnessed at first hand the start of the revolution that brought the Ayatollahs to power 47 years ago.

I had little or no warning when I flew into Tehran in August 1978 of the profound political upheaval that was about to get under way in Iran. I was standing in for the BBC's resident correspondent and had been assured that things were pretty quiet – nothing to write home about.

I knew that Iran was no stranger to regime change, or indeed to foreign interference in its affairs. In 1953, the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, had been overthrown in a coup d'état instigated by Britain and the United States. The key motive of the coup, which was secretly engineered by the UK's MI6 and the American CIA, was to protect British oil interests in Iran after Mossaddegh nationalised the country's oil industry.

The effect of this action was to strengthen the position of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and when I had travelled through the country by bus in 1967 on my way to India, the country appeared calm and peaceful. The Shah too must have been feeling pretty confident because in 1971 he chose to throw an exorbitantly expensive celebration to mark 2500 years of the Persian Empire. However, as his rule became increasingly autocratic, the gulf was growing steadily between a newly prosperous westernised urban middle class and the deeply religious, predominantly Shi'a Muslim, population. And the calls for change were starting to be heard.

The main catalyst for change came from the prominent Shi'a cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had been living in Iraq for several years, having been exiled for his controversial views and his

calls for 'Jamhuriye Eslami' or the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran. It was his picture that was being carried in the first of several huge marches that I witnessed in August 1978, soon after I arrived in Iran. I remember seeing truckloads of young soldiers, armed and distinctly nervous looking, parked in side-streets along the Old Shemiran Road in North Tehran down which the demonstrators were marching. One of these trucks pulled out and temporarily blocked the marchers and I saw one of the leaders of the demonstration step forward to address the soldiers. 'You are our brothers, we are not your enemy,' he shouted, and then women in black chadors brought roses to give to the soldiers, after which the truck pulled back and the march proceeded peacefully.

Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh (left) was overthrown in the 1953 coup backed by Britain and the United States, and later sentenced to prison in December 1953, cementing the rule of the shah and reshaping Iran's political trajectory. Photo: AP

A few days later, however, after the declaration of martial law, another pro-Khomeini demonstration was met with a very different response. 8 September 1978 – Black Friday, as it came to be called – soldiers opened fire at random on a crowd of unarmed demonstrators in Jaleh Square in central Tehran, killing at least 60 people. In the aftermath I saw many others who were wounded and bleeding.

This was a major turning point. Over the next three months the Shah brought in a number of mostly military officials in the hope of stemming the rising tide of opposition to his rule. In early January 1979 he even appointed Dr Shahpur Bakhtiar, a politician from the opposition party the National Front, as prime minister. But then, on 16 January, the Shah himself left Iran unexpectedly – on health grounds it later transpired. The relatively slow-motion regime change was well under way.

Perhaps in response to the Shah's departure, Ayatollah Khomeini left Iraq and decamped to a little village in France near Paris called Neauphle-le-Chateau to plan his return to Iran. There he held court for a week or so, surrounded by supporters planning his return to Iran. There was much talk of 'Jamhuriye Eslami', much less about the detail of the sort of government he envisaged and the role (if any) the various Iranian political parties would be allowed to play.

The departure date was fixed for 1 February 1979 and I had bought my ticket for the chartered Air France flight to Tehran along with 150 other journalists and 50 of the Ayatollah's entourage. As we all gathered at Charles de Gaulle Airport, we were very aware that there was no firm indication of who was in power in Tehran and what sort of reception we would receive. The Ayatollah was, as usual, a picture of steely, stone-faced resolution. I remember seeing one of his lieutenants, Abolhassan Banisadr, standing alone at the airport looking deeply

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi presided over a modernising yet increasingly autocratic Iran before the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

unhappy and apprehensive. He was subsequently appointed the first President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a post he held for 16 months before being impeached in June 1981 and forced to flee into exile in France. He was lucky. Another of Ayatollah Khomeini's close aides in Paris, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, who was also on the plane and subsequently served as the Islamic Republic's foreign minister from November 1979 to August 1980, was executed in 1982 for allegedly plotting the assassination of Ayatollah Khomeini and the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. As the saying goes: 'The Revolution devours its own children.'

Mass protests in Tehran in 1978 brought together diverse groups demanding change, signalling the collapse of the Shah's rule.

The flight from Paris was uneventful but we did have two anxious moments on arrival. As our plane was coming in to land the pilot suddenly changed his mind, accelerated up again and circled around for ten minutes before making the landing. Then, when the plane had stopped, armed air force officers ran out from the airport building and surrounded our plane – not, it transpired, to attack us but to protect us from possible attack.

Tehran airport was in turmoil – we had to stamp our own passports because there was no one to do it for us. However, there was a sort of welcoming committee for the Ayatollah, made up primarily of politicians from various opposition parties who were wondering what sort of future lay ahead for them. As far as I can remember, Khomeini ignored them all and we were then swept along in a massive procession made up of hundreds of thousands of ardent supporters of the Ayatollah, bringing him to the Behesht-e-Zarah cemetery to honour the victims of what would soon be the outgoing regime.

Vast crowds gathered as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini visited Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery following his return from exile, where he delivered a speech that symbolised the Iranian Revolution's triumph over the old regime. Photo: AP

It took another ten days or so for the Shah's army to declare its neutrality, following the example of junior officers in the air force. Martial law was lifted and the first bricks of the Islamic Republic were laid. 47 years later it still survives, despite a war with Iraq, the American Hostage Crisis, the conflict with Israel and now a devastating aerial bombardment from both Netanyahu's Israel and Donald Trump's United States. But Iran – or Persia as it was for most of its history – is no stranger to regime change, or indeed to foreign interference. After all, Alexander the Great, the young king of Macedonia, invaded the Persian Empire 2300 years ago, and Iran's still there.

Richard Oppenheimer reported on the start of Iran's Islamic Republic for the BBC.

How Iran governs itself

The Council for Foreign Relations (CFR) based in New York explains how Iran is governed. *Democracy Asia* publishes this extract with the permission of the CFR.

Iran's system of government is not quite a democracy, nor a theocracy. Founding Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini developed its animating doctrine, known as guardianship of the jurist, in the years before the Islamic Republic's establishment in 1979. Khomeini posited that a just government was possible if religious scholars sat atop it to ensure consistency with Islamic law. This system was put into place with a constitutional referendum after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The organs of a modern republic—a unicameral legislature (the majlis), an executive led by the president, and a judiciary—were enveloped by a clerical system.

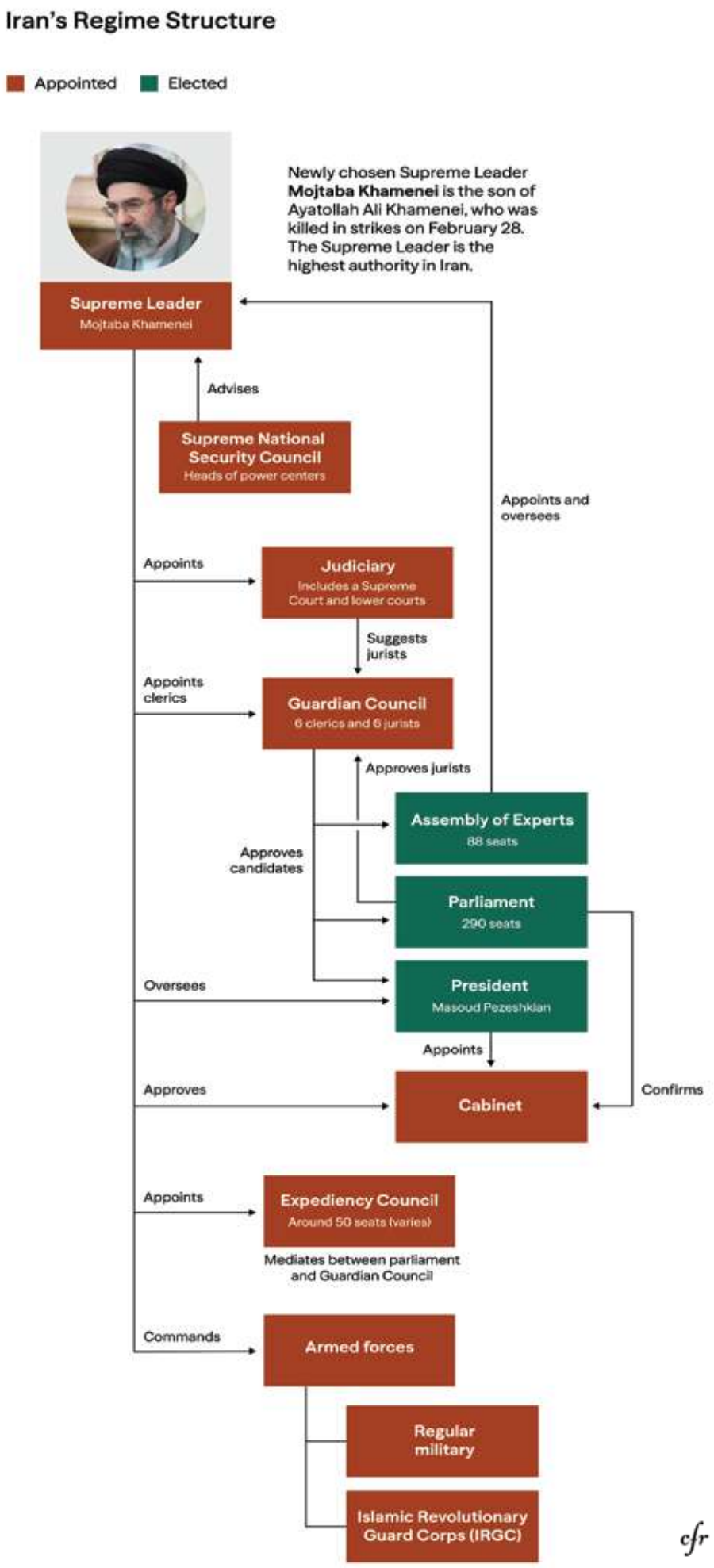
One factor that has remained constant throughout Iran's modern history is the ultimate authority of the supreme leader, the guardian jurist who is effectively Iran's leader for life, per the constitution. Iran's constitution designates the office as head of state and affords it vast control under the theory that political authority springs from religious authority. Article 110 of Iran's constitution outlines the position's major powers. They include setting national policies and supervising their implementation, as well as commanding the armed forces and appointing military chiefs and the heads of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and police. Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei, has reportedly influenced the selection of ministers of defense, intelligence, and foreign affairs, as well as science, a sensitive post charged with appointing the heads of universities. Khamenei served as president and as commander of the IRGC before becoming supreme leader until his death in February 2026.

The supreme leader's authority is not absolute, however. He is elected by the Assembly of Experts, a body of eighty-eight directly elected jurists who are constitutionally mandated with overseeing the supreme leader. In practice, however, they carry out oversight in a secret committee, and it is unclear whether they have ever sought to meaningfully check either Khomeini or Khamenei.

Khamenei's death triggered the Assembly's search for Iran's next leader, a task that has only been conducted once since the Islamic Republic was established in 1979. According to the constitution, the new supreme leader must be a male cleric with religious expertise and political competence, as well as someone who possesses moral authority and is loyal to the Islamic Republic. Mojtaba Khamenei became an ayatollah in 2022, achieving the highest clerical rank after more than a decade of seminary teaching and securing himself a position in Iran's power circles.

There are also informal constraints on the supreme leader. The position is considered both an arbiter of Iranian politics and a source of emulation, so his direction is meant to both set the course for the republic but also reflect broader consensus among elites. Meanwhile, the supreme leader relies as much on typical instruments of political power – control of media outlets, patronage, and so on – as the religious trappings of his office to influence government and society.

Answering to the supreme leader is the president, who serves as head of government. (Neither office is specifically reserved for men, though no woman has ever been permitted to seek these seats by the regime-aligned electoral authority.) Eligible for a maximum of two four-year terms, the president is charged with executing the country's laws, setting policy within parameters set by the supreme leader, and conducting diplomacy on the state's behalf. They nominate members of the cabinet, who must be confirmed by the parliament. They also



Sources: Congressional Research Service; European Council on Foreign Relations; CFR research; Photo: Tasnim News Agency

propose the budget, which must then be passed under the normal legislative process.

The parliament, or majlis, has 290 seats. Its members are directly elected to four-year terms by geographic district, with five seats set aside for religious minorities. The share of clerics holding seats in it has declined—down from more than 50 percent in 1980 to 5.5 percent in 2020—while the number associated with the Revolutionary Guards has increased. As the unicameral legislature, it has broad lawmaking authority.

The Guardian Council is charged with determining whether the laws parliament passes are permissible under the constitution and Islamic precepts. Half of the council's twelve members are theologians appointed by the supreme leader; the other half are legal scholars selected by the parliament. The Guardian Council also qualifies candidates for the Assembly of Experts, presidency, and parliament, giving it great influence in setting the parameters of Iranian electoral democracy. In the 2016 general elections, the body approved just half of the declared candidates for parliament and one-fifth of those for the Assembly of Experts. It has often weeded out reformist candidates for office. For example, in each presidential election since 2017, it has disqualified Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the firebrand ex-president who had clashed with Khamenei while in office.

Another body, the Expediency Council, mediates between the parliament and Guardian Council. It was established by decree in 1988 before being added to the constitution in an

amendment the following year. The supreme leader, who appoints the council's members to five-year terms, has since delegated to it the authority to supervise the government. This body is another avenue through which the supreme leader can choose to exercise closer authority over the government.

The Supreme National Security Council is led by the president and includes the parliamentary speaker and chief justice—that is, the heads of all three branches of government. Also, on the council are military chiefs and the ministers of state, foreign affairs, and intelligence, as well as two personal representatives of the supreme leader; thus, it includes appointees of both the president and supreme leader. Its constitutional writ is broad; it is charged with setting a wide range of policies that touch on defense and security, responding to threats both foreign and domestic.

'The Islamic Republic of Iran's Power Centers' can be viewed at
https://www.cfr.org/articles/islamic-republics-power-centers

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Iranian director Jafar Panâhi, whose films often explore censorship, morality and everyday life in Iran, returns with the darkly comic thriller *It Was Just an Accident*. Photo: AFP

It Was Just an Accident, a film by Jafar Panâhi

Jafar Panâhi is an Iranian film-maker and actor whose films have frequently been banned or censored in the country and who has been imprisoned twice for 'propaganda against the Islamic Republic'. Even under legal restriction, Panâhi continued to make films without permission, sometimes produced semi-clandestinely. Daniel Nelson reviews his latest film *It Was Just an Accident*.

When Iranian director Jafar Panâhi's prison interrogator asked him 'Why do you make these kinds of films?' he explained that his movies were based on what he was going through 'so what I was experiencing at that very moment would inevitably appear in a film, in some form or another.'

He reflected that experience in *Taxi Driver*, which reveals more about life in Tehran than shelves of academic tomes. Banned from film-making, he made a film called *This Is Not A Film*.

After a second spell in jail he said 'I felt compelled to make a film for the people I'd met behind bars. I owed them that film. Even though I'm speaking from personal experience, it aligns with what was happening in Iranian society more broadly – especially with the Woman, Life, Freedom revolution that began in the Fall of 2022. A great deal has changed during that period.'

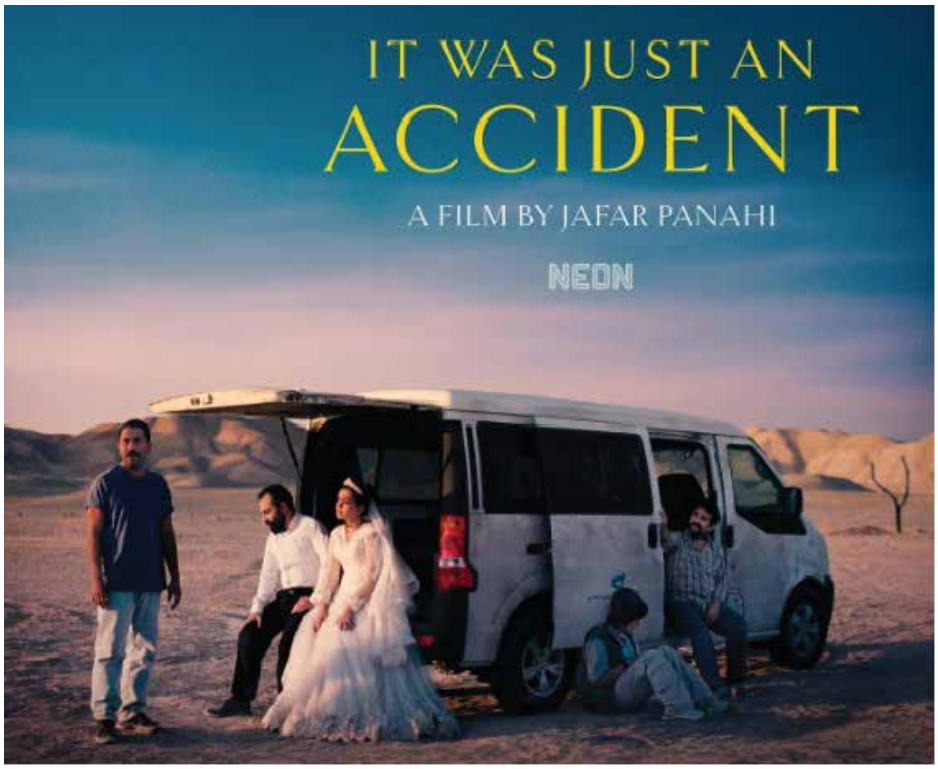
The will-he/won't-he hero of the film Panâhi felt compelled to make, *It Was Just an Accident*, is a garage mechanic, Vahid, who by chance encounters his former torturer, Eghbal. Or almost certainly is his former torturer. Probably his former torturer. Perhaps.

Vahid wants to kill Eghbal. But even if Eghbal has been correctly identified as the torturer, is his murder moral, or would the act reduce the victim

to the level of the perpetrator of state violence?

The mystery that marks the opening minutes turns to mordant humour and surreal circumstances, as the vacillating Vahid (with Eghbal tied and gagged in the back of his van) gathers up a motley collection of fellow ex-detainees — a headscarf-free wedding photographer, a couple about to be married, the bride-to-be's former partner — who argue over what action to take. Madcap scenes and arguments give way to a final fevered, dramatic confrontation about personal motivation, morality, justice and human weakness, with Eghbal's life hanging in the balance as, tied to a tree, the interrogator is in turn interrogated.

A final twist leaves the viewer dangling, and chewing over its meaning. It's fittingly open-ended because 66-year-old Panâhi is unwaveringly humane,



In Panâhi's film, a mechanic named Vahid believes he has encountered the interrogator who once tortured him, setting off a tense moral dilemma.

his characters not black or white but complex beings, part good, part bad, part middling along. The twist is telling, too, because it's a sound, and the earlier absurdist attempts to identify the torturer are based on sound, smell and touch imprinted on the blindfolded victims' consciousness during interrogations. ('The fact of never seeing the face of your interrogator is everyone's experience,' Panâhi has said.)

He also said in an interview with AwardsWatch that 'Vengeance and forgiveness are only the façade of the film. They're only on the surface to keep the plot moving.'

'What mattered to me in the film was a fundamental question, and that was what is going to happen in the future? Is the cycle of violence going to continue or is it going to come to an end at some point? And anyway, what is it that's going to happen in our future?' An attack by the United States and Israel turned out to be the answer.

He was looking ahead when he told an interviewer that he wanted to make a film about war — not the war that erupted in February 2026, but war in general.

Panâhi's earlier film Taxi portrayed everyday life in Tehran through conversations inside a taxi, filmed despite a ban on his directing.

Mahsa Amini protests also known as the Woman, Life, Freedom movement that erupted in Iran in 2022 form part of the social background to Panahi's reflections on justice, violence and resistance. Photo: Reuters

I have an intense dislike of generalisations about countries and people, which are little more than stereotypes and can shift more swiftly than is generally realised. But I am tempted to hint at the link between the film's arresting changes of note (thriller, black comedy, moral tale?) and the quiet irony, humour and tolerance of many Iranians, and certainly of Panâhi himself.

While promoting his film abroad, Panâhi told Jon Stewart that he intended to return to Iran, where his family and colleagues live. Photo: The Daily Show

The film's synopsis says simply: 'What begins as a minor accident sets in motion a series of escalating consequences.' That's like saying the Mona Lisa is a picture of a woman. From that single sentence description, Panâhi has spun a wonderfully entertaining, intellectually fascinating film that further reinforces the intriguing ability of a coterie of Iranian directors to manoeuvre around state intolerance to produce world-class cinema. As Soviet-era Eastern Europe showed, totalitarian rules can spark film-makers to use their wits, creativity and culture to forge gems from the crushing weight of narrow-minded mediocrity.

Panâhi lives and films in Iran, where his family resides, but has been out of the country for a few months to help promote *It Was Just an Accident*. What he would face on returning home when the US and Israel attacks stop is unclear, because the shape of the next government is equally unclear. Asked on the Jon Stewart US TV show where he would go next, he replied: 'Iran. It's my country ... My son, my mother, brothers, my sisters, my colleagues, everyone is there. When half of you is there, then how could half of you be out?'

Daniel Nelson, who has worked on newspapers and magazines across Asia, edits Eventslondon.org, covering events in London relating to the Global South.

Cricket in South Asia has evolved beyond sport, becoming a stage for political rivalry, nationalism and state influence. Photo: AI generated

The politicisation of cricket in South Asia

Cricket, a sporting contest followed avidly across South Asia, is now increasingly shaped by political rivalries and state power, as Ashis Ray reports.

After their team retained the Twenty20 World Cup – the first time any side has achieved this – the Indian coach Gautam Gambhir, captain Suryakumar Yadav, and the chairman of the International Cricket Council (ICC) Jay Shah visited a Hindu temple in Ahmedabad for thanksgiving, carrying the trophy presented to the Indians with them. Video of this trip went viral on social media. A former cricketer now opposition MP, Kirti Azad, said this was 'unsecular' since there were Sikhs, a Christian and a Muslim in the Indian squad. Yet it underlined the divisiveness that has presently infiltrated Indian and international cricket.

The rumpus obscures the reality that cricket in India has become both commercial and highly political. The *Press Trust of India* reported last September that the bank balance of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) had soared to around £2 billion. This comes mainly from Indian television channels, streaming services, advertisers and sponsors, who are also significant revenue providers for the cricket boards of other countries. A tour by an Indian team is a lifeline for such boards.

Sensing that clout, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), after coming to power in 2014, took control of the BCCI by nominating its president, secretary and treasurer, effectively converting it into a weapon of foreign policy, especially against Pakistan. No bilateral series has taken place between India and Pakistan since Narendra Modi has been prime minister.

In India, the allure of cricket has been such that Mr Modi, as chief minister of Gujarat state, had himself elected president of Gujarat Cricket Association, an affiliate of the BCCI, and held that position until he became prime minister in 2014. At that point, he handed charge to his

Members of the India national cricket team visit a temple with the T20 World Cup trophy, sparking debate over religion and secularism in Indian cricket.

close colleague Amit Shah, now the Indian home minister, who in turn passed the baton to his son Jay Shah. In 2019, Shah Junior was fast tracked into the role of BCCI secretary, in effect its chief executive. In December 2024, he was propelled to the post of chairman of the ICC without having becoming president of the board, generally regarded as a pre-requisite.

By that move the BJP completed its capture of the game's international governing body as well. Before the appointment, Indian political commentator Harish Khare wrote in *The Wire* 'the only reason Jay Shah is set to become the next boss of the International Cricket Council is because his father is the junior partner in the old, faltering ruling firm of *Shahenshah*, an allusion to Modi, and his home minister.

The BCCI was party to the ICC's decision to select Pakistan as host of the 2025 Champions Trophy tournament. Yet, when it came to participation, India refused to visit Pakistan and were granted special dispensation to play their games in Dubai. The precedence of World Cups in 1996 and 2003 should have resulted in India being scratched from the event but this did not happen because the ICC is also at the mercy of Indian television networks and sponsors who would not countenance India's absence. However, when Bangladesh, who do not possess the same grip over the ICC, asked for their fixtures in the just concluded Twenty20 World Cup to be moved to Sri Lanka, co-hosts of the competition, they were refused.

Under Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, the BCCI has become deeply intertwined with political power and state influence. Photo: Reuters

Because India had retracted from their responsibility in the Champions Trophy, Pakistan were permitted by the ICC to undertake their outings in Sri Lanka rather than in India. An India-Pakistan encounter is lucrative for the ICC because of the significant audience it attracts and thereby earnings from TV, streaming services, advertisers and sponsors. Mysteriously, every draw in an ICC championship ensures an Indo-Pak clash.

In a parallel political appointment, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is run by the country's interior minister Mohsin Naqvi, who was selected for that post by the army. When Pakistan threatened not to turn up to play India in the preliminary stage of the T20 World Cup in support of Bangladesh, the ICC warned the PCB it would lose a considerable share of its returns from the 2026 Twenty20 World Cup if Pakistan did not show up for the match. Behind-the-scenes

diplomacy ensued and the PCB relented after the ICC agreed not to penalize the Bangladesh Cricket Board for not complying with its commitment to play Bangladesh's matches in India.

But, as in the 2025 Asia Cup which took place after a four-day armed *fracas* between India and Pakistan in May 2025, India were happy to lock horns – bearing in mind the fiscal rewards – but their cricketers refused to shake hands with the Pakistani opposition to express their solidarity with Indian soldiers, a clear violation of the 'spirit of cricket' as laid down in a preamble to the 'Laws of Cricket'.

In short, Hindu nationalism, the philosophy of the ruling BJP, has come to pervade not just Indian but international cricket. In effect, the ICC (whose chief executive is an Indian) and the BCCI are 'joined at the hip' with Modi and Shah Senior in remote control. ICC's founders – England, Australia and South Africa – are mute spectators, not wanting to jeopardise largesse from the BCCI in the form of India's trips to their shores.

As ICC chairman, Jay Shah embodies India's growing influence over global cricket administration.

Matches between India national cricket team and Pakistan national cricket team remain politically charged, often reflecting tensions beyond the boundary.

Becoming ICC head should involve detaching oneself from one's national body and acting impartially towards member boards in the best interests of cricket. Yet on social media, Shah blatantly sided with the Indian military in last year's Indo-Pak war. Now, instead of maintaining the dignity of the post of ICC chairman, he chose to identify with India's victory in a sectarian sojourn with Gambhir, a BJP activist and former MP, and Yadav. It was further evidence of the *de facto* merger between ICC and BCCI under the tutelage of Modi and Shah.

Ashis Ray has been a commentator on international cricket since 1975 and is the author of *Cricket World Cup: The Indian Challenge.*

Entrepreneur and peer Karan Bilimoria built Cobra Beer into a global brand before taking a seat in Britain's House of Lords, championing business links between the UK and India.

From beer baron to real baron – an interview with Lord Bilimoria

India-born Karan Bilimoria, founder of Cobra Beer, has spent his career promoting links between Britain and India. A former chancellor of the University of Birmingham and now a member of Britain's House of Lords, he spoke to Nicholas Nugent about business, politics and the UK–India relationship.

Karan Bilimoria came to Britain as a student, studying first to become a chartered accountant and subsequently earning a degree in law at Cambridge University. It was at Cambridge that he became what he calls a 'dissatisfied customer' drinking 'gassy' beer while eating at an Indian restaurant. He thought he could do better. 'I hated the fizzy beers and lagers I was presented with and came up with the idea of a beer that had the refreshment of a lager and smoothness of an ale combined, which would accompany all food and particularly Indian food.'

The next stage was pure luck, says Bilimoria. He was introduced to an established brewery in Bangalore whose chief brewmaster was Dr Cariappa, a great nephew of the famous Indian general. The younger Cariappa had studied brewing in the Czech Republic, a country famous for beer, and together they crafted Cobra Beer in India.

'I've always had an ambition to bring India and the UK together, and Cobra Beer is an Indo-British product.' For its first seven years Cobra was brewed exclusively in India and imported to the UK. Production later moved to Britain and today the beer is brewed in several countries and sold in more than 40.

Beer was the starting point of Bilimoria's business career, which has also involved Indian food in Britain. When Cobra was launched there were around 6,000 Indian restaurants in the UK, a huge potential market. Today there are about 12,000, many of which serve Cobra.

Bilimoria says he feels equally at home in India, where he was born in Hyderabad in 1961, and Britain,

where he studied before starting his business career. In 2020 he became president of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), just as the Covid pandemic struck. He describes it as 'the worst crisis since the Second World War' and says he was privileged to help British business navigate that difficult period.

Lord Bilimoria was chancellor of the University of Birmingham, another role he calls a great privilege, and continues to lecture on business at his own seat of learning, Cambridge University. He is currently UK chairman of the ICC, the International Chamber of Commerce, a role he took over just as President Trump held what he called his 'liberation day', imposing tariffs on goods imported into the US. It is clear that Bilimoria favours free trade and reform of the World Trade Organisation to promote that cause internationally. Citing India, he says protectionism has never really worked in the past.

'My focus has always been India which I remember as a closed inward-looking country.' He believes he played a role in changing that. 'I believed that one day India would open up and, sure enough, in 1991 it did.' Appointed

Cobra Beer was created to accompany Indian food, combining the refreshment of lager with the smoothness of ale. Photo: Denis Jones

UK chair of the Indo-British partnership, his counterpart in India was Narayana Murthi, the founder of Infosys. I asked: 'Why is India far behind China in moving to become a developed country?' China's autocratic environment has helped it advance, he says. 'It is already a superpower, way ahead globally, not just of India.' He doesn't conceal his admiration for China's development while pointing out that India by contrast has democratic government.

Asked which countries in Asia he would advise investors to focus on, Bilimoria immediately names India, which he says has become the fastest-growing major economy in the world. He credits Prime Minister Narendra Modi and notes that the AI Impact conference hosted in Delhi in February reflected India's growing technological ambitions. He also sees potential in Japan, whose new prime minister Sanae Takaichi, he suggests, is modelling herself on Margaret Thatcher.


As president of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Bilimoria represented British business during the economic disruption caused by the Covid pandemic.

Other markets on Bilimoria's investment radar include Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. During an investment visit to Saudi Arabia in 2003, he says he was struck by how seriously the country was pursuing economic development, particularly through links with British schools and universities.

So how did the former beer baron become a real baron with a seat in the House of Lords and playing a role in passing legislation? 'I have always been interested in politics and started debating at school aged 14.' He went on to debate at the Cambridge Union debating society. He resisted a temptation to stand as an MP, the conventional way to become a

member of parliament. The former prime minister, Tony Blair, widened access to the membership of the upper house, the House of Lords. He applied and was admitted, giving him the rank of 'baron' as Lord Bilimoria of Chelsea, his full title.

The House of Lords, where Lord Bilimoria contributes to debates and scrutinises legislation as part of Britain's upper chamber.

He is a big supporter of the House of Lords which is the less powerful chamber of the British parliament: 'The strength of the House of Lords makes it almost the cornerstone of our democracy', he says. 'Although not elected, we are the equivalent of the senate in another country.' Revealing his Britishness as well as his pride in exercising a parliamentary role he explains the role of the Lords: 'We challenge government and scrutinise legislation. It works because we have the greatest depth and breadth of expertise of any parliamentary chamber in the world by a factor of ten.' He says the US senate consists largely of lawyers while the House of Lords includes university leaders, former cabinet secretaries, former high court judges, authors, scientists and doctors. 'In any field that we debate you will have world experts to contribute and that is what gives us our authority.' Lord Bilimoria is no longer a foreign-born outsider describing how things work but a proud British participant in the process.

Karan Bilimoria holds the February issue of Democracy Asia during his interview with Nicholas Nugent, reflecting on business, politics and the evolving UK–India relationship.

Asked whether he feels more British or Indian, Bilimoria quotes the Indian-born Nobel laureate Amartya Sen: "We all have multiple identities." 'I am Indian, a British Asian, a Zoroastrian Parsi and British – and proud of all of them.' His use of the pronoun 'we' shows the extent to which he has become a patriotic Britisher: 'We are still the sixth largest economy in the world, even after Brexit — a gateway to Europe... because we have always been a free trading nation.' We have phenomenal international universities, the Nobel prize winning tradition of Cambridge University in particular, before adding 'and of course premier league football!'

Nicholas Nugent has reported for the BBC from many Asian countries. His latest book is *The Spice Ports - Mapping the Origins of Global Sea Trade.*

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Tiny magnets, massive power — rare-earth elements sit at the centre of a growing global industrial rivalry between China and the West.

The Elements of Power — or Magnet Wars

Rare-earths appear to be a mining story. In reality, seventeen obscure elements in the periodic table, known as rare-earths, sit at the centre of global industrial rivalry. Technologies ranging from electric vehicles and wind turbines to fighter jets and semiconductor lithography machines are critically dependent on them, as Sham Banerji reports.

At the 2025 G7 summit in Canada, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, held up a rare-earth magnet made in Estonia by a Canadian company using Australian raw materials. The gesture not only captured Europe's push to build new supply chains, but also illustrated how the rare-earth debate has shrunk to the size of a magnet.

China's strategic leverage lies in the factories that turn neodymium (Nd) into powerful permanent magnets. Other important uses of rare-earth elements or REEs include as catalysts, ceramics and glass, metallurgical alloys, batteries and polishing materials. According to the US Geological Survey, China supplies over 90% of the world's processed rare-earths and rare-earth magnets, making them the main chokepoint in trade negotiations. A single F-35 fighter jet contains more than 400 kilograms of rare-earth materials, mostly in permanent-magnet systems such as radar and actuators. It is really a story about magnets.

The attraction of magnets

Ordinary iron magnets are useful, but far too weak and unstable. Precision manufacturing for advanced technologies requires magnets that are small, powerful and able to work reliably at temperatures of 150–200°C. That

requirement is met by Nd–Fe–B magnets. Made from neodymium, iron and boron, they are the strongest permanent magnets known, making them vital for the green economy and advanced defence systems.

They are also critical in semiconductor manufacturing. An extreme ultraviolet (EUV) lithography machine relies on powerful magnets to drive precision linear motors and magnetically levitated platforms that position silicon wafers with precise nanometre accuracy.

In practice, the geopolitics of rare-earths revolves around just four elements: neodymium, praseodymium, dysprosium and terbium. The International Energy Agency (IEA) tracks these four elements separately because they are the ones most critical for manufacturing NdFeB magnets. Magnets weighing only a few hundred grams can determine whether industries worth billions continue to function.

Mother Lode

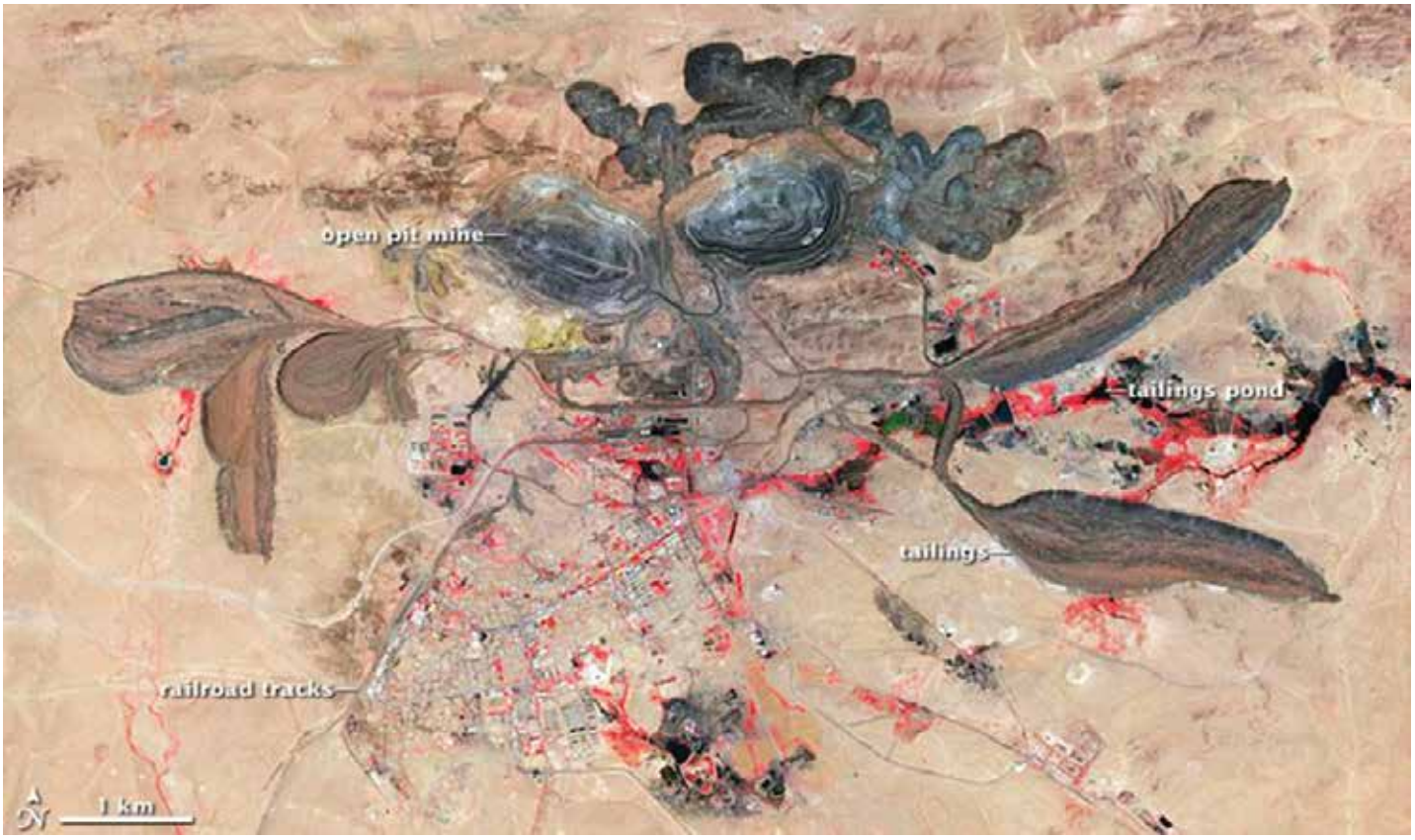
Bayan Obo in China is widely regarded as the largest rare earth deposit and production site in the world. While China holds roughly half of global rare-earth reserves, its real power lies further down the supply chain. China dominates rare-earth processing accounting for about 85–90% of global refining capacity. Even if they are mined elsewhere, rare-earths often need to be sent to China for the specialised chemical processes required to make them usable.

America has not always trailed China in rare-earths. From 1965 to the mid-1980s, Mountain Pass mine in California was the dominant global supplier and the US was largely self-sufficient in rare-earth elements. China overtook the US in rare-earth production in the early 1990s. This was the result of decades of strategic planning, relaxed environmental regulations and a focus on the more complex downstream steps of separation, refining and magnet-making.

China wielded its rare-earth leverage as early as 2010. It cut export quotas by 40% and briefly halted shipments to Japan during a territorial dispute. It had to back down in 2015 after losing the WTO case brought by the US, the EU and Japan. The net impact was a collapse in prices that crippled other producers, causing some like America's Molycorp to go bankrupt.

Land Mines

Amid escalating U.S. technology sanctions and tariffs, China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) introduced new export-control rules in October 2025. Certain foreign-made products containing even 0.1% Chinese-origin controlled rare-earth content by value could require a Chinese licence. Potentially, this grants China extraterritorial control over global supply chains. The Economist notes that China's grip on



Bayan Obo Rare Earth Mines in Inner Mongolia Photo: NASA Earth Observatory

rare-earths is not primarily geological or technological; it rests on the sheer scale and efficiency of its industrial ecosystem. But it warns that 'Xi Jinping's weaponisation of rare-earth elements will ultimately backfire. Here's why.

Washington is aggressively rebuilding its position. With a direct $400 million investment in MP Materials, the Department of Defence is on a path to reviving Mountain Pass as the largest rare-earth mining operation outside China. In February 2026, MP Materials announced Northlake, Texas as its new 10X rare-earth magnet manufacturing campus, backed by more than $1.25 billion in investment. The Pentagon's Department of War specifically describes its rare-earth ambition as a 'mine-to-magnet' supply chain, stretching from extraction and separation to magnet production.

Between Beijing and Washington, the unresolved rare-earth dispute remains stuck in a state of adversarial interdependence. Magnets and chips are bound to rank high on the agenda when the two presidents meet.

The Global Dig — or Race to the Bottom

The *Financial Times* reports that other rare-earth customers are rushing to diversify away from Chinese suppliers, with more than 30 advanced projects expected to begin production globally within the next five years across Europe, Africa and Australia. Brazil's Serra Verde has become a favoured rare earth hopeful, securing a $565 million US financing package in 2026, complete with an option for Washington to take a stake.

India, meanwhile, is moving from rhetoric to state-backed industrial policy. The Indian cabinet approved an $800 million programme in 2025 to establish an integrated permanent-magnet capacity, with production expected to begin by the end of 2026. Japan marked its first import of rare-earths from Australia's Lynas in 2025, separated and refined in Malaysia.

Still, outside China, no single country possesses all the ingredients needed to build a fully independent rare-earth supply chain on an industrial scale. The emerging strategy is clear: combine domestic investment with international partnerships, linking mines, refineries and magnet plants with alliances.

For now, the United States dominates the technology of semiconductors. But China commands the chemistry of rare-earths.

Some images in this article are AI generated

Sham Banerji is a veteran of the semiconductor industry having spent three decades working with Texas Instruments and Philips in the UK, USA and India.

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Iran

International crude oil and natural gas prices surged sharply after Iran – as a tactical response to Israel and the United States' military attacks – choked the movement of non-Iranian vessels through the Strait of Hormuz.

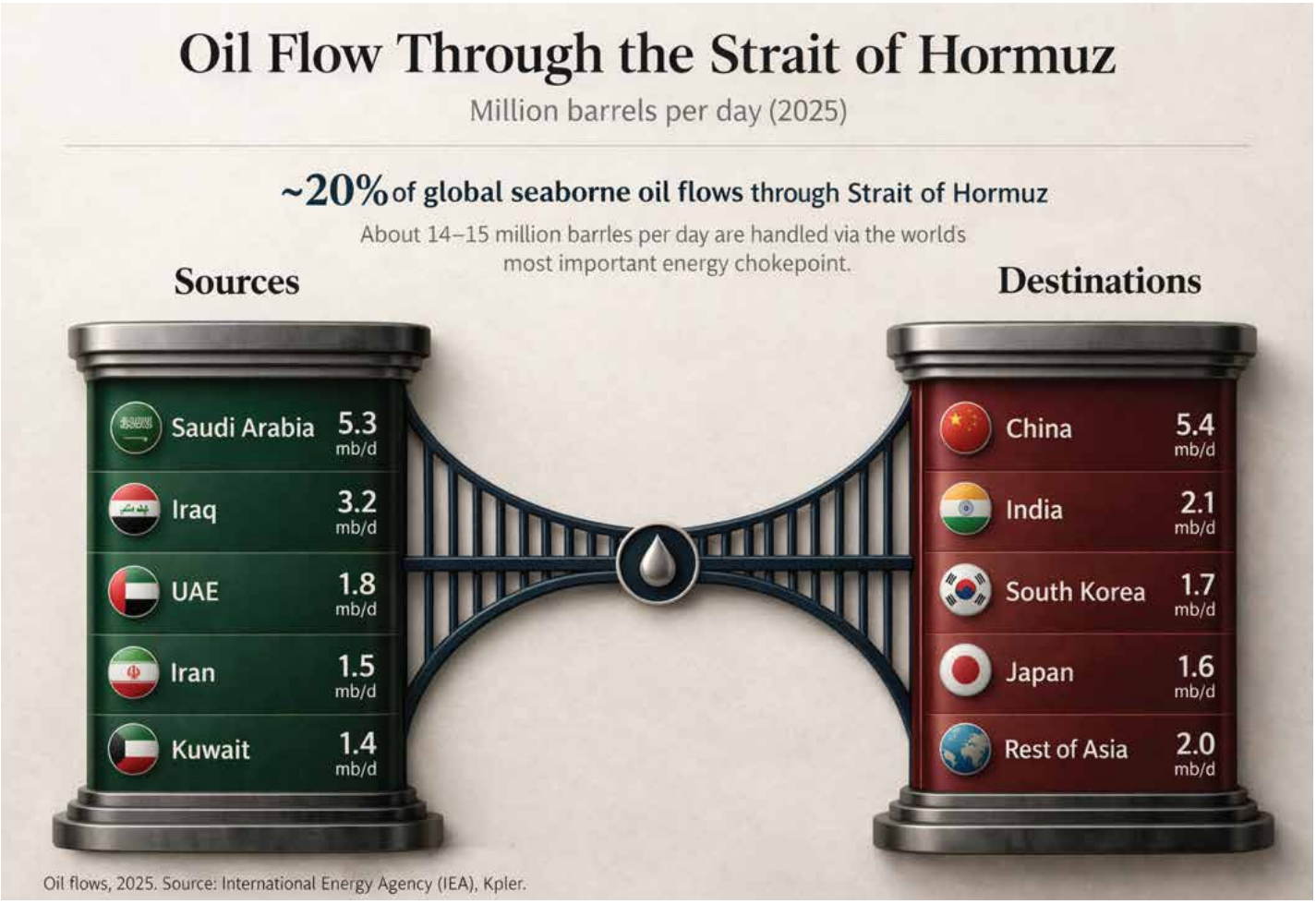
The International Energy Agency (IEA) estimated that in 2025 around 20 million barrels of crude oil and related products passed through the 100-mile stretch of water daily, equal to about 25 percent of the world's seaborne oil traffic.

The IEA also calculated that about 19 percent of global liquefied natural gas (LNG) is shipped through this waterway. Revenues of major exporters, such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar were thus significantly affected. The latter, the world's second-largest exporter of LNG, announced a production halt at its 77 million tons per annum facility and declared force majeure on shipments.

Countries dependent on energy from overseas, especially Asian nations east of the Gulf, such as India, the world's third largest importer – were not only burdened by a steep hike in prices but confronted by a potential short-term shortage, especially of LNG.

Iran, while being ceaselessly pounded by bombs, missiles and drones, continued to fulfil its commitments until its gas field in South Pars, one of the world's largest, was struck by Israel. Neighbouring Iraq, which depended on supplies from the field, was the immediate sufferer. Iran retaliated for the damage to South Pars by hitting an industrial site in Ras Laffan in Qatar.

Iranian oil flows were mainly directed towards China – the world's biggest importer. According to trade data analyst Kpler, it was continuing to receive 1.25 million barrels a day. China pressed Iran not to disrupt energy movement through the Strait of Hormuz. Beijing had already turned to Moscow to replace shipments from Venezuela, stopped since the ouster of its president Nicolas Maduro in a commando



operation ordered by US President Donald Trump in January.

One of the consequences of the blitz on Iran was food prices fast approaching a level where poorer families were finding consumption unaffordable. Iranian media quoted bakers and grocers as saying advance payments made by wealthy customers were enabling them to extend credits to others for bread and meat. Meanwhile, a flight of capital from Iran accelerated. Central Bank of Iran figures suggested more money left the country than entered it from its trade surplus.

The run-up to Nowruz, the Persian New Year holiday, on 20 March usually sees an economic bustle in Iran with the buying of presents, new clothes and widespread festivities. This year, with Iranians fearing to venture out of their homes because of the Israeli and US bombardment, retail came to a standstill, thereby delivering another blow to Iran's fiscal well-being.

Gulf Cooperation Council

The Qatar-based television news network *Al Jazeera* quoted an associate professor of politics and international relations at Zayed University in Dubai, Khaled Almezaini, as saying, 'Disruptions to aviation, tourism, shipping routes and energy exports combined with higher insurance premiums and freight costs mean the region is likely losing hundreds of millions of dollars per day in economic activity.'

Despite aggressive diversification in recent decades, a large proportion of the GDPs of GCC member countries Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman are founded on oil and gas production. All have faced a barrage of retaliatory drones and missiles from Iran, which have caused destruction in varying degrees. The first three are particularly exposed to Iran choking off the Strait of Hormuz.

The short-term impact of Shia Iran hitting out at Sunni Arab states is a throttling of their vital energy exports. In the medium term, foreigners from the world over who have been attracted to the area as an investment destination, a business hub, a place of residence (perhaps to escape paying taxes in their countries of origin) or a sandy riviera may now think twice about its charm and safety. An analyst from the UAE at an

International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) seminar in London felt maintaining US military bases on their territories could be up for review as a long-term peace formula with Iran. That would demand mutual trust, which has presently plummeted.

Malaysia

Some Southeast Asian destinations are feeling the pinch of air flight cancellations and rising prices because of the war in West Asia. But others, such as Malaysia, may be better positioned to weather the storm, even capitalise on it.

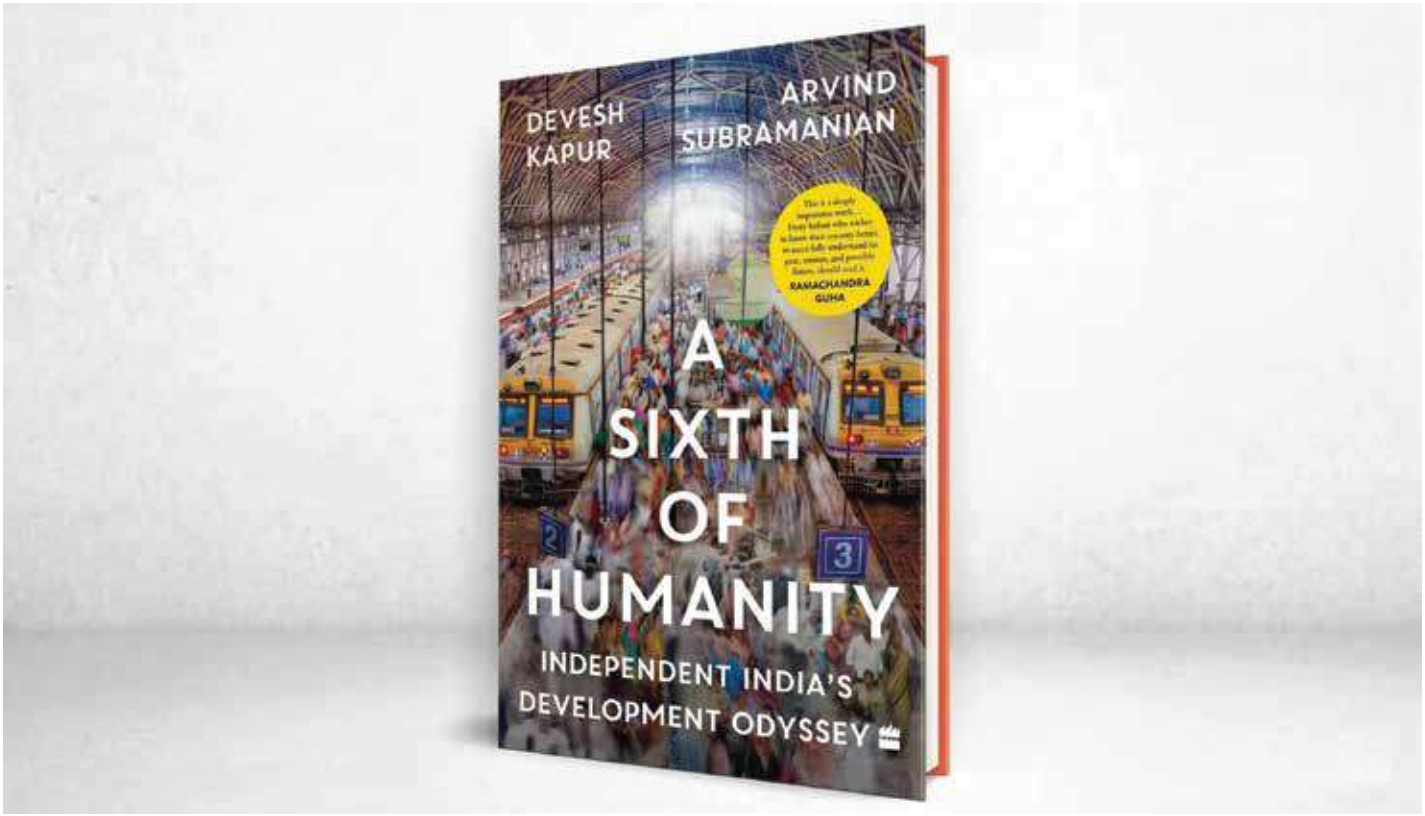
Thailand and Indonesia – including the much sought-after resort of Bali – have been among the most vulnerable to the shock. European visitors to these countries preferred to shy away because of longer flights triggered by planes having to avoid the airspace of the conflict zone.

Signage at a gas station in Kyodo Japan reads 'Sorry, out of gasoline because of Trump'. Photo: Kyodo News

But Malaysia is different. European tourists, who account for only 15% of its trade, stay longer and spend more. Yet, this could be offset by strong demand from East Asia, India and ASEAN countries. 'We are in a sweet spot at the moment, very much like Singapore,' Nigel Wong, president of the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents, told the Singaporean news channel *CNA*.

Japan

The crude oil crunch compelled the Japanese government to roll out gasoline subsidies, after forecourt prices reached an unprecedented high. *Japan Times* reported that snack maker Yamayoshi Seika had stopped producing six of its items, notably its flagship Wasabeef potato chips, because manufacturing these required heavy oil usage and oil was in short supply.



The book *A Sixth of Humanity: Independent India's Development Odyssey* examines how India's politics and economics evolved together over seventy-five years of independence. Publisher: HarperCollins India

A Sixth of Humanity: Independent India's Development Odyssey by Devesh Kapur and Arvind Subramanian

India is often narrated as two separate stories that only occasionally touch: those of the world's largest democracy and of a developing economy still trying to provide prosperity on a continental scale. *A Sixth of Humanity* rejects that separation and argues instead that India's politics and economics have never been parallel tracks; they are one braided history, each strand tightening or loosening the other, and the knot they form is what the authors want us to see. Rahul Jaywant Bhise has been reading this weighty book.

Devesh Kapur (a political scientist) and Arvind Subramanian (an economist and former chief economic adviser to the Indian government) take on an old ambition with an unusually disciplined method: to explain seventy-five years of India as a single developmental experiment carried out under extreme constraints: mass poverty at Independence, radical social diversity and universal adult franchise from day one.

The book's core claim arrives early and echoes throughout: India has been 'precocious' – attempting tasks 'ahead of their time', in an order that defied the familiar scripts of development: democracy before development; services before manufacturing; globalisation that rewarded the mobile and educated before the poor had ladders to climb; laws and rights promised faster than administrative capacity could deliver them.

'Precocious' is not used here as praise or scolding; it is the authors' way of making timing itself into an explanatory variable. In their telling, chronology becomes causality: doing the 'right' things in an unusual order can produce achievements no model predicts – and frictions no model easily resolves.

The sheer scale of *A Sixth of Humanity* – around 760 pages – signals that this is not a quick

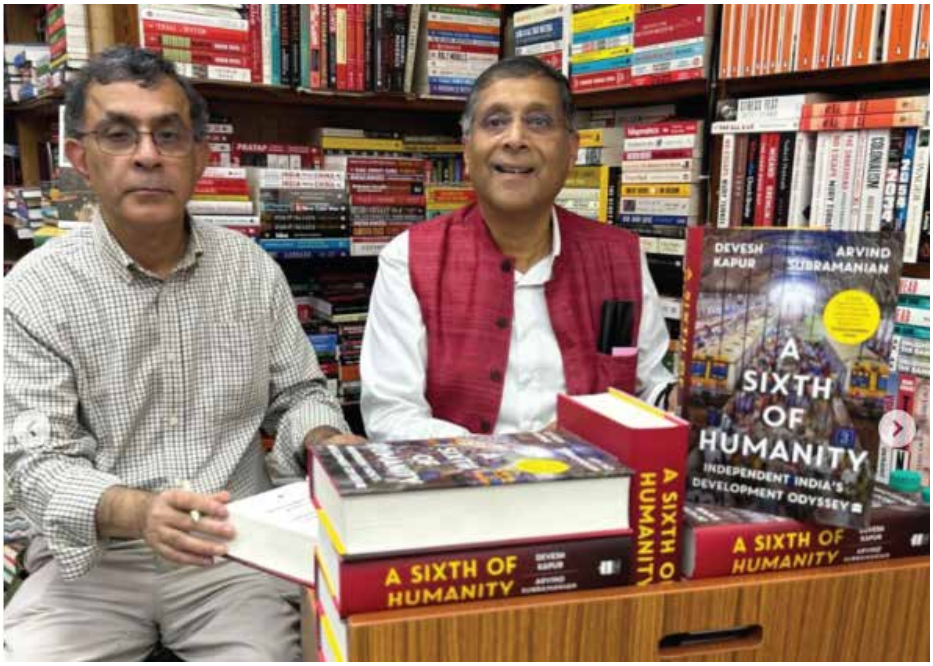
argument, it is an attempt at synthesis: politics, economic policy, state capacity, social transformation, nation-building, and the often-overlooked machinery of Indian federalism.

India, uniquely, attempted four concurrent transformations – building a state, creating an economy, changing society, forging a sense of nationhood – under universal suffrage. The book keeps returning to this fourfold frame, not as a slogan but as a discipline: any claim about markets must be reconciled with the pressures of democracy; any claim about national unity must be reconciled with the realities of caste, patriarchy, region, language.

Methodologically, the authors place unusual weight on the state's own paper trail – thousands of official reports and policy documents, read as artifacts of how India's policy-makers understood the problems of their time. That archival seriousness gives the narrative a particular texture: it is not only a story of what India became, but of what it *thought it was trying to become* at different moments.

And yet the book is not written like an archive. Its stance is closer to a long walk than a lecture: sweeping in horizon, but attentive to the stubborn details that keep tripping big theories.

The book refuses to romanticise the post-Independence decades which, the authors argue, were marked by sluggish growth, persistent poverty and limited structural transformation – particularly the failure to move labour at scale from agriculture to productive industry. They try not to judge the 1950s and 60s by the moral confidence of hindsight. Scarcity was real; national fragility was real; and the instinct to build a public-sector-led economy was, in context, understandable.



Political scientist Devesh Kapur and economist Arvind Subramanian bring together policy history, economics and political analysis. Photo: Midland the Bookshop

But they also argue that India's version of planning was distinct in a damaging way: it not only sheltered domestic industry from foreign competition; it constrained India's own private sector through a dense lattice of permissions and controls – the infamous Licence Raj – which stunted entrepreneurship and created fertile ground for corruption.

Democracy as a constraint

If 'precociousness' is the book's master concept, democracy is its most complicated character. Kapur and Subramanian treat Indian democracy as a developmental instrument, not merely a constitutional ornament. Democracy, in their framing, was central to nation-building: it offered a way to forge political belonging in a society divided vertically by caste and gender and horizontally by language, region and religion.

The book insists that sustaining electoral democracy and 'a modicum of order' at India's scale – especially through poverty – counts as a major achievement in itself. This is an argument about what success looks like when your unit of analysis is not a city-state or a small nation, but one-sixth of humanity.

And then comes the book's second move: democracy also exacted economic costs. Leaders could not rely on coercive tools used elsewhere; land reform never became transformative; electoral pressures favoured visible welfare spending over slow-burn investments in public goods like learning and public health. Subramanian describes democracy as something that 'gives and takes'.

The book does not try to resolve this tension into a verdict. It keeps it alive. It asks the reader to inhabit the contradiction: democracy is both India's great adhesive and one reason the state struggled to become a high-capacity developmental machine.

The book's signature argument about India's economic structure is sharper: India's growth has been unusually tilted. It found global

success in high-skilled services, while failing to generate enough low-skill, productive manufacturing jobs for the vast majority of its workforce.

even as some regions have demonstrated striking dynamism after liberalisation – evidence that states can be engines of both stagnation and transformation.

designed policies, citizens live inside the clutter.

That emphasis – exit as discipline, not just entry as ambition – may be the book's most quietly original contribution to how we talk about governance.

India's Parliament reflects the book's central argument that democracy came early in the country's development journey, shaping policy choices and state capacity. Photo: Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs (GODL-India)

India climbed – yet the ladder often lacked middle rungs.
One of the book's most useful reorientations is its insistence on looking away from Delhi. The authors emphasise that many of the sectors that determine daily well-being – health, education, agriculture, law and order, electricity – sit constitutionally with state governments. If development is lived locally, then development must be explained locally.

Their portrait of Indian federalism is not romantic. Accountability failures and corruption are often worse at the state level, they argue,

Here the book becomes something rarer than a national economic history: it becomes a map of unevenness, a reminder that 'India' is frequently shorthand for a set of divergent political economies loosely bound by a common constitution.

A Sixth of Humanity is not only a history of what India *built*. It is also a history of what India could not easily stop building, regulate down or simplify. The 'exit problem' turns out to be an institutional explanation with moral consequences: when governments cannot exit badly

What lingers?
In the end, the great achievement of *A Sixth of Humanity* is not that it tells India as a new story; rather it persuades you that India is not one story at all, but a set of simultaneous stories forced to cohere.

Its most lasting question is less 'Why didn't India become China?' but more unsettlingly 'What does development mean when democracy arrives first, when society changes unevenly, when markets expand before the state can regulate fairly, and when nationhood must contain rather than homogenise?'

The book's title is not metaphorical; it is arithmetical. If one-sixth of humanity succeeds, or fails, the consequences do not remain Indian. The authors' deeper wager is that to understand those consequences, we must stop treating politics and economics as separate shelves.

India's development, in their telling, is not a march it is an odyssey: movement without guarantee, progress without linearity, and a destination that keeps changing shape as the traveller grows.

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

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