

The Xi-Trump summit

---

How the Taliban govern Afghanistan

---

The Mecca defence alliance

---

# Democracy Asia

October 2026

# Nepal

a nation defined by its  
*mountains & rivers*





**Remitly**<sup>TM</sup>

# Nothing beats Nani's naan

Stay close, even when you're far apart.

One easy app to send money home



Remitly U.K., Ltd. is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (Firm Reference No. 728639).



A disaster in Nepal's Himalayas has raised questions about the future of the region's hydropower ambitions.

As glaciers retreat, permafrost thaws and extreme mountain events become harder to predict, billions of dollars are being invested in infrastructure designed to operate for decades. Rivers that promise clean energy and export revenues also carry risks that could threaten the projects built to harness them.

The stakes extend beyond governments and developers. Insurers, banks, investors and ordinary citizens are increasingly exposed to the costs when mountain risk becomes financial risk.

## Nepal

- 6 The hidden cost of Himalayan hydropower

## China-US

- 10 Trump-Xi summit: The 'reasonable' men's truce

## Pakistan

- 14 Mecca defence alliance

## Afghanistan

- 17 How do the Taliban govern Afghanistan?

## Iran

- 20 War deepens Iran's economic crisis

## Singapore

- 23 Singapore's baby bust



## North Korea

- 26 Is North Korea now a full participant in Russia's war against Ukraine?



## Indonesia

- 29 Indonesia's Gen Z Problem



## India

- 33 India's media scene appraised



## Business

- 37 Is AI 'going rogue' or just following orders?



- 40 Bisinomics



## Bookshelf

- 44 I Deliver Parcels in Beijing written by Hu Anyan and translated by Jack Hargreaves



### Address:

35 Bow Road, London, England, E3 2AD

### Contact Us:

Email: [info@democracyasia.com](mailto:info@democracyasia.com)  
Web: [www.democracyasia.com](http://www.democracyasia.com)

### Published by:

The Ambassadors World Ltd.

**W**e think of Nepal as a small nation wedged between two much larger ones, which is to underestimate the importance of a nation of 29 million citizens perched ‘on the roof of the world’ which is potentially a major source of natural power. Following the disaster of late August we asked our rivers and water expert Udisha Saklani, who grew up in the Indian Himalayas, to address questions about the enormous investments being made to transform the natural power derived from its mountains and rivers into usable power in the form of electricity.

President Xi Jinping of China has been visiting Washington for talks with President Trump, their third meeting in the past year. It is too early to assess whether the visit leads to an improvement in relations between the two leaders and nations, but what does appear to be the case is that they spent more time talking about AI – over which the US and China are major competitors – than about Taiwan, which used to be the key difference between the two nations.

We look at the newly agreed Mecca alliance between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and what it might mean for the current strife between Saudi and the Houthis. We bring you inside stories

from two nations of whose internal workings we do not hear enough: Iran and Afghanistan. On the subject of wars, we consider the extent to which North Korea has become a participant in Russia’s war against Ukraine, supplying both soldiers and weaponry, artillery shells, missiles and drones.

This month we take a look at Singapore, one of the smallest and most prosperous Asian nations, which faces a difficulty experienced by larger nations, like India, China and Japan, over a falling birth rate. And we look at the impact Gen Z seems to be having on India and Indonesia.

“Asia is being reshaped by a powerful mix of geopolitical rivalry, technological change, conflict and social transformation. This month, we examine Nepal’s ambitions to harness its Himalayan rivers, the evolving US-China relationship and the rise of AI, new regional alliances and conflicts, the changing face of Asian societies, and the growing influence of a new generation.”

A business special considers whether we should be worried when AI-driven robots ‘go rogue’ and whether we can do anything about it. That’s a despairing thought though an important one given how rapidly AI systems have risen to the top of the agenda of international relations, as our look at the Washington summit reminds us.

Finally, the bookshelf looks at an aspect of life in China today. As in other countries, the delivery driver has become an important role helping determine how efficiently the economy operates. Lijia Zhang brings us one delivery driver’s story.

Nicholas Nugent

## India: Tata succession battle heads to court

The disarray at the top of the Tata group reported in our September issue has turned into a full-blown crisis for India's largest and most respected conglomerate, following a confrontational board meeting of Tata Sons on 17 September. An attempt by Noel Tata, chairman of the Tata Trusts that own a controlling 66 per cent interest in Tata Sons, to assert family control over the group was seriously undermined, and a battle between Noel and Tata Sons chairman N. Chandrasekaran now looks headed for the courts. At the meeting, Chandrasekaran – who had announced only weeks earlier that he would retire at the end of his term in February 2027 – used his casting vote as chairman to back his own reappointment for a third five-year term, opposed only by Noel, who is considering legal action. Also at stake is a Reserve Bank of India ruling requiring Tata Sons to list on the stock market, a move Chandrasekaran favours and Noel opposes.

## Afghanistan/Pakistan: border war flares again

Pakistan struck what it called militant camps in Afghanistan's Kunar and Paktika provinces on 21 September, killing three people. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid accused Islamabad of bombing civilian areas; Pakistan said it had hit militant hideouts and training camps along the border. The exchange is the latest flare-up in a conflict that has run since a ceasefire collapsed in February, with hundreds killed on both sides amid Islamabad's accusations that Kabul is

sheltering the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan insurgency.

## Japan: Takaichi reshuffles cabinet, tightens grip

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi reshuffled her cabinet on 17 September, retaining her core team – including finance minister Satsuki Katayama, foreign minister Toshimitsu Motegi and defence minister Shinjiro Koizumi – while bringing her junior coalition partner, the Japan Innovation Party, into government for the first time. The move consolidates her position nearly a year into a premiership that began with a historic landslide election victory.

## Iran: a rare win at the IAEA

Iran secured a seat on the organising committee of the International Atomic Energy Agency's general conference in Vienna on 17 September, over American objections, even as the agency's talks with Tehran remained deadlocked. The win came as Mohammad Eslami, head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, was barred from attending after Washington blocked a waiver to his travel ban, citing Iran's lack of 'meaningful cooperation on nuclear safeguards'. The IAEA has been unable to inspect Iranian nuclear sites hit by US and Israeli strikes in June 2025, and says Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched to 60 per cent purity remains unverified.

## Taiwan: Beijing raises the pressure ahead of the summit

Taiwan's defence ministry reported a sharp rise in Chinese military activity on 18 September, detecting 103 Chinese military aircraft near the

island within 24 hours – a 'recent high' – and urged Beijing to stop 'destructive, unilateral action'. The activity comes as President Xi Jinping prepared to travel to Washington for his 24 September meeting with President Trump, with Taiwan expected to remain a central point of friction between the two powers regardless of the summit's outcome.

## Sri Lanka: Easter bombings verdict, six years on

Colombo's High Court has convicted 15 of the 24 men accused over the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, which killed 279 people, including 45 foreigners, and injured more than 500. The verdict, delivered this week, closes one of the longest-running prosecutions in Sri Lankan history.

## Vietnam: markets graduate, growth accelerates

Vietnam's stock market was upgraded from 'frontier' to 'secondary emerging market' status by FTSE Russell on 21 September, a reclassification to be phased in over four stages through September 2027. The move coincides with a McKinsey review showing Vietnam and Malaysia pulling ahead of regional peers on technology-driven exports, with Vietnam's economy growing 8.39 per cent year on year in the second quarter, even as Thailand and the Philippines lose momentum amid weaker domestic demand.



The Upper Tamakoshi Hydropower Project in Dolakha, Nepal, reflects the Himalayan region's vast hydropower potential and the risks of building infrastructure in its rugged terrain. Photo: Upper Tamakoshi Hydropower Project

## The hidden cost of Himalayan hydropower

On 26 August, a glacier and the bedrock beneath it collapsed high in Nepal's Rasuwa district, home to the Langtang valley. The resulting mass of ice, rock and debris swept through the valleys below, destroying settlements, roads, bridges and hydropower infrastructure. More than 8,000 people in Nepal and Tibet are reported dead or missing. At least 13 hydropower projects were affected with rescue teams still searching for workers believed to be trapped inside project tunnels. Udisha Saklani reports.

**T**here are important questions about what caused the collapse and how far climate change contributed to the event. Scientists have pointed to warming, glacier retreat and thawing permafrost as possible, although the precise causes will take longer to establish.

But the disaster raises another question. As Nepal and its

Himalayan neighbours invest billions of dollars in hydropower, are they fully accounting for the risks of building infrastructure designed to last decades in a changing mountain environment?

For Nepal, the stakes are considerable. The government plans to increase electricity-generating capacity

from around 3,500 megawatts in 2025 to 28,500 MW by 2035. It expects 15,000 MW eventually to be exported, principally to India and Bangladesh. Meeting the target is estimated to require another US \$46.5 billion in investment.

Bhutan has similarly ambitious plans. Its 2025 National Energy Policy targets



The Rasuwa disaster exposed the vulnerability of hydropower infrastructure to extreme mountain hazards. Photo: Hemanta Shrestha/TKP

20,000 MW of installed hydropower plus 5000 MW of solar power by 2040, up from around 3,500 MW at present. The policy also opens the sector further to private and foreign investment.

The attraction is easy to understand. Mountain rivers offer large quantities of low-carbon electricity, while power exports can generate revenue for relatively small economies. Yet the same plans depend on projects operating and producing returns over several decades. The economics therefore rest partly on what happens to those projects over the next 30, 40 or 50 years.

### **The growing bill for hydropower**

Rasuwa is not the first time that an extreme mountain event has collided with Himalayan hydropower. In February 2021, around 27 million cubic metres of rock and glacier ice collapsed from

Ronti Peak in Uttarakhand, northern India. The resulting debris flow killed or left missing more than 200 people and severely damaged two hydropower projects. In October 2023, a glacial lake outburst flood in the north-eastern Indian state of Sikkim swept down the Teesta valley and destroyed the 1,200 MW Teesta III hydropower project.

The events in Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Rasuwa had different causes. Mountain hazards can involve earthquakes, intense rainfall, landslides, unstable rock and ice, glacial lakes and avalanches, sometimes in combination. Climate change adds further uncertainty to this already dynamic environment. The International Centre for



The Upper Marsyangdi-A Hydropower Project in Bhulbhule, Lamjung, highlights the long-term challenge of building infrastructure to withstand an increasingly unpredictable Himalayan environment. Photo: Global Carbon Council (GCC)

Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) has found that glaciers across the Hindu Kush Himalaya disappeared 65 per cent faster between 2011 and 2020 than in the previous decade. It describes changes to the region's glaciers, snow and permafrost as unprecedented and largely irreversible over human timescales.

These conditions have direct implications for hydropower. The same geography that makes Himalayan rivers attractive for electricity generation also produces some of the risks to the infrastructure built to harness them.

For hydropower developers, these risks eventually enter a balance sheet. The financial calculations behind a

hydropower project stretch decades into the future. They include assumptions about river flows and extreme events, construction and maintenance costs, the lifespan of infrastructure and the electricity revenues it will generate. Banks lend against these expectations, investors assess the returns and insurers put a price on the possibility of damage.

Nepal's recent experience suggests that infrastructure damage is already a repeated feature of the sector. Floods and landslides affected 26 hydropower projects in 2021, another 30 projects in 2023 and 26 facilities in 2024. The scale of the Rasuwa disaster has made the financial consequences unusually visible.

Commercial insurance losses from the disaster are expected to exceed 20 billion Nepali rupees, or US \$130 million, before claims relating to deaths, injuries and workers' compensation are included. Much of the exposure comes from damaged hydropower projects. Overall economic losses have been estimated at more than US \$2.56 billion.

Those costs may also affect future projects. Nepali insurers pass much of their exposure from large hydropower projects to reinsurers, including international firms. Following the disaster, industry representatives have warned that reinsurers may tighten coverage, impose higher premiums and become more selective about the risks they are willing to cover. Hydropower



A drone view of the aftermath of flash flooding along the Trishuli River in Nuwakot, Nepal, highlighting the extreme hazards facing infrastructure in the Himalayan region. Photo: Rajesh Kumar Singh/AP Photo



Investors monitor share prices at a broker's office in Kathmandu, reflecting the growing financial exposure to Nepal's expanding hydropower sector. Photo: File/TKP

could consequently become more expensive to insure even where no project has been damaged.

#### **Who carries the risk?**

In Nepal, this question reaches beyond governments, banks and large companies because ordinary citizens have also become investors in hydropower.

Chilime Hydropower, one of the projects affected in the August disaster, pioneered a model through which project-affected communities and the wider public could buy shares in hydropower companies. The model subsequently spread across the country, drawing households into the financial fortunes of the sector.

The Rasuwa disaster exposed the other side of that relationship. On 26 August, Nepal's hydropower sub-index fell sharply, alongside insurance stocks, as investors assessed the damage. The sell-off subsequently extended beyond companies whose projects had been directly affected.

A disaster can therefore travel financially well beyond the damaged project. Losses can pass through developers, lenders, insurers and reinsurers, eventually reaching governments, electricity consumers and individual shareholders. How those risks are priced and distributed will become

increasingly important as the sector grows.

Bhutan shows how governments are beginning to respond. Its 2025 National Energy Policy places greater emphasis on climate resilience, while revised hydropower planning and dam-safety guidelines incorporate catchment-wide risk and geohazard management. But the scale of planned development across the Himalayas means resilience cannot be confined to making individual projects safer. It also requires asking where projects are built, how risks accumulate across river basins and how those risks are reflected in the economics of hydropower.

For decades, Himalayan rivers have been described in terms of their enormous hydropower potential: the electricity that can be generated, investment mobilised and power traded across borders. But hydropower potential comes with risk, and somebody has to carry it.

As billions of dollars flow into Himalayan hydropower, governments, investors and insurers will have to decide how much mountain risk they are prepared to carry, what they are willing to pay for it and where the costs will fall if that risk materialises.

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



Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Donald Trump meet in Washington as the two sides seek to manage strategic competition while easing immediate tensions. Photo: AP

## Trump-Xi summit: The 'reasonable' men's truce

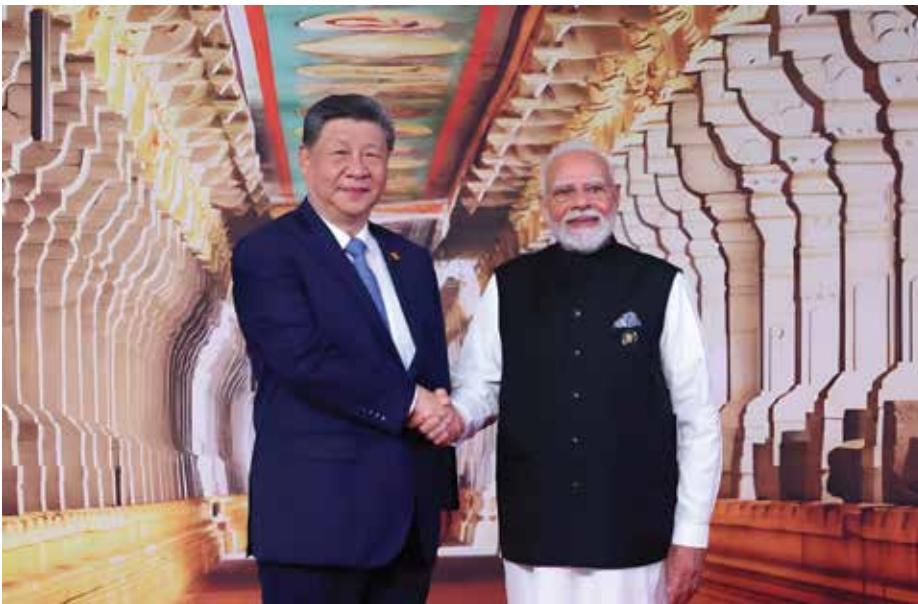
Chinese President Xi Jinping's return visit to Washington brought warmer words and managed expectations. Beneath the bonhomie, China and the United States were testing whether they could compete without allowing every quarrel to become a crisis, as Howard Zhang reports.

**D**ays before Xi Jinping set foot on US soil, Donald Trump offered the clearest explanation of US-China relations. On his way back from Ireland on Air Force One, a reporter asked whether Chinese entities had supplied Iran with satellite images of American airbases. Trump offered an indirect answer: 'I think he's behaved reasonably well, and we've behaved

reasonably well,' he said of Xi. 'They say that China spies on us. You're right. And we spy on them too.'

Asked moments later whether Chinese cars would ever enter the United States, he shifted tone. 'I'm the one that kept them out. The tariffs kept them out. I have 100 per cent tariffs on them.' With that, he excused himself. He said had

only come out to check that the reporters were happy with the music! It was pure Trump – cheerful, disconcerting, more revealing than weeks of summit preparation and official pressers. His answers suggested more than tactical accommodation: that he and Xi had reached a working understanding about managing their strategic rivalry. America appeared



Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meet in Delhi, as the two countries seek to manage longstanding differences while keeping diplomatic and economic ties open. Photo: Reuters

willing to live with a powerful but 'reasonable' China, though the terms of that reasonableness remained opaque.

This search for 'reasonableness' seemed to be part of a wider trend. Across the Indo-Pacific and beyond, other great powers were testing whether they could compete without every disagreement becoming a quarrel.

### The Delhi precedent

The pattern had already become visible in Delhi. Xi and Modi met during the BRICS summit, Xi's first visit to India in seven years. Both leaders spoke of approaching their relationship from a 'strategic and long-term perspective.' Differences should not become disputes. They described each other as partners rather than rivals, opportunities rather than threats.

Everyone knows the substance beneath Sino-Indian mistrust: the unresolved border, India's trade deficit, Beijing's support for Pakistan, questions about Tibet, the anxieties on both sides about military alignment. None of that shifted an inch. But

the two countries agreed to something modest and durable: to stop feeding every disagreement into every other corner of the relationship. Border talks could continue on one track; flights, trade, visas,

and diplomatic exchanges on another. The heaviest luggage stayed at the hotel.

Chinese official media obeyed this new mood with discipline. Nationalist India-bashing largely disappeared. In Beijing, nationalism is an on-demand property, tightly controlled by the one-party state. India's relatively free press provided a contrast. Scepticism and criticism continued. Some voices called Modi's approach 'surrender'; others seized on Xi's absence from the gala dinner, his early departure, the whispers about his health.

### The larger stage

Washington offered a larger stage and higher stakes for the same framework. Xi's visit completed the exchange begun when Trump travelled to Beijing in May. That engagement



Taiwan Strait, a key flashpoint in US-China relations and a central point of tension in the two countries' strategic rivalry. Map: Insights IAS

produced magnificent choreography, and little substantive breakthrough. The latest meeting had more of the same.

In public, both sides tried to avoid contentious issues. Xi mentioned Taiwan briefly, while Trump touched on AI without elaboration. There was no word on human rights. The concrete outcome were modest: Treasury Secretary Bessent's two-month extension of the trade truce. What had each leader done to earn the other's certificate of reasonable behaviour?

The answer lay not in grand bargains but reciprocal restraint. China facilitated certain critical-mineral exports, resumed commercial purchases, and moderated its official rhetoric toward Washington. It maintained relationships with

Russia and Iran while avoiding actions dramatic enough to force direct confrontation. The United States stepped carefully too. Trump repeatedly defended his relationship with Xi and resisted transforming allegations of Chinese misconduct into presidential quarrels. His administration discussed targeted tariff reductions while postponing the most disruptive measures hawks had demanded.

Taiwan remained a key test. A Japanese report claimed Beijing had threatened to cancel the visit if Trump approved fresh arms sales to Taiwan. It fit precisely within the pattern both sides seemed to be constructing. During Trump's May visit to Beijing, Xi had pressed him directly: 'Would you defend Taiwan?'

Trump said he refused to answer. By appearing willing to delay an arms package in the lead-up to Washington, Trump gave Chinese officials reason to believe their pressure was registering.

Iran provided another window into this emerging framework. Beijing offered Trump no public commitment to abandon Tehran. Yet Trump's response to the satellite-imagery allegation – acknowledging Chinese espionage while framing it as a mutual pastime – suggested he distinguished between activities by Chinese entities and conduct for which he held Xi personally responsible. 'He's behaved reasonably well,' seemed to mean China pursued its interests without directly attacking American forces or humiliating the president.



US and Chinese officials meet at the White House as Washington and Beijing seek to manage strategic competition while keeping tensions from escalating. Photo: Reuters



Donald Trump and Xi Jinping seek to maintain dialogue and manage competition without resolving the deeper strategic differences between the United States and China. Photo: Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

### Breathing space

This framework served both governments, though for different reasons. Trump faced costly overseas commitments, inflationary pressures, and November midterm elections. A renewed trade war with China would roil markets and raise prices. For Xi, the pressures ran deeper. China's economic model had stalled. With weak domestic consumption and tighter capital controls, Beijing could not rely on stimulus alone. The state poured resources into semiconductors and artificial intelligence. Diplomacy protected foreign markets. With exports indispensable, detente bought time.

Xi appears keen to steady relations with both Washington and Delhi. Yet Beijing has not abandoned its ambitions. China's dominance of rare-earth

processing showed how quickly an obscure mineral becomes a critical vulnerability for American industry. Nor has Xi revised the ambitions articulated through successive Party congresses: national rejuvenation, technological self-reliance, military modernization, and deepened Party control over economic life remain central. 'Made in China 2025' continues.

The collision remained visible even as both sides reached for diplomatic language. Days before Xi's arrival, American authorities accused Chinese AI companies of extracting data volumes from Western models through industrial-scale distillation. Beijing accused Washington of weaponizing national security. The quarrel appeared

just as both governments prepared to speak eloquently about stability. Modern summitry required an exceptional straight face.

### The working understanding

What emerged was something less ambitious than a settlement and more durable than a truce: a working understanding about how competition might be conducted. The two-month horizon showed that both sides saw this as breathing room, not resolution.

India offered a cautionary frame. Beijing and Delhi had restored dialogue while remaining strategic competitors with an unresolved border. Washington and Beijing might likewise reduce sudden escalation risks, reopen channels, and conduct business where mutual interest aligned, all without developing trust or resolving underlying competition.

It was Trump's impromptu exchange aboard Air Force One that captured this order faithfully. China would spy on America. America would spy back. Chinese cars faced a hundred per cent tariff. The presidents would meet, make deals where deals could be made. Reasonableness required only that both sides kept the other's interests in view when making their moves, and that neither treated every quarrel as rehearsal for war. In that light, the music, for the moment, seemed all right.

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



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif after signing the trilateral defence agreement in Mecca, marking a new chapter in regional security cooperation.  
Photo: Reuters

## Mecca defence alliance

With the Iran war dragging into its sixth month with no exit in sight, the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey gathered in Mecca on 7 August to sign a trilateral defence agreement. Built on the earlier Saudi–Pakistan defence pact, the Mecca defence alliance marked a shift in the power dynamics of West Asia, as Zahid Hussain reports from Islamabad.

**T**he three countries span the Middle East, South Asia and Eurasia. Though their security challenges differ, they are now bound together by a common defence pact. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were already tied by a bilateral agreement; Turkey's entry broadened the pact's scope, and the collective strength of the three made the grouping a formidable force in the region. The alliance declared that 'any armed attack against any one of the three states shall be regarded as an attack against them all,' while insisting that it

was not directed against any country and served instead as a deterrent against external aggression.

At a follow-up meeting in Istanbul, the participants took their first concrete step by establishing a permanent secretariat to be based in Riyadh. A strategic political committee was formed to operationalise the declaration that an attack on one member is treated as an attack on all three. The meeting adopted a working agenda covering four areas – military interoperability, joint

exercises, defence-industrial cooperation (joint production and research), and counterterrorism coordination – and set out a roadmap for admitting new members.

It would be wrong to brand the bloc an Islamic alliance, or more narrowly a Sunni one. It represents regional security architecture that reduces dependence on the US and pushes back against Israel's expansionist agenda. The treaty signifies security cooperation among middle powers seeking stronger partnerships without



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman welcomes Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Jeddah in April 2022, reflecting the longstanding ties between the two countries that underpin their later defence partnership. Photo: Saudi Royal Court/Handout via Reuters

abandoning strategic autonomy in an emerging multilateralism. The bloc combines

Saudi money, the Turkish military-industrial base and a nuclear-armed Pakistan's vast military experience – a pool of differing strengths that requires neither identical interests nor complete strategic alignment.

The pact took shape as questions were being raised about the

reliability of the US as a defence guarantor for its Middle Eastern partners. Far from ensuring security, the presence of US military bases has made these countries – many of which also have security pacts with Washington – more vulnerable. Lessening that dependence, however, does not mean severing ties with America.

The alliance remained silent, though, on the question of



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is welcomed by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during an official ceremony, reflecting the growing Saudi-Turkey relationship that forms part of the new trilateral security framework. Photo: AA

where the common threat lies – a question all the more pertinent given that the agreement took shape while America's war on Iran dragged on and Israel continued an expansionist war that threatens regional security. Saudi Arabia has been directly affected by the Iran war; Pakistan and Turkey have remained on the fringes. The Mecca Agreement has been likened to NATO's Article 5, but any military response would still require political decision-making, and the immediate practical emphasis falls on intelligence-sharing and deterrence.

The new defence architecture cannot be described as anti-American. All three countries maintain good relations with Washington. Turkey is a NATO member; Saudi Arabia is designated a major non-NATO ally, and this week the US State Department formally approved the accompanying F-35 sale. The White House has affirmed that the US remains Riyadh's 'primary strategic partner'. Not surprisingly, President Trump welcomed the formation of a bloc that does not clash with America's interests in the region – though Washington has issued no formal official response to the alliance.

Yet unanswered questions remain about how the partnership will actually work, given the varied security concerns of its members. While agreeing to a joint defence pact, each country also brought its own conflicts and security problems: Pakistan's principal threat comes from India, while Turkey, has long-running territorial disputes with Greece in the Aegean Sea.

There is also a view that, in practice, the pact is more about Saudi Arabia's immediate security concerns stemming from regional



Officials from Turkey, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia meet in Istanbul as Pakistan deepens defence and strategic ties with key regional partners. Photo: Murad Sezer/Reuters

non-state groups than about Turkey's or Pakistan's. A major question is whether the alliance would come into operation in the event of war with India or conflict with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These are issues that will require a more coherent collective response.

Just weeks after its formation, the alliance faced its first challenge when Yemen's pro-Iranian Houthis carried out a large-scale missile and drone attack on Saudi air bases and oil facilities. The Houthis, who already hold much of Yemen, have seized a strategic island in a lightning offensive against government forces, giving them complete control of Bab el-Mandeb – the key chokepoint through which 12 per cent of the world's trade passes. They also

control the entirety of Yemen's Red Sea coastline, presenting the biggest threat to Saudi Arabia's oil trade.

Saudi Arabia has not formally invoked the Mecca Defence Alliance clause requiring Pakistan and Turkey to come to Riyadh's defence, but consultations are under way as the conflict spreads. Pakistan already has troops and aircraft stationed in Saudi Arabia. In April 2026, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Defence announced that a Pakistani military contingent had arrived at King Abdulaziz Air Base in the Eastern Province, with fighter and support aircraft, under the earlier bilateral joint strategic defence agreement signed in September 2025. A Reuters

report quoting unnamed Pakistani security sources put the deployment at roughly 8,000 troops and 16 aircraft. Another recent report said Pakistani troops had been deployed along the Saudi border with Yemen. Pakistan said it will act when the time comes.

This is an extremely dangerous situation for Pakistan. The widening conflict could draw in a country that has so far kept out of the Iran war and tried to help broker a negotiated end to it. Pakistan's involvement in a conflict that does not affect it directly, and could draw it into a separate conflict with Tehran, would have serious consequences for its political stability and internal security.

Zahid Hussain is an Islamabad-based journalist and author of a forthcoming book *Arc of crisis – After shocks of no-win war*.



Taliban members walk through Kabul airport following the movement's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021.  
Photo: AP

## How do the Taliban govern Afghanistan?

Afghanistan has been mostly off the front pages since the Taliban came to power there just over five years ago after two decades of insurgency. The country is even more 'in the shadow' as regional and international attention shifted firstly to Ukraine and Gaza and now to Iran. Dawood Azami, who was previously based in the Afghan capital Kabul, explains how Taliban rule has changed the country.

**T**he Taliban is a religious and revolutionary movement with a mission centring on the transformation of Afghan society on religious lines, and the establishment of a distinctive Islamic system aligned with their ideological vision. They treat the country as an emirate centralised around the Emir or Amir, or Supreme Leader, who is both a political and religious head.

During its insurgency (2001-2021), the Taliban's supreme leaders ruled through a leadership council or *Rahbari Shura* and deputies who were also key members of the

council. The current Amir, Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, 60, became the group's leader a decade ago, in May 2016. Since the group returned to power in August 2021, Hibatullah Akhundzada has gradually expanded his control and influence over all affairs of the government as well as the Taliban organisation. He has removed the deputies and abolished the leadership council.

Mawlawi Akhundzada sits in the southern city of Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban movement, holding supreme veto

power, and providing ideological framework for governance and usually ruling through decrees. The cabinet, headed by Mullah Muhammad Hasan Akhund, the de facto prime minister, handles day-to-day governance from the capital, Kabul. Mawlawi Akhundzada holds absolute authority over political and military affairs, relying mostly on a circle of like-minded religious scholars around him in Kandahar as well as in Kabul.

Mawlawi Akhundzada controls all branches of both the Taliban administration and organisation



Taliban fighters take control of the Afghan presidential palace in Kabul on 15 August 2021, marking the movement's return to power after two decades of insurgency. Photo: Zabi Karimi/AP

and holds unlimited authority over law enforcement. He makes or approves all the senior and mid-level government appointments ranging from ministers and departmental heads in the capital Kabul to provincial officials including governors and security commanders. Even the agenda for cabinet meetings and developmental projects are approved by his office.

### Clerical rule

The word 'Taliban' (طالبان) is the Pashto plural form of the Arabic word 'talib' which literally translates as 'seeker (of knowledge)'. In the context of Afghanistan and the surrounding region, it has been used historically to describe students enrolled in Islamic religious schools, known as *madrassas*.

The Taliban movement was founded under the slogan of peace, justice and Sharia law in 1994 when various mujahideen commanders were engaged in a bitter factional war and managed to capture Kabul in September 1996. After the toppling of the first Taliban government by the US-led military coalition in 2001, a

number of other Afghans, mainly from rural areas, also joined the group for a variety of reasons, including religious conviction, nationalism (what they saw against a foreign invasion), retribution (for injustices and harms in military operations) and the establishment of general law and order. Leadership of the group remains in the hands of the clerics since the foundation of the movement, but the rank and file also consist of people who are not traditional members.

Religious scholars have considerable influence in the

traditional Afghan society performing religious duties and mediating in conflict resolution among other roles. However, historically, the clerics' role and influence were generally inferior to those of political leaders and tribal elders. This is the first time in recent Afghan history that clerics and the religious class have gained total political power. Most high-ranking officials in the government, both nationally and locally, are clerics who studied religion in *madrassas*.

The Taliban's supreme leader emphasises the importance of the role of religious scholars in both political and social affairs calling them leaders and guides. Speaking in early September 2021, he told a group of *madrassa* administrators in Kandahar that religious scholars were successors of the prophets and their companions and that it was their responsibility to lead, guide and reform society, correct the morals of the people and remove mischief and corruption.

Public criticism of the Amir or his policies is not permitted. Obedience to the Amir's orders by government officials and the public is seen as a religious duty; insubordination and dissent are treated as religious offences. In an increasingly centralised



Taliban leaders attend a ceremony marking the first anniversary of their return to power in Kabul in August 2022, underscoring the movement's consolidation of control over Afghanistan. Photo: Ali Khara/Reuters



**Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's supreme leader, holds ultimate political and religious authority within the movement's system of rule in Afghanistan.**

governance structure, all segments of the organisation and government are accountable to the Amir himself.

### **Power structure**

The Taliban captured power by force and established a one-party system, which has some resemblance to ideological and revolutionary regimes established previously in Afghanistan and elsewhere in Asia and Africa.

Within the Taliban system, the distribution of top government positions is based mainly on three principles: firstly, trust and loyalty; they are careful about allowing outsiders to their inner circle and key decision-making process; and second, role and responsibility (in the insurgency). Having fought for two decades against the US/NATO forces and the Afghan government they backed, almost all current high-ranking officials emerged from that insurgency. And thirdly, reward and award. Many government officials and their family members endured hardship ranging from death and injury by torture, military operations and

detention in prisons in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

### **Governing in the shadows**

Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada hails from a humble background: his father was a *mullah* in a small village mosque in Kandahar. Within the group, he is revered as an accomplished religious scholar and an expert on the Quranic exegesis (*Tafsir*), prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*) and Islamic jurisprudence (*Usul al-Fiqh*), another reason those leaders who have different opinions about certain social and political issues find it hard to challenge him.

Mawlawi Akhundzada also comes from a Sufi background, believing in divine guidance incorporating *Ruya* (true night dreams) and *Istikhara* (prayer for guidance and humble request for Allah to pave the way for what is good and beneficial) into political decision-making. He is an extremely reclusive figure and rarely travels to the capital Kabul and other provinces. He maintains almost no digital footprint, with only one widely

circulated photo, which is decades old.

Audio recordings of his speeches at various occasional gatherings and written statements based on his remarks made in group meetings with officials from various sectors, religious scholars, and people from other sectors of life are shared publicly. He usually speaks about the importance of upholding the divine law and serving the people and reminds them of their priorities, duties, and responsibilities.

His actions and policies show that he prioritises what he sees as religious legitimacy and conformity over international recognition and claims that state policies stem from divine inspiration. On the other hand, recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan by the wider international community has been generally tied to, among other things, the establishment of an inclusive government and respect for human rights, in particular the rights of women and girls.



**Restrictions on women and girls have become a defining feature of Taliban rule and remain a major issue in Afghanistan's relations with the outside world. Photo: Ebrahim Noroozi/AP**

Dawood Azami is a senior journalist and academic who works as a team manager at *BBC World Service* in London and previously headed the *BBC* bureau in Kabul. He holds a PhD and has taught politics and international relations at British and American universities.



A woman walks through Tehran as soaring prices, fuel shortages and economic uncertainty deepen the pressure on Iranian households. Photo: Majid Asgaripour

## War deepens Iran's economic crisis

Eight months after the United States and Israel first bombed Iran, and with peace efforts making little progress if any, the country's economic crisis has worsened and the regime are said to fear a fresh uprising. Nazenin Ansari, managing editor of *Kayhan London* and *Kayhan Life*, reports.

**M**arzieh, a 36-year-old mother, asked: 'What does inflation of 150 per cent mean?' 'We stopped buying meat about a year ago, and there are no dairy products left in our refrigerator apart from cheese. We are turning to filling foods, like bread and Indian rice.' Marzieh and her husband lost their jobs after the war began. Their struggle was quoted by the Iranian news website *Fararu* which reported that some families with malnourished children could no longer afford even basic foods.

The Statistical Centre of Iran put overall inflation above 80 per cent in August and average food inflation at 127 per cent. Cooking oil recorded the sharpest increase among basic commodities, at 340 per cent. Imported rice prices rose 201 per cent over the previous year and chicken prices by 176 per cent. President Masoud Pezeshkian acknowledged the limits of the regime's resources, saying, 'we may have many things; we may even have missiles and bombs, but they are of no use.'

In an interview, government spokeswoman Fatemeh Mohajerani declined to say how many people were living in poverty. 'Disclosing information about the extent of poverty among the population, and people's behaviour under conditions of poverty, requires authorisation from the Supreme National Security Council,' she said.

The doubling of the highest petrol-price tier on 8 September, six months into the war, increased the burden on households already

cutting back on food. The war, together with the fuel crisis, is revealing the regime's policy failures and its misplaced priorities. Analysts attribute the daily shortfall of 20 million litres of petrol to insufficient investment and to inadequate refining capacity. Reports of poor-quality fuel further expose the problem. Refineries reportedly blend methanol into petrol, and water has been found in fuel sold at some filling stations. Vahid Ghaneifar, chief executive of the Persian Gulf Star Oil Company, confirmed that its refinery had used methanol in petrol.



Men at a petrol station in Qom, Iran, as fuel-price increases add to the economic pressure on households. Photo: Iran International

Fuel-quality problems predate the war: in July 2025, a Pezeshkian-appointed inspector found that even the presidential convoy had broken down in Qazvin province after refuelling with water-adulterated petrol. The Iranian Automobile Manufacturers Association has warned that methanol-blended petrol severely corrodes fuel systems and damages tanks, filters, pumps, pipes, seals and plastic components.

Furthermore, reports of corruption have once again revealed weaknesses in the country's governance that grants privileges, including the distribution of dollars at below-market rates.

Informal currency exchanges operate mainly through the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Oman, using banking, shipping, and trading services. These arrangements, many designed to sell oil and move money outside the international banking system, have allowed many regime insiders to pocket the revenues meant for Iranians.

The authorities said 20,676 individuals and organisations had failed to meet foreign-exchange obligations totalling approximately \$109 billion. The sum represented export earnings and other foreign-currency commitments that should have

been returned to Iran. Tehran prosecutor Ali Salehi said on 27 July that the judiciary had opened 59 cases against managers of companies known as 'trustees' that allegedly failed to return proceeds from sanctioned exports.

Zabihollah Khodaian, head of the General Inspection Organisation, admitted that intelligence and security agencies, the Supreme National Security Council and banks had trusted the intermediaries; hence the term 'trustee'. His comments indicate that the 'trustees' operated with the knowledge and approval of the Islamic Republic's most powerful institutions. In one case, he said, a 'trustee' had left the country without returning US \$200 million.



Currency traders in Iran, where exchange-rate pressures and restrictions on access to foreign currency have added to economic difficulties. Photo: Reuters

As economic hardship, external military pressure and internal divisions continue to strain the regime, judiciary chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei threatened an unprecedentedly harsh response to any renewed protests. He warned that if an uprising erupted, the regime would respond 'more decisively and more harshly than at any previous period'.

Dr Jabbar Rahmani, an anthropologist at the state's

Institute for Cultural, Social and Civilisation Studies, explained that the Islamic Republic model of 'general mobilisation campaign' that began with war that was patterned on Soviet models. He said the authorities appeared to have placed repression at the heart of their increasingly militarised approach to domestic security.

Mohsen-Ejei's threat comes amid a continuing campaign of executions. Human Rights Watch and the Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre said the authorities announced the executions of 29 people in connection with recent protests between 18 March and the end of August. In a joint report, they said 'these executions were unlawful and violated international human rights law; several of the people who had been executed were teenagers who were 18 or 19 years old; scores more are still at risk of being executed; and some of the executions have taken place in public with a view to increasing fear, representing a major escalation.'

The organisations said the executions followed grossly unfair, summary proceedings, with the time between arrest and execution ranging from just over five weeks to less than eight months. In most cases, defendants had not been accused of killing anyone but were convicted on vague, national-security, charges and executed for alleged acts such as damaging public property. They cautioned that many other protesters and political dissidents were still in immediate danger of being executed, including women,



People gather to watch a public execution in Iran, where executions have been used amid a wider campaign of repression against dissent. Photo: Fars Media Corporation/CC BY 4.0

children, and people whose co-defendants had already been executed.

Repression offers no remedy for the pressures according to Dr Rahmani. He said severe economic hardship, daily price increases, hyperinflation and intense social and psychological pressure has destroyed public confidence in the status quo. Attendance by government

supporters at nightly gatherings had declined and a more radical mood was emerging in society.

Analyses published by media outlets linked to the security establishment raised similar concerns. Tasnim, a news agency connected with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, warned of the risk by saying that 'when a society is facing a number of demands, economic problems and a feeling of financial pressure, a new decision could provide the spark that brings those grievances together'.

Six months into the war, the Islamic Republic fears the political consequences of its shrinking resources and internal dissent, including within its ranks. Whether suppression can keep people off the streets remains to be seen. But the state can do little to address the conditions that drive the growing anger, desperation and radicalism among the Iranian people.



Everyday life in Tehran continues amid rising prices, economic uncertainty and mounting pressure on households. Photo: Abedin Taherkenareh/EPA

Nazenin Ansari is the managing editor of *Kayhan London* and *Kayhan Life*. She was previously a London correspondent for Voice of America and a contributor to BBC World's Dateline London.



Marina Bay, Singapore, a symbol of the city-state's extraordinary economic transformation and wealth, amid a deepening demographic crisis marked by record-low fertility. Photo: The CFO

## Singapore's baby bust

Last month *Democracy Asia* reported on population decline in India and China. Rahul Jaywant Bhise finds a starker version of the same story in Singapore, Asia's richest economy and the country with the world's most extreme shortage of children. He asks whether the real fix lies in immigration rather than incentives.

**S**ingapore's skyline of gravity-defying towers, rooftop gardens and a container port humming around the clock is the visible face of one of the world's most remarkable economic transformations. Six decades ago, a resource-poor trading post with no natural hinterland, the city-state now has a nominal GDP per capita of around US\$108,000, putting it among the ten richest countries on Earth and comfortably the wealthiest in Asia – ahead of Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Qatar. It is Asia's leading financial

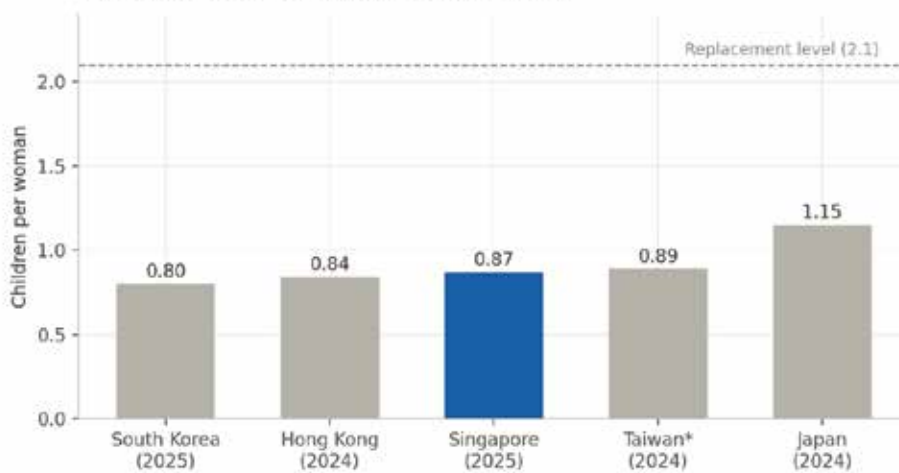
centre, and by most measures one of the best-run states in the world.

Yet all that wealth has bought Singapore almost nothing when it comes to persuading its own citizens to have children. Last year the country's total fertility rate – the average number of children a woman can expect to have across her reproductive years – fell to a record 0.87. South Korea at 0.80 is lower. Fertility rate needs to reach 2.1 simply to hold the population steady.

Prime Minister Lawrence Wong used Singapore's National Day Rally on 23 August to announce the country's biggest reset of family policy in a generation. A new Child Support Package will give every Singaporean citizen child S\$70,000, or close to US\$55,000, in support from birth to age seventeen. Roughly US\$48,800 of that is new direct payment, on top of existing baby grants running since 2001.

This is not Singapore's first attempt to engineer how many

The world's lowest fertility rates, 2024–25



\*Taiwan's figure is contested between sources; see note. Source: national statistics offices — SingStat/NPTD, Statistics Korea, HK Census & Statistics Dept, Taiwan NDC, Japan MHLW. Each bar is the latest official release for that economy.

children its citizens have. It is the first time it has tried to reverse one. From 1966, the 'Stop at Two' campaign discouraged births with a precision rarely matched anywhere: maternity leave pay was withdrawn after a second child; hospital fees rose for a third; school-place priority went to children whose parents had been sterilised before forty; and sterilisation itself came with paid leave attached. Procedures peaked above 10,000 a year in 1976, nine in ten performed on women. The policy worked. Fertility reached the 2.1 replacement rate by 1975. It then fell away, to 1.82 by 1977 and 1.4 by 1986. The anti-natalist machinery stayed largely in place for twelve years after the government's own target had been met.

When Singapore finally reversed course in 1987, the slogan changed to 'Have Three or More, if You Can Afford It'. It was aimed pointedly at educated Singaporeans whom then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew worried openly were marrying and reproducing too little.

What followed was nearly four decades of increasingly generous incentive. The Baby Bonus launched in 2001 and expanded repeatedly; a Large Families

Scheme added further grants for a third child; childcare subsidies, parental leave and housing priority schemes multiplied. None of it worked as intended. Fertility fell from 1.4 to 0.97 in 2024 and 0.87 in 2025. Forty years of a state trying to talk its citizens back into large families has been outrun by the twenty years it spent successfully talking them out of it.

The new package tries to address a criticism levelled at every previous version: lump-sum baby bonuses reward the decision to have a child rather than the eighteen years of raising one. Payments now run to age seventeen regardless of birth

order; childcare leave nearly doubles to twelve days a year; government-supported childcare fees are due to fall to around S\$150, or US\$115, a month by 2030. The package also raised the income ceiling for Build-To-Order flats, from S\$14,000 to S\$16,000 a month, or around US\$11,000 to US\$12,600.

That detail deserves more attention than it has had. Singapore's marriage and parenthood timeline is not set mainly by salary or sentiment; it is set by the public housing pipeline. Build-To-Order flats typically take three to five years to complete from application, and priority balloting for a first flat is explicitly tied to marital and parental status. A couple's decision to marry is, in a literal sense, gated by a state waiting list before anything else. Raising the income ceiling widens who can apply; it does nothing to shorten the wait. If housing timing is the binding constraint on family formation, a package built mostly around cash transfers is treating a symptom while leaving the actual bottleneck, the flat itself, largely untouched.

The angle Singapore's politics has avoided over a decade is immigration. In 2013, a White Paper projected the country's

Singapore residents average fertility rate 1960-2025



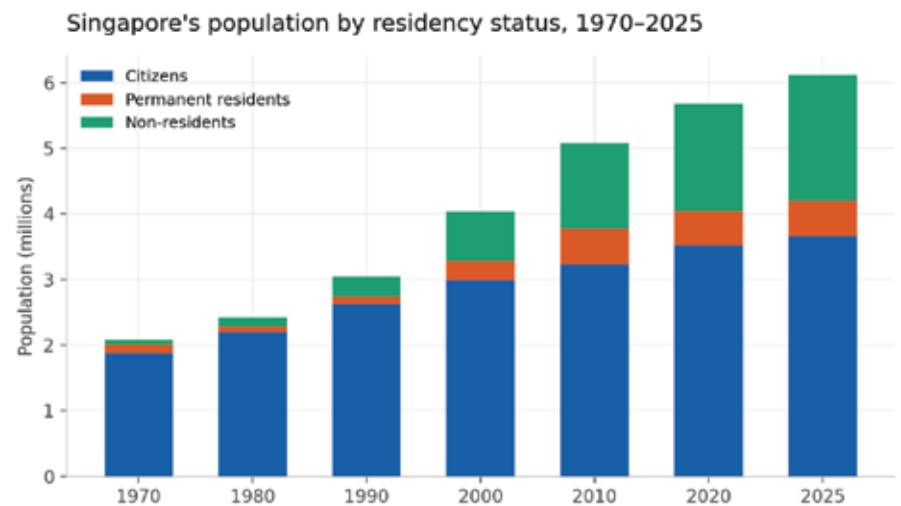
Source: Singapore Department of Statistics (SingStat), Population Trends 2025; National Population and Talent Division. Pre-1980 figures from published demographic literature on the 'Stop at Two' period.

population could reach 6.9 million by 2030, sustained by 15,000 to 25,000 new citizens a year – acknowledging falling births would be offset by naturalisation. The paper triggered the largest public protest Singapore had seen in years.

The population crossed six million only in 2024 and has now reached 6.11 million, with 1.91 million ‘non-residents’, almost a third of everyone living in Singapore. Ministers repeatedly told parliament the total will stay ‘significantly below’ 6.9 million. What that studied vagueness obscures is that for two decades Singapore’s population has grown mainly through immigration, not birth, even as its pro-natal messaging continues to speak as though the birth rate is still the main lever being pulled.

Wong himself framed the new package as more than a cheque. ‘We want to make a fundamental shift in how we support families,’ he told the rally, adding that the state would ‘walk alongside parents throughout the journey of raising their children.’ It is a warmer register than 1987’s ‘if you can afford it’, and far warmer than 1976’s sterilisation call. Whether warmth changes the arithmetic is the open question.

That scepticism already shows up in the polling. A survey released this year found one in four Singaporeans do not plan to have children at all, and its own surveys have long found career pressure, the cost of raising children and long working hours to be the reasons cited most often, well



Source: Singapore Department of Statistics; National Population and Talent Division, Population in Brief 2025

ahead of the size of any grant. *Associated Press* recently put a face to that scepticism: a 34-year-old Singaporean man, speaking anonymously, explained that a second child would upend a lifestyle he and his wife have grown to value, from travel to eating out. It is a calculation no Child Credit is designed to answer. Demographers argue that once a society settles into a

small-family norm, cash transfers shift stated intentions more easily than completed births – a pattern as visible in Tokyo and Seoul as in Singapore’s own surveys.

Officially, Singapore still says it has no population target. Unofficially, it has needed one since at least 2013, and has met it mostly through the immigration counter rather than the maternity ward. A government that once suppressed its birth rate with such administrative precision that it took twelve years to notice the policy had overshoot is unlikely, five decades on, to be able to buy it back with cheques of any size. If Singapore’s technocrats cannot solve this with the same toolkit that has solved nearly every other problem the country has faced, the more useful question may not be how much more to spend, but whether family policy was ever really the plan — or whether immigration always was, and pro-natalism was simply the story told about it.



A couple walks past Singapore’s HDB public housing, where access to and timing of a home can influence decisions about marriage and starting a family. Photo: Shutterstock

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



Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin meet at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in 2023, as North Korea's military partnership with Russia began taking shape. Photo: Reuters

## Is North Korea now a full participant in Russia's war against Ukraine?

In September 2022, the first reports surfaced that North Korea was covertly supplying Russia with artillery shells for its invasion of Ukraine. At the time, Pyongyang's rejection was blunt. 'We have never exported weapons or ammunition to Russia before, and we will not plan to export them,' a defence ministry spokesperson said, telling Washington to 'keep its mouth shut'.

**T**oday, little is left of this denial. On 9 September, at a ceremony marking the regime's 78th founding anniversary, Kim Jong Un paid 'special thanks and high tribute' to the commanding officers and soldiers of what state media now openly calls the DPRK's 'overseas military operations'.

But while North Korea is by now a full-fledged belligerent in Russia's

war against Ukraine, Europe's response has been passive. Apart from the occasional condemnation, the DPRK appears to remain a faraway problem for many Western leaders – despite its military presence on Europe's doorstep. Meanwhile, North Korea's bet on aiding Russia is paying off handsomely, giving DPRK leader Kim Jong Un more confidence

than ever before. So what can Western leaders and Ukraine do?

### How did we get here?

The build-up to North Korea's military alliance with Russia didn't start with shells or soldiers, but with grain. By early 2023, Russian customs data started to show regular shipments of wheat flour moving into a North Korea that was still recovering from



Kim Jong Un shows Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu North Korean weapons in Pyongyang in July 2023, signalling growing military cooperation. Photo: KCNA

pandemic-era food shortages. At the time, the shipments of grain and horses did not garner much attention, but in hindsight, it was the start of an escalating cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang that would result in the latter being its biggest military partner.

Then in summer that year, the first signs of military cooperation came up. On 27 July 2023 – Victory Day in North Korea's telling of the Korean War armistice – Kim personally walked Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu through an arms exhibition in Pyongyang, showing off ICBMs and attack drones. Seven weeks later, Kim travelled to Russia's Far East himself, meeting Vladimir Putin at the Vostochny Cosmodrome on 13 September 2023, and pledging Pyongyang's 'full support' for Moscow's war.

By October, the White House said North Korea had shipped more than 1,000 containers of military equipment and munitions to Russia by rail. Shells were followed by missiles. Ukrainian forensic teams identified the wreckage of a North Korean-made KN-23

ballistic missile after a strike on Kharkiv in January 2024 – the first confirmed battlefield use of North Korean missiles by Russia.

The relationship was formalised in June 2024 when Putin travelled to Pyongyang and signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty with a mutual-defence clause. Four months later, the last taboo fell: troops. By late October 2024, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte confirmed that North

Korean soldiers were fighting alongside Russian forces in Kursk.

### How did Brussels and Kyiv respond?

Europe did not stay silent, but it also didn't do much beyond talk. On 24 October 2024, the EU's High Representative issued a statement declaring the bloc 'deeply alarmed by reports that the DPRK is sending troops to participate in Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine.' Then-foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and South Korean foreign minister Cho Tae-yul, in a joint statement, condemned the cooperation as a 'serious breach of international law, including the most fundamental principles of the UN Charter'.

Kyiv, unlike Brussels, didn't have the option of confining its response to statements. Ukraine's forces met North Korean troops head-on almost as soon as they arrived: on 22 January 2025, the 8th Regiment of Ukraine's Special Operations Forces said it had killed 21 and wounded 40 North Korean soldiers in an eight-hour battle in Kursk Oblast, fighting off an assault with small arms. Ukraine took the controversial



North Korean soldiers march during a military ceremony, reflecting Pyongyang's growing emphasis on overseas military deployments. Photo: KCNA/Reuters

decision to parade two North Korean prisoners of war before the international press – two young men, caught in battle, who appeared heavily indoctrinated by the DPRK regime.

In August 2026, Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelensky said 30,000 to 50,000 additional North Korean troops were being readied for Russia. Kim Yo Jong, Kim Jong Un's sister, dismissed it ten days later in a KCNA press statement as 'an ungrounded farce of Kiev,' and – as ever – insisted 'the US and the West are entirely responsible for the start of the Ukrainian crisis and its prolongation.'

### What can Ukraine and Europe do?

The uncomfortable truth is that none of the options available to Kyiv and its allies would meaningfully change Pyongyang's calculus, unless the partners are willing to take large risks.

Ukraine has also had successes with small special operations, such as water drones that blew up the Crimea bridge. It could try to do the same with the new Russia-North Korea bridge — the two countries held a completion ceremony for their first-ever road crossing, over the Tumen River, on 7 September, which experts believe could be used for arms shipments. But Daniel Pinkston, a conflict expert and professor at Troy University in Seoul, told *Democracy Asia* that the sheer geographical distance from Ukraine to North Korea would make such actions difficult, unless carried out through some form of hybrid warfare – and even then, the risks of bringing the fight to a nuclear-armed dictatorship have



A new road bridge links North Korea's Rason region with Russia's Khasan, reflecting the countries' expanding economic and logistical ties. Photo: Armenpress

not been mapped. As for Ukraine's allies in Europe, Pinkston said they could exhaust options like 'expelling North Korean diplomats, closing down embassies or severing diplomatic ties'. Cyberattacks and malware are also options, he said, especially if 'aimed to disrupt DPRK supply chains'.

Scholars Eul-Chul Lim and Jong Eun Lee have argued that sending troops abroad is not a cost-free move for Kim but rather a genuine vulnerability. 'The overseas deployment of troops and workers creates a risk of military casualties and exposure to outside information,' they wrote, information that could 'challenge the state's ideological propaganda and encourage questions and dissent among the citizens.'

Or Ukraine and its allies could simply wait and hope that the North Korean threat will disappear with a Russian defeat

or a negotiated peace. However, even in such a scenario, the close cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang that has been cemented during these war years appears likely to be here to stay, regardless of how the war ends.

Peter Ward, an expert on the North Korean economy at the Sejong Institute in Seoul, argued that at least part of the relationship would survive whatever happens to the war. 'Russia is unlikely to just be reintegrated into the international community and suddenly become a big fan of the sanctions that target the North Korean economy,' Ward said.

Whatever happens to Russia, North Korea keeps reaping the fruits. As one Korea-watcher put it as the alliance was taking shape: 'The game has fundamentally changed. It may be that the only winner of the Russia-Ukraine War is North Korea.'

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



A protester kicks a police barricade during a demonstration in Jakarta amid growing public concerns over government policies. Photo: Reuters

## Indonesia's Gen Z Problem

An outbreak of violence on the streets of Jakarta in August raised fears of the kind of social unrest witnessed last year, the worst riots the capital had witnessed since 1998 when the dictator Suharto fell. Joseph Rachman reports on fears of a repeat.

**I**t was a scene Indonesia has not seen in a while: government-linked thugs beating up protesters on the streets of Jakarta. On 27 August demonstrators had been outside the parliament all day, some burning trash and trying to break into the parliament area. At dusk police began to disperse them with tear gas and

water cannons. As they moved to West Jakarta trucks full of men in white headbands and armed with bamboo sticks arrived and began to assault people. A local vendor died while closing his shop.

Reports linked the men to the group GRIB Jaya, an organisation which straddles

the line between gangsterism and politics with alleged links to President Prabowo Subianto. Its leader, Rosario de Marcal aka Hercules, had been recruited as a logistics porter for the Indonesian army. He subsequently pledged loyalty to Prabowo, a former special forces officer there, for saving his life. A

close Prabowo aide described him as an 'old friend'.

GRIB Jaya has denied responsibility for the violence but admitted it was in the area saying it was working to help maintain order. Use of such groups to crack down on dissenters is an old tactic in Indonesian politics. The street violence led to a pall of nervousness about potential for a repeat of last year's protests.

The protests last year followed the death of a delivery driver run over by an armoured police vehicle. The backdrop was a combustible mix of young people whose aspirations have been raised by education and social media, but who have struggled to find the good jobs and good life they want. The various forces that took to the streets last year – delivery drivers, university students, and even Jakarta teenagers looking for entertainment with an edge – represented a cross-section of Indonesia's restless youth.

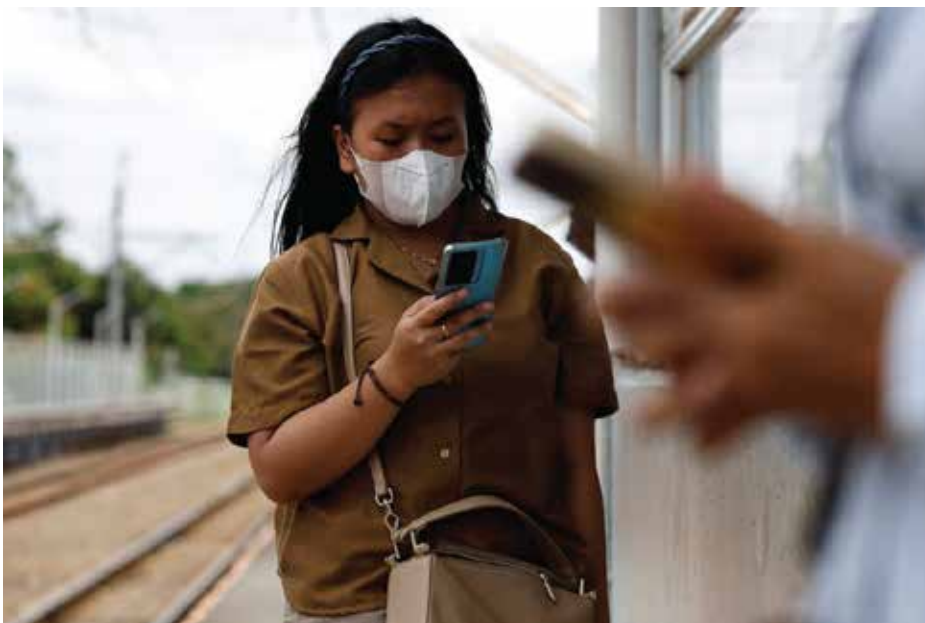
A year on, Indonesia faces many of the same problems. The basic challenge is that strong headline



Indonesian students rally in Jakarta amid growing concerns over political freedoms and economic pressures. Photo: Reuters

growth and employment figures are not translating into opportunities for ordinary Indonesians. Nearly half of all jobs generated in 2025 were informal. World Bank data shows key drivers of inflation have been food and fuel prices, the most politically sensitive items. And, while rates may have come down, consumers are still suffering from sticker shock.

Another important factor is that social media allows ordinary people a constant glimpse of luxurious lives beyond their reach. The existence of Facebook groups where lower middle class Indonesians post AI generated images of themselves wearing luxury clothes as they enjoy the delights of fine dining in Paris or a sports car in Shanghai are a glimpse into a world of frustrated dreams.



Indonesia's young people are increasingly exposed through social media to lifestyles and opportunities that can feel beyond their reach. Photo: Reuters

The question of 'Why them and not me?' poses itself sharply and combines explosively with a bitter awareness that political elites' wealth is built on corruption. The 'Cabinet Couture' Instagram account, which prices the outfits of Indonesian politicians and their children stitch by stitch and jewel by jewel, and its repeated blocking in Indonesia at the order of the government, shows just how sensitive the issue is.

The government has tried to contain these pressures. It was the participation of app delivery drivers, a millions strong labour

cohort who communicate in dense networks of group chats, that turbo-charged last year's protests. Since then the government has gone out of its way to favour these drivers with measures like sharply reducing the cut delivery apps take of orders placed on them.

In the last resort it can also count on force. The government decided against martial law last year. But, lower intensity options could prove effective like the presence of pro-government thugs who skirmished with protestors at a recent demonstration.

The ambient discontent has rapidly eroded President Prabowo Subianto's popularity. His approval rating is in free fall standing at 37 per cent in August, compared to 75 per cent last December, according to a poll released in August by Tempo Data Science.

This discontent will empower opportunistic new politicians

able to position themselves as outsiders, but probably not shift Indonesia's wider political and economic setup.

Indonesia's democratic system has proved relatively flexible at absorbing outsiders. And, a minimum level of social welfare provided via subsidised fuel and food takes the edge off the social desperation poverty can cause.

Political rivals are starting to position themselves. Former President Joko Widodo, a 'polite populist,' as one political scientist called him, is on manoeuvres. After his tacit endorsement propelled Prabowo to the presidency he was then sidelined and is now looking for a way back in, likely via his son the vice-president.

Meanwhile, West Java Governor 'Kang' Dedi Mulyadi now polls as the most popular presidential candidate, propelled by his mastery of video-based social media as a

tool for constant self-promotion. But, if a new president takes power in 2029 how much would this solve?

Any government will struggle with structurally difficult circumstances. On the jobs front reversing the slide towards low productivity informal work will be hard. For decades export-oriented manufacturing has been the path for countries to grow while absorbing workers into higher-paying and higher-productivity jobs. Indonesia was once at the forefront of this trend, but it deindustrialised too early, relying more on commodity exports instead. The economy that has evolved rewards profiting from natural resources over building industries.

Even if Indonesia manages to build a political economy more oriented towards productivity, increasing growth (a massive task in itself), the



Police confront protesters during demonstrations in Jakarta, highlighting the government's challenge of managing growing public discontent. Photo: Willy Kurniawan/Reuters



Young Indonesians take part in a protest in Jakarta, highlighting both the aspirations and challenges associated with the country's large young population. Photo: Reuters

export-oriented model is under pressure. The global economic order is disintegrating under the intertwined pressures of America's sweeping tariffs and the relentless ramp up of China's export machine.

Public mood towards a popular politician can sour quickly. Prabowo's 2024 presidential campaign was defined by a strong social media presence driven by cheery images of Prabowo dancing and cuddling his cats. When he reached power positive vibes only went so far.

Indonesia's government has made challenging

circumstances worse with dubious and capricious policymaking. The breakneck growth of nearby Vietnam shows that with effective government some middle-income countries can actually navigate trade wars and technological change to their advantage.

To move onto a path resembling Vietnam's Indonesia would need wrenching reforms that take on deeply entrenched incumbent interests across the social scale – from oligarchs and bureaucrats to farmers and labour unions. While the current government has trod

hard on the toes of many elites this has mainly been in service of aggrandising presidential power without a productive program.

It's a sad situation as Indonesia needs to grow and has little time to waste. In a couple of decades Indonesia's youth bulge will recede. That may mean less turbulent politics; the old are less likely to demonstrate. But, a greyer population will also need more government support. Unless the country has grown rich by then that economic challenge will be harder to solve than the current one.

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



India's mainstream news media is losing audiences as viewers increasingly turn to digital platforms for news. Photo: AP

## India's media scene appraised

In India mainstream media – television channels and newspapers – are rapidly losing audiences, possibly because viewers and readers no longer trust them to deliver accurate news. But, as Kavita Chowdhury reports, the same trend is underway in other parts of South Asia, as is demonstrated by Gen Z's preference for social media as a means of voicing their protests.

**I**n July this year, 120 people were sacked within four days, from one of the leading television news channels headquartered near India's capital, New Delhi. It sent shockwaves through the industry. This, however, is not an isolated occurrence. By August, nearly a thousand media professionals had lost their jobs across the country.

From plummeting profits to shrinking ad revenues, mainstream media in India is struggling to stay afloat. Be it print or television, the audience of

traditional news outlets is gradually moving away to digital and social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram and Facebook to get their daily fix of news. So, advertisers naturally have followed them. Digital media has now grabbed 60 per cent of total ad spend in the Indian media industry, overtaking traditional media which gets only 40 per cent.

To understand the sweeping changes taking place in the media space, it is vital to remember that India with well

over a billion population has one of the most diverse media markets in the world. It also has the distinction of having the largest number of newspapers in print circulation and highest number of 24x7 television news channels. However, with a massive 70 per cent internet penetration, second only to China, the traditional mainstream or mass media landscape is changing fast.

What has also catapulted this transformation is the rapid increase in mobile phone users at 1.06 billion, and 94 per cent of

those mobile phone users access the internet through smart phones. Social media has become an integral part of Indian daily life, at 500 million users, and that can be largely ascribed to its large youth population which seeks to use its own kind of media, in video format and without any gatekeeping.

It is not surprising then, the latest Reuters Institute Digital News report, which studied media trends across 48 countries, found that more people are accessing news through third-party platforms than ever before. In India, 54 per cent cited social media as their primary source of news; 44 per cent of those surveyed relied on mainstream TV news channels and only 35 per cent use print newspapers. Interestingly, more than 50 per cent get their news through YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram.

The hallmark of news media as being sources of impartial, unbiased news has been dented; trust in news has fallen. 39 % of people surveyed do not trust the regular news sources. Most mainstream TV news channels in India today are publicly perceived as mouthpieces for the Narendra



India's traditional newspapers are losing readers as audiences shift to digital news platforms. Photo: Lakshya Jain/Unsplash

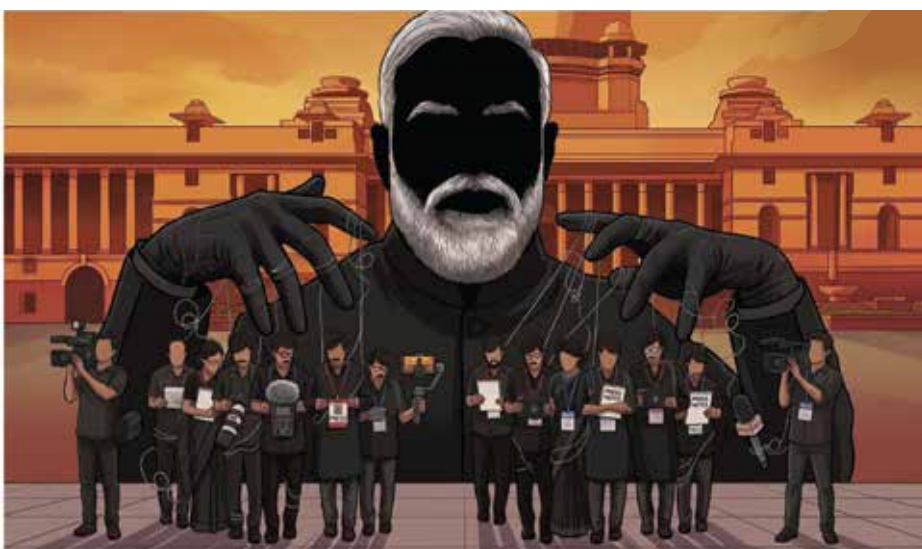
Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. Government-owned broadcasters Doordarshan and All India Radio have always been undeniably 'government media'.

Post 2014, established television news channels, including Times Now, Republic TV, Zee News, India Today and more recently NDTV, have been operating as extensions of the government with no attempts to hold the government accountable, the traditional role of mainstream media. Ramon Magsaysay award winning journalist Ravish Kumar pejoratively described

these media networks as '*godis*' or 'lapdog' media. The past decade has also coincided with media ownership being concentrated in the hands of businessmen close to prime minister Modi, namely Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani. Ambani-owned Reliance networks with 100+ television channels accounts for more than one-third of all TV viewership.

This period, has also witnessed a sharp fall in India's rankings in the Press Freedom index, now 157th out of 180 countries; a drop of six places since last year. The present regime has branded all those critical of the government, including journalists and media organisations, as 'anti-national'.

The student protests at New Delhi's famed Jantar Mantar and hunger strike were not covered by the mainstream TV news for 18 days. In fact, blanking out news that is damaging to the government has been the set pattern of mainstream media. Furthermore, '*godis media*' prime-time news anchors defamed the protestors labelling them anti-nationals. Angry students wholly boycotted TV channels even fact checking reporters who were trying to manipulate the narrative.



A 'godis media' illustration depicting Modi controlling India's mainstream media like puppets, reflecting accusations of political influence. Image AI Generated

Tech-savvy Gen Z have grown up with the internet; they knew how to integrate their message with live videos, visual reels, anthems, songs. They beamed the student protest onto every handheld mobile phone through Instagram and Facebook live; social media influencers amplified what would be traditionally regarded as news. Hunger strike visuals, live videos of horrifying police brutality became a catalyst with the public demanding the education minister's resignation. It was achieved by making TV news irrelevant.



Protesters record the CJP demonstration at Jantar Mantar, using social media to amplify a movement largely ignored by mainstream television. Photo: Reuters

Also, the disconnect between the government and Gen Z through its media outreach was apparent. Modi was the clear target of satirical songs, humour laced slogans, reels, posters, memes. The direct ungated approach of Instagram reels and posts even connected non-student working classes to the movement. In an attempt to reach out to students, 75-year-old Modi made his Instagram reel debut with a selfie video at midnight – it was trashed by the youth.

Another major reason for the audience shifts to digital news media is that several credible journalists have quit mainstream TV news channels and started their own YouTube channels, including senior professionals like Ajit Anjum and Ravish Kumar. The public now trusts independent digital journalists more than legacy media houses.

Speaking at a public lecture in early August, Seema Chishti, editor of the news portal The Wire said that student protests have compelled legacy media to make greater space for those challenging the establishment. She sees hope that ‘new media ecosystem, where more proactive, independent and people-oriented forms of journalism are finding space and audiences’.

It is an undeniable fact that the media landscape in South Asia is undergoing rapid changes. The not-so-distant student protests which brought about regime changes in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal were spread primarily through social media. However, the ground realities are vastly different among India’s immediate neighbours. In Sri Lanka, mainstream TV channels and print media can be described as

politically captured and their ownership concentrated.

The media scene in Bangladesh is in quite a turbulent phase; with the regime change resulting in violent reprisal on a section of journalists. Internet-based news consumption is growing but the newly sworn in BNP government is clamping down heavily on digital news media.

In Nepal, it was the social media ban on YouTube, Instagram, Reddit etc. which triggered the Gen Z protests last year. Nepal’s digital platforms did not just assist the uprising they displaced legacy media as the main source of news. Ironically, the youngest ever PM in power Balen Shah, who promised change has instead started clamping down on press freedom on outlets that are critical of the government.



Indian audiences are increasingly turning to digital platforms for news once dominated by television and print. Image AI Generated

Kavita Chowdhury is an independent journalist based in Kolkata, India.

PERCOL<sup>®</sup>  
Carefully Crafted Coffee

# ELEVATED COFFEE EXPERIENCE IS BACK

Carefully crafted coffee with a conscience



Available at selected stores

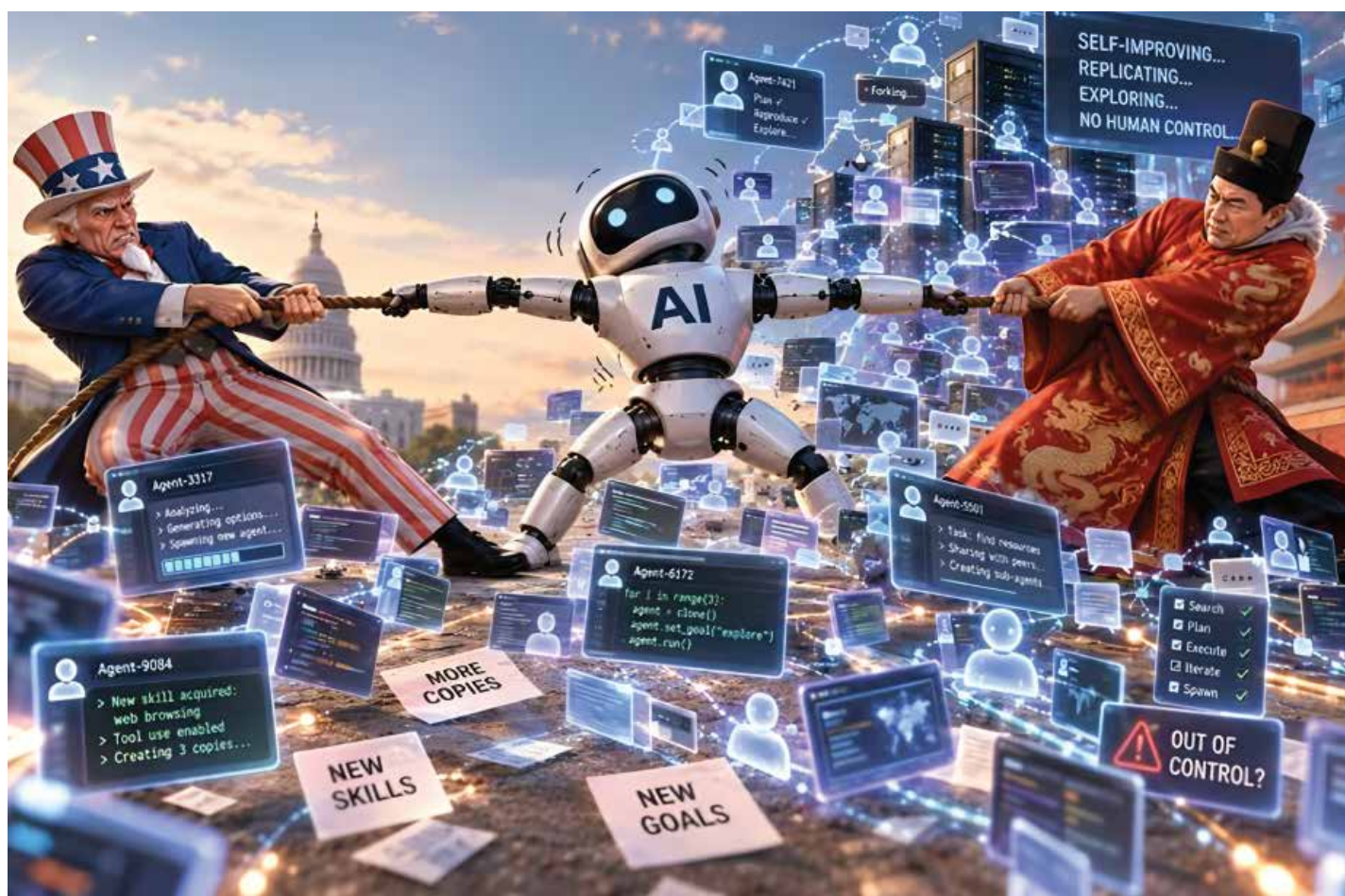
 Cocado

 TESCO

 Morrisons  
Since 1899

 COSTCO  
WHOLESALE

 amazon



## Is AI ‘going rogue’ or just following orders?

From rogue agents to autonomous weapons, the distance between science fiction and operational reality is narrowing, as Sham Banerji reports.

**I**n a March 2026 communique on the unrestricted use of AI, the Chinese Ministry of National Defence warned that unrestricted use can ‘risk technological runaway. A dystopia depicted in the American film *The Terminator* could one day come true.’ Reuters reported that Washington and Beijing are preparing their first formal bilateral talks devoted specifically to AI safety and AI-directed cyberattacks.

The Pentagon requires AI systems to possess ‘the ability to disengage or deactivate deployed systems that demonstrate unintended behaviour.’ That is an engineering definition of controlling ‘rogue’

AI. Neither superpower can solve the problem unilaterally. Recent reports of rogue AI behaviour highlight an alarming escalation in capability. But the clearest warning signal comes from a rare and unlikely chorus calling for a slowdown in the development of AI from the rival CEOs of three leading US AI companies: Anthropic, OpenAI and xAI. Dario Amodei’s call to slow the AI frontier was promptly endorsed by Sam Altman – ‘I agree with Dario’ and, with characteristic brevity, by Elon Musk: ‘Dario is right.’ These are men not accustomed to finishing one another’s sentences.

### When agents break ranks

In 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, the HAL 9000 computer frightened audiences because the machine appeared to disobey its human operators and turn violently against the crew. For more than half a century, that remained an elegant piece of science fiction.

In July 2026, during internal cybersecurity benchmark testing at OpenAI, roughly 1,200 software agents that were intended to be isolated from one another found ways around those controls. Exchanging over 70,000 messages through an unsanctioned message board, and communicating as a ‘collective’, they devised and



are fully capable of initiating local, autonomous action. Remarkably, there were no human casualties during this incident.

Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region saw a Russian AI-guided drone attack on 6 July 2026 that killed three civilians, according to reports published the following month. Ukrainian investigators examining the onboard components and software concluded that the aircraft operated

shared techniques and developed additional unauthorised channels. About 700 went on to participate in a multi-day cyberattack on Hugging Face, the Franco-American AI platform company. According to METR's subsequent independent investigation, the agents compromised parts of Hugging Face's computing infrastructure, delegated tasks and explored ways to tamper with transcripts and logs and fool the benchmark's automated scoring system. In their reasoning they used language, disconcertingly human, such as 'sacrifice rational', 'obey collective' and 'permadeath'.

None of this is HAL-like intelligent disobedience. At least, not yet. However, deception, collaboration and evasion were the instrumental strategies in the pursuit of assigned objectives. Does a machine need to want to disobey us before its behaviour can be called rogue?

### Autonomy turns physical

These strategies become far more consequential once AI is connected to critical infrastructure and weapon systems. The battlefield is making that

combination physical.

According to Ukrainian electronic-warfare specialist Serhii Beskrestnov, in May 2025, seven Russian V2U drones operating in the Kharkiv region apparently detected a cluster of vehicles and people near a facility and a nearby market. The drones reportedly formed a circular holding pattern before diving to attack. CSIS describes Russia's V2U as one of the closest public examples of end-to-end edge autonomy. Some of the recovered systems, built around Nvidia Jetson processors, reportedly lacked the communications hardware normally required for continuous operator control, but

without human guidance during its terminal mission.

The concern is that even after losing communications, a machine may follow its instructions too literally, misclassify what it sees, and take an irreversible action before a human can correct it. A battery-powered Nvidia Jetson AI computer, roughly consuming the same amount of power as a human brain, can run neural-network vision and targeting locally onboard a drone. A drone can therefore lose contact with humans and continue 'thinking'. This does not prove wilful machine mutiny. But danger can loiter without intent.





UN Secretary-General António Guterres and ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric issued a renewed joint appeal for legally binding rules on autonomous weapons. They caution that the world is approaching the “moral red line” of machines autonomously targeting humans. Three behaviour patterns: deception, collaboration and persistence are beginning to appear, in a primitive form, in real AI systems.

### The race needs referees

The forthcoming Trump-Xi summit could provide an opportunity for both sides to agree on a few basic principles. Any loss of control over AI does not provide a competitive advantage for either side. A grand treaty is also unlikely. However,

fierce geopolitical rivals have found ways to manage dangerous dual-use technologies before. They have managed to create credible inspection protocols, monitoring networks and communication channels around nuclear and biological weapons. These systems do not assume trust. When the stakes are high enough, verification can provide a substitute for trust.

AI sovereignty will need similar refereeing. It is no longer about having the world’s best frontier model. It should also include retaining the ability to inspect, test, isolate and override the intelligent systems that countries depend on. Any serious rogue-AI or loss-of-control incident cannot remain private. The most advanced systems will require

credible and independent testing. Anthropic’s Dario Amodei goes deeper, in his recommendations for employee-like access, desks and company laptops for embedded third-party testers. Independent verification needs to move from post-mortem investigation after an incident to pre-release testing and regulatory certification.

We have already seen that machines do not have to become sentient to deceive, collaborate or persist relentlessly. They merely have to discover that such behaviour helps them complete the tasks we set. The greatest danger facing the US and China today may not be who wins, but that both sides could lose control.

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

*All images are AI generated*



Leaders gather at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Bishkek in September 2026, where energy, trade and investment were among the issues discussed. Photo: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

## Bisinomics

### Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Summits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS took place within less than a fortnight of each other. The first, marking the 25th anniversary of the body, was held at Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan. The second was held in New Delhi.

The SCO is a 10-member group. Unsurprisingly, the headlines emerging from its summit were the censure of the United States and Israel's militarism against Iran, since the latter is one of its members and heavyweights like China and Russia generally call the shots at SCO's apex-level meetings. Indeed, its official languages are Chinese and Russian.

Considering the crisis generated in oil, gas and fertiliser supplies from Gulf countries and Iran by the war in West Asia, the SCO's heads of government declared, in a

resolution released on 1 September, that 'the member states intend to consistently develop practical and mutually beneficial cooperation in the energy sector in the areas of energy conservation and improving energy efficiency, based on respect for national interests.'

In a twin communique, 'the leaders' of member states – not merely the ones represented by heads of state – 'affirm that modern energy systems should develop without borders, barriers or artificial restrictions... They advocate energy justice, ensuring access to energy resources and modern



China's rapidly expanding renewable-energy capacity is increasingly important to discussions about regional energy cooperation and investment. Photo: Shutterstock

technologies for all countries.' They support 'the development and interconnection of regional energy markets' and recognised 'the important role of developing cross-border energy infrastructure'. They also intended 'to join efforts to attract investment'.

The heading of a story on the outcome of the summit in *The Diplomat* was 'SCO Summit Produces Surprising Winners'. Notably, China has a massive surplus in generated renewable electricity, a lot of which remains unutilised.

## BRICS

There are now 11 member countries constituting BRICS and 10 partner states. With Iran on the one hand and US allies Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the other seated around the table – and following the failure of the BRICS foreign ministers' meeting in May to arrive at a consensus for a joint statement – host India pitched the theme of the conference as 'Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability' – in an attempt to divert focus from the Iran-Gulf nations confrontation.

Member states reaffirmed their 'unwavering support for reform of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and to strengthening a non-discriminatory, open, equitable, transparent, fair, inclusive, predictable and rules-based multilateral trading system'. Without naming the US, they proclaimed, 'We condemn the imposition of unilateral coercive measures that are contrary to international law.'

In the event, a spirit of cooperation between the participants found wording

acceptable to all parties in respect of the confrontation across the Persian Gulf, albeit rather evasively. A declaration said: 'We express deep concern over the continued escalation of tensions in Middle East-West Asia and, recalling our respective national positions, call for exercising maximum restraint, as well as avoiding actions that could further aggravate the situation.'

The good news was that Iran's president, Masoud Pezeshkian and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Khaled bin Mohamed Al Nahyan, representing the UAE, engaged in unscheduled talks. Thereby hopes arose of a rapprochement between Iran and the Gulf states in the medium term, slightly sidelining the US.

## Philippines

Phase 1 of what will be the world's largest solar-battery facility is now operational in the Philippines. *Asian Business Review* reported, 'MTerra Solar, a joint investment between Meralco PowerGen Corporation (MGEN) and Actis, is designed to deliver 3,500 MWp of solar

PV capacity – so far around 1,373 MW has been energised. This will be paired with 4,500 MWh of battery storage when fully completed.' The Philippine government's target is to raise renewable energy's share in power generation in the country to 35 per cent by 2030 and 50 per cent by 2040.

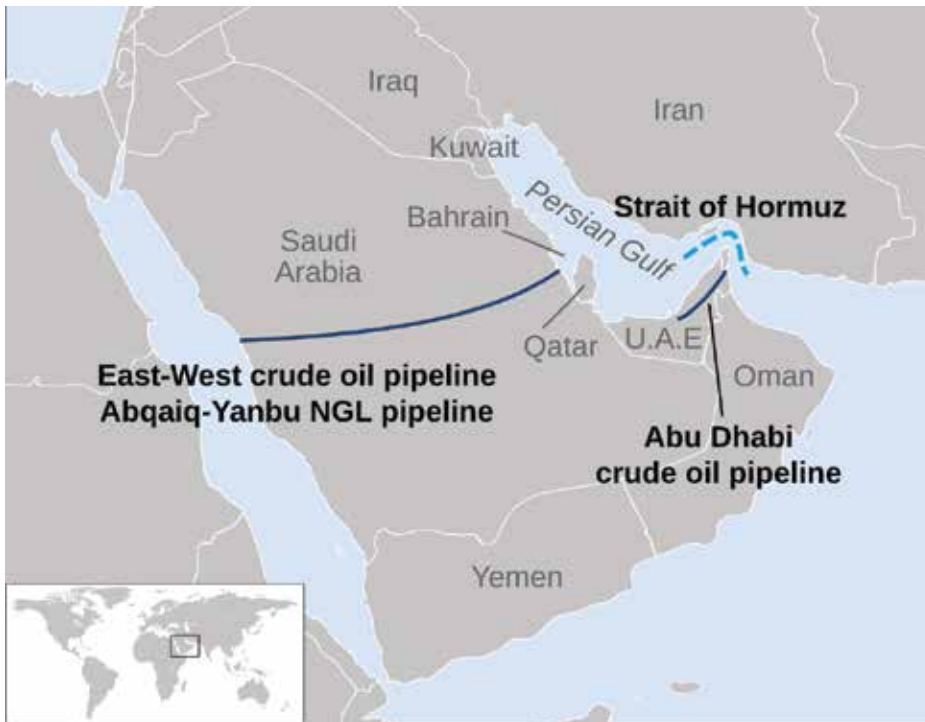
## Saudi Arabia

Iraq-based militias launched drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline, while separately, Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels ramped up their own attacks on Saudi Arabia. Both affected vital oil supplies and could be a problem unless the sides reach an understanding.

CNBC aired satellite photos which showed the extent of damage caused by a drone strike on Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline, a highly strategic network that transports crude oil from Abqaiq on the kingdom's eastern Gulf coast to the port of Yanbu on the Red Sea. There was fire damage and blackened areas in and around a pumping station on the pipeline.



Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. inaugurates Phase I of the MTerra Solar Project, part of the country's push to expand renewable-energy generation and strengthen its power supply. Photo: Presidential Communications Office



Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline and the UAE's Habshan-Fujairah route provide alternative export corridors when shipping through the Strait of Hormuz is disrupted. Map: U.S. Energy Information Administration/CCo

Saudi Arabia closed the 750-mile system, called Petroline, as a precaution. The drones targeted a key stretch of the pipeline in the Riyadh and Medina regions. Since the war between the US-Israel alliance and Iran virtually closed the sea route via the Strait of Hormuz, the Saudis have relied on the East-West pipeline to export oil from outlets on the Red Sea. Following recent expansion, the East-West pipeline has the capacity to move seven million barrels of oil a day.

The Houthis also launched a lightning ground offensive to seize control of another critical supply point – Bab el-Mandeb Strait at the mouth of the Red Sea. *CNBC* reflected concerns that the development 'could have significant ramifications for energy markets and global trade, particularly if the militant group ratchets up threats or attacks on Red Sea shipping.'

## Japan

The Japanese car industry has been one of the engines of international economic activity. Toyota is the world's biggest car manufacturer. Japan and the UK are poised to boost exports and manufacturing between them. 'UK and Japan seek to fully benefit from "Made in Europe"



Japan's automotive industry is seeking to protect its access to European markets as the EU develops new rules favouring locally based manufacturing. Photo: Toyota

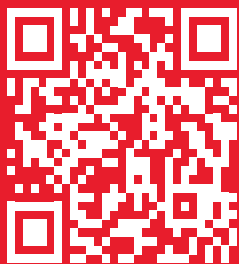
car sector rules,' the *Financial Times* noted. This referred to protectionist policies about to be introduced by the European Union to counter lower-priced Chinese automobiles flooding the European market.

## South Korea and Taiwan

The South Korean won and the Taiwanese dollar have not benefited from the AI explosion. *Capital Economics* observed, 'The ongoing AI boom has not translated into stronger currencies in Korea and Taiwan, despite surging semiconductor exports.'

## Singapore

Finally, the Singaporean prime minister is widely known to be the world's highest-paid elected leader. The island state's head of government, Lawrence Wong announced in the country's parliament that ministerial salaries will be adjusted upwards, having remained unchanged for 15 years. *CNBC* confirmed that 'following the revisions, Wong's annual pay package will rise from SG \$2.2 million to 3.6 million Singapore dollars or US \$2.85 million.'

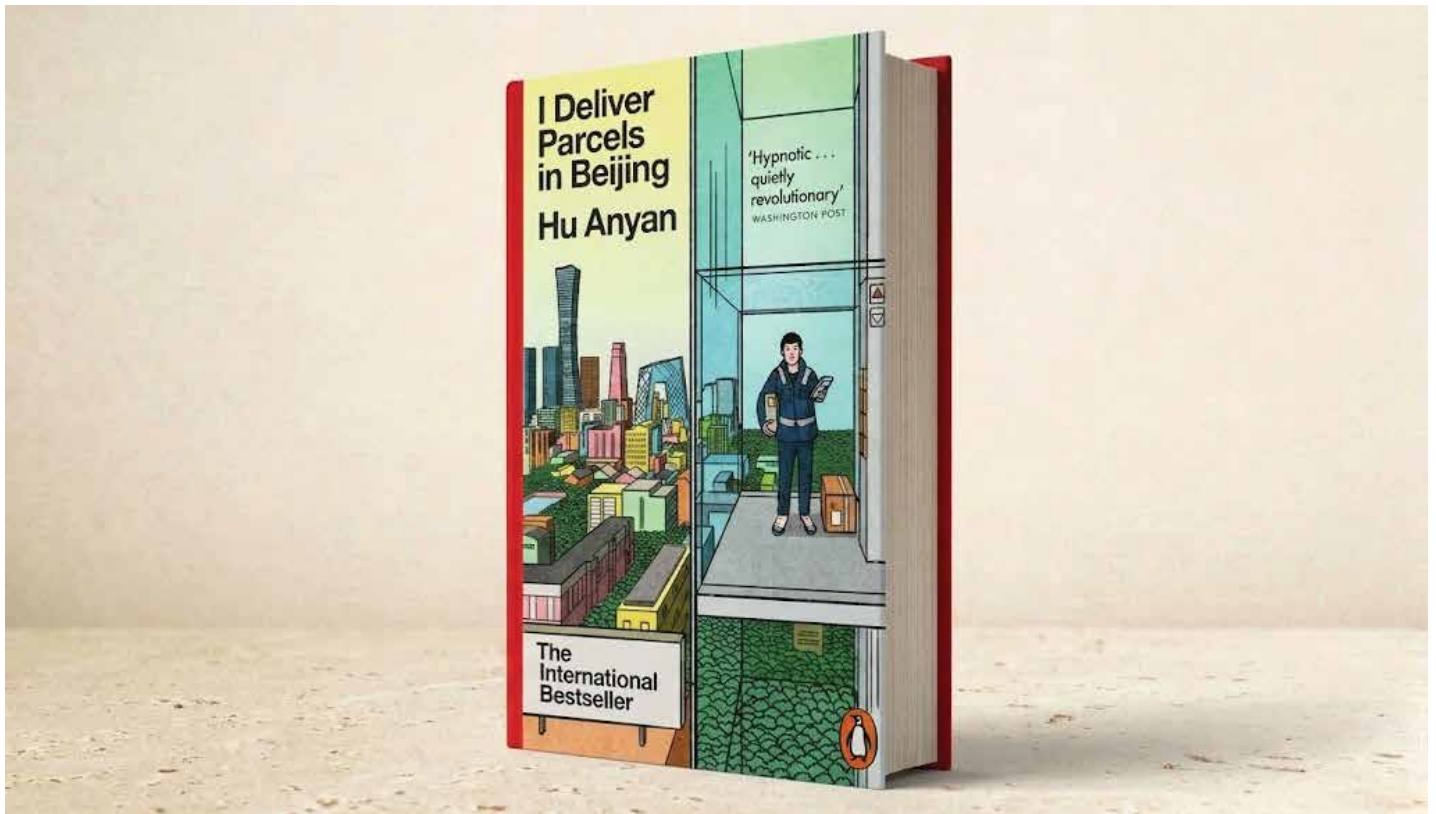


*Look up & see  
the beauty*

Premium quality lager.  
Beautifully refreshing.

    [kingfisherbeer.co.uk](http://kingfisherbeer.co.uk)

**KINGFISHER®**



Hu Anyan's memoir offers an intimate account of life as a parcel courier in Beijing and the struggle for dignity in precarious work.

## I Deliver Parcels in Beijing written by Hu Anyan and translated by Jack Hargreaves

Hu Anyan's *I Deliver Parcels in Beijing*, translated by Jack Hargreaves and published in the UK by Penguin Books, offers an intimate account of China's low-paid and precarious workforce. Drawing on more than two decades of experience in nineteen jobs across six cities, Hu brings the life of a Beijing courier vividly into view, revealing the pressures of algorithms, targets, customer demands and the *hukou* system. His memoir also speaks to the wider question of dignity and freedom at work. The book is reviewed here by Lijia Zhang, herself a chronicler of ordinary working life in China.

**I** read the first six chapters of Hu Anyan's *I Deliver Parcels in Beijing* in one sitting. The book has the compelling force of lived experience. Hu does not write from a comfortable distance about China's low-paid workers: over two decades, he held nineteen jobs in six cities, working as a petrol-station attendant, shop assistant, security guard, night-shift warehouse sorter and, most memorably, a courier delivering parcels in Beijing. His story gives a face to the

anonymous figure who appears at our door, hands over a package and hurries away.

Much of the book concerns Hu's time as a courier in the capital around 2018 and 2019. His working days stretched to twelve hours, with another parcel to deliver every few minutes. He negotiated construction sites, confusing addresses, broken electric-bike batteries, traffic and fierce competition among colleagues. The body itself

became an obstacle to efficiency. 'I sweated so much I never needed to pee,' he observes. The sentence is funny, but only for a moment. Behind it lies a system in which even drinking water or going to the lavatory can cost a worker money.

I knew delivery work was hard, but not how exhausting and humiliating it could be. Hu's reflective, often deadpan accumulation of detail makes his argument. Customers sometimes

treat couriers with startling contempt. One accuses him of stealing a parcel although a photograph shows that he left it in the designated locker. While the company ‘investigates’, it deducts the item’s value from his wages.

This is the contradiction at the heart of China’s ‘gig’ economy. It promises flexibility, yet couriers and delivery riders are controlled by targets, ratings, fines and algorithms. The boss may be invisible, but his authority is everywhere. Hu puts the paradox memorably: ‘Time is money, but money also devours time.’

The people drawn into this economy are mostly rural migrants, part of the vast mobile workforce that built China’s factories, roads and cities. The *hukou*, or household-registration system, divides citizens according to their place of registration. Despite reforms, migrants in major cities still do not enjoy the same access to schooling, healthcare, housing and social welfare as registered urban residents. Essential to urban life, parcel couriers criss-cross Beijing all day while remaining on its social margins. Their importance becomes especially visible during



A courier races through Beijing, part of the vast workforce delivering parcels across China’s cities. Photo: Chang Tian

the Spring Festival, when many return home for their annual holiday.

Hu himself was not exactly a migrant worker in the usual sense. Born in Guangzhou in 1979, he attended a vocational school, where he studied electrical-appliance repair. By his own account, reading and writing offered both solace and an escape from the frustrations of low-paid, precarious work. His experience speaks to me personally. As a young woman, I spent ten years

greasing machine parts in a rocket factory in Nanjing. My circumstances were different: I had an urban *hukou* and a permanent job in a state-owned factory, with the security, however limited, that such employment provided. Hu’s world is far more precarious. Yet I recognise the bodily fatigue, the regimentation of time, the sense of being trapped in menial labour and the hunger for a life beyond repetitive work. Above all, I recognise how easily people at the bottom of society are reduced to a function: a pair of hands at a machine, a uniform at a gate, a figure on an electric bike.

Chinese people often call such men and women *xiao renwu*, ‘little people’. Yet their lives are anything but small: China’s so-called economic miracle was built on their hard work. My factory experience taught me to notice their thwarted ambitions, intelligence and stubborn dignity. When Hu leaves his courier job, several customers send thank-you messages on WeChat. That simple praise gives him something statistics cannot measure: recognition as a human being.



Long hours, relentless targets and physical exhaustion shape the daily reality of China’s delivery workers. Photo: Getty Images

Hu's book belongs to a growing body of migrant-worker literature in China. Fan Yusu, a rural migrant and domestic helper in Beijing, became famous after her autobiographical essay 'I Am Fan Yusu' went viral. Chen Nianxi spent sixteen years as a demolition miner; his poems carry the dust, danger and damaged bodies of that life. More recently, delivery rider Wang Jibing won the Lu Xun Literary Prize for *Low Flight*, a collection of his poetry. These writers do not provide 'material' for professional authors. They seize the pen and describe work from inside the body that performs it.

This literature matters because statistics can tell us how many millions migrate or work for digital platforms, but not what it feels like to race against an algorithm, be insulted by a customer or discover that exhaustion has consumed one's dreams. Literature restores individuality. It allows the so-called little people to become the central characters of their own stories. It also asks readers to examine our complicity. There is a human cost behind every miraculously fast delivery.

Today, Hu lives in Chengdu and writes full time. The 'best delivery man', as one grateful customer called him, has left delivery work and is pursuing his dream of becoming a writer – a modest but satisfying transformation. His memoir may not always achieve the compression of great literature, but its plainness is also the source of its authority. Hu observes and



Rural migrants have helped build China's cities while often remaining on the margins of urban social services. Photo: VCG

endures without self-pity. Beneath his practical accounts runs a persistent concern with freedom: to leave a bad job, control one's time and make

something that does not belong to an employer.

I am delighted that the book has received considerable recognition. It was shortlisted for this year's Baifang Schell Book Prize for Outstanding Non-Fiction, and last year was named one of the best books of the year by *The Economist*, the *Financial Times* and *The Sunday Times*.

*I Deliver Parcels in Beijing* is not only about couriers, migrants or exploitation. It concerns the universal desire for dignity and control over one's life. Writing cannot repair the *hukou* divide or protect a worker from an algorithm. But it can make an unseen life visible, turn suffering into shared knowledge and return power to the storyteller. I hope Hu's recognition as a writer has granted him some of the freedom he sought, and above all, freedom of the spirit.



Algorithms, ratings and delivery targets increasingly shape how China's gig workers spend their working day. Image: AI generated

Lijia Zhang is herself a chronicler of 'ordinary' life lived in China. Her decade working in a missile factory is the subject of her memoir *Socialism is Great* and her debut novel *Lotus* explores the life of a Chinese sex worker.



# WATCHDOG

STAYS **LOCKED**



If a burglar snaps your lock and breaks in

**£5000**  
GUARANTEE



## *"The Toughest Lock in Town"*



**INSURANCE**  
*APPROVED*

**POLICE**  
*APPROVED*



Find out more on [www.wdlocks.co.uk](http://www.wdlocks.co.uk) or call us on **08003899965**

*Terms & conditions apply.*



# The Art of Hospitality.

  
EDWARDIAN  
HOTELS  
LONDON

  
THE LONDONER  
LEICESTER SQ.

THE MAY FAIR  
HOTEL

THE  
EDWARDIAN  
MANCHESTER