

# The South Asian Insider

Independent Voice of South Asians in North America

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## THE STRAIT SPEAKS

### Iran Declares Hormuz Open - But Peace Hangs By A Thread

Iran's Foreign Minister declares the Strait of Hormuz "completely open" under a fragile cease-re framework. Trump hails it as a turning point. The world holds its breath — and its oil supply.



Story on Page 2-5

#### By Investigative Desk

On the morning of April 17, 2026 — the forty-eighth day of a war the world was not supposed to have — Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi posted a brief, carefully worded message on the social media platform X. It arrived like a flare in the fog of a conflict that had, in less than seven weeks, reshaped the Middle East, rattled the global economy, and brought two civilizations to the brink of catastrophe. "In line with the cease-re in Lebanon," Araghchi wrote, "the passage for all commercial vessels through Strait of Hormuz is declared completely open for the remaining period of cease-re, on the co-

ordinated route as already announced by Ports and Maritime Organisation of the Islamic Republic of Iran." The reaction was immediate and global. Oil prices, which had spiked as high as 40 percent since the war began on February 28, began falling. Stock markets in Asia and Europe surged. Shipping companies scrambled to re-route vessels that had been idling in the Arabian Sea for weeks. And in Washington, Donald Trump — a man who had, just ten days earlier, threatened that "a whole civilization will die tonight" unless Iran complied — took to Truth Social to declare the development a triumph of American power and resolve. But beneath the

fanfare, seasoned analysts, diplomats, and maritime experts urged caution. This was not the end of the Hormuz crisis. It was, at best, its most hopeful chapter — and possibly its most treacherous.

#### How the World's Most Dangerous Chokepoint Became a Weapon of War

To understand what Araghchi's announcement means, one must first understand how the Strait of Hormuz — a sliver of water barely 21 miles wide at its narrowest point, separating the Persian Gulf from the Gulf of Oman — became the central battlefield of a conflict fought largely in the air. **(Contd on page 2-5)**

### Actor Jacqueline Fernandez Seeks To Turn Government Approver



Story on Page 5

#### State of Nation



Trump's New Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the dealmakers, for they shall inherit the algorithm."

## THE ETERNAL MELODY

### Honoring the Life and Legacy of Asha Bhosle

(TSAI BUREAU) The world feels a little quieter today. The passing of Asha Bhosle, at the age of 92, marks the closing of a chapter in history that defined the very soul of Indian cinema and touched hearts across generations and continents. She was not just a singer; she was the rhythmic heartbeat of Bollywood, a voice that could embody every human emotion—from the deepest ache of longing to the sheer, unbridled joy of life.



(Contd on page 6)

### H-1B visa selection rate hits a high of 75%



(TSAI BUREAU) After years of steadily worsening odds in the annual H-1B lottery, American businesses in 2026 experienced a notable turnaround in selection rates for high-skilled foreign workers through the visa programme. The approval rate of the highly sought-after visas has jumped to its highest levels in recent years. **(Contd on page 6)**

#### Also In This Issue

The Interpreter's Dilemma: 35-Year Resident Meenu Batra Detained in High-Stakes ICE Enforcement Case **Page 9**

Build-Up to Indian American Impact's "We Belong" Summit & South Asian Hill Day (April 20-21) **Page 10**

The inherited intolerance of 'my-god-the-only-god'. Why peace fails **Page 12**

Trump doesn't understand Iran. So how will he make a deal? **page 17**

Behind the bluster, Donald Trump desperately needs a peace deal with Iran. Here's a solution **Page 20**

# THE STRAIT SPEAKS

## Iran Declares Hormuz Open - But Peace Hangs By A Thread

The strait is, by any measure, the most strategically vital waterway on the planet. In peacetime, roughly 20 percent of the world's traded oil passes through it daily, along with significant volumes of liquefied natural gas. The economies of Japan, South Korea, India, China, and much of Europe are structurally dependent on unimpeded access to these waters. Iran, as a littoral state, has long regarded control of the strait not merely as a security matter, but as its most powerful geopolitical card. When the United States and Israel launched the joint operation codenamed "Epic Fury" in the early hours of February 28, 2026, Iran played that card with ruthless efficiency. Within hours of the first American and Israeli missiles striking Iranian military installations, command-and-control infrastructure, and, fatally, the compound of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei — who was killed alongside senior officials in the opening salvo — the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) began its counter-move. It closed the Strait of Hormuz. The closure was not merely symbolic. Iranian forces mined the shipping lanes,



deployed gunboats, and issued warnings to any commercial vessel attempting passage. The IRGCN destroyed at least ten commercial ships attempting to transit the strait in the opening days of the war, according to its own statements. The world watched in horror as the artery through which much of its energy flowed was severed. The consequences were swift and severe. Oil prices spiked. Qatar Energy declared force majeure on gas exports. Kuwait

Petroleum Corporation began cutting output. Gulf states that had hosted U.S. military bases found themselves under retaliatory Iranian missile and drone attack, sending shockwaves through GCC stability. In Europe, the International Energy Agency's executive director Fatih Birol warned this week that the continent had "maybe six weeks or so" of jet fuel remaining. Airlines began canceling routes. The global economy, already under strain from years of trade turbulence, lurched toward recession.

### A War Launched During a Breakthrough

The tragic irony of the 2026 Iran

war is that it began at the precise moment diplomacy appeared to be succeeding. Just one day before the strikes, on February 27, Omani Foreign Minister Badr Al-Busaidi had told the world that a "breakthrough" had been reached in indirect nuclear negotiations between Tehran and Washington. Iran had reportedly agreed both to never stockpile enriched uranium and to full IAEA verification. Al-Busaidi said peace was "within reach." Talks were expected to resume on March 2. They never did. On February 28, following what U.S. officials later described

"unsatisfactory results in the third round of negotiations," the strikes began. Trump, in an eight-minute video statement released at 2:30 a.m. EST, said the purpose of the U.S. strikes was effectively regime change in Iran. Israeli military officials later said that months of planning had preceded the operation, and that the element of tactical surprise — attacking in the morning, unlike Israel's previous night-time operations — had been a deliberate choice.

The decision to strike at the moment of apparent diplomatic progress has since become a source of fierce controversy. Critics accused the Trump administration and Netanyahu government of manufacturing or exploiting a pretext. Supporters argued that Iran had been stalling for time to advance its nuclear program and that the "breakthrough" was a diplomatic fiction. What is not in dispute is the outcome: in 12 hours, American and Israeli forces launched nearly 900 strikes, killing Khamenei, destroying critical military infrastructure, and igniting a war that has now claimed more than 3,300 Iranian lives, according to Iran's own forensics chief — and many more across Lebanon, Iraq, and the broader region.

### The Long, Painful Road to "Completely Open"

In the weeks that followed, the



Strait of Hormuz became the focal point of a furious international effort to force its reopening — and of equally fierce Iranian resistance to doing so on anyone else's terms.

Iran's initial position was uncompromising. The IRGC declared the strait would remain closed to ships from the U.S., Israel, and their Western allies. The regime's new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei — son of the slain Ali Khamenei, and considered more hawkish than his father — showed no signs of backing down under military pressure alone.

Trump's approach alternated between bluster and bribery. On April 1, he claimed Iran had asked for a ceasefire, and said the U.S. would consider it "once the Strait of Hormuz is open, free, and clear. Until then, we are blasting Iran into oblivion." Iran's foreign ministry called the claim "false and baseless." A week later, Trump threatened to "destroy Iranian power plants and bridges" unless the strait was reopened. Then, hours before a self-imposed deadline, he reversed course and announced a two-week ceasefire — contingent on Iran reopening the strait.

The diplomatic mechanics of that reversal have since become clearer. Pakistan, the critical intermediary, played a role that few anticipated. Pakistani army chief General Asim Munir and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif worked intensively behind the scenes, shuttling between Washington, Tehran, Riyadh, and Doha. Sharif publicly asked Trump for a two-week extension of his deadline, and simultaneously urged Iran's leadership to open the strait as "a goodwill gesture." On April 7, Trump announced the ceasefire on Truth Social, declaring it a "doublesided" agreement. Iran's Foreign Minister Araghchi confirmed acceptance.

**But what followed was chaos — not peace.**

Iran began allowing passage through the strait but charging tolls of over \$1 million per ship, asserting sovereign control over the waterway. Islamabad ceasefire talks broke down. On April 12, Vice President JD Vance announced the talks had failed. Trump then declared a U.S. naval blockade of Iranian ports —



not the strait itself, U.S. Central Command was careful to clarify — with more than 10,000 sailors, marines, and airmen deployed in the operation. The U.S. military began active mine-clearing operations in the strait, prompting Iran to accuse the U.S. of ceasefire violations. Reports emerged that Iran had lost track of some of the mines it had planted, and was therefore physically unable to guarantee full reopening even if it wished to do so. It was into this maelstrom that the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire, and Araghchi's announcement today, arrived.

**What Araghchi Said — and What He Didn't**

The foreign minister's declaration is significant in several respects — and ambiguous in several others.

What Araghchi said is unambiguous on its face: the strait is "completely open for all commercial vessels for the remaining period of the ceasefire." This is the broadest declaration of openness Iran has made since the war began. Previous Iranian positions allowed passage only for ships from specific friendly nations — China, Russia, India, Iraq, and Pakistan — or imposed toll regimes that the international community rejected.

What Araghchi did not say is equally important. The declaration is explicitly conditional on the ceasefire holding. It is time-limited. It is linked to the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire specifically — a connection Iran's deputy foreign minister reinforced by saying

Tehran "rejects any temporary ceasefire and is seeking a comprehensive end to the war across the region." In other words, Iran is signaling that the Hormuz opening is not a unilateral, permanent concession. It is a diplomatic instrument, available to be withdrawn if Iran's broader demands are not met.

Those demands, outlined in Iran's 10-point proposal that Trump called a "workable basis" for negotiation, include the withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces from regional bases, the lifting of all sanctions, the release of Iranian assets frozen abroad, full payment of war-related damages, and — critically — "controlled passage through the Strait of Hormuz coordinated with Iran's armed forces" with "Iran's control under the agreed framework."

That last point cannot be overstated. Iran is not proposing to relinquish control of the strait. It is proposing to formalize that control under international agreement. This is a fundamentally different proposition from what the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the broader international community have been demanding — namely, the unconditional restoration of freedom of navigation under international maritime law.

**Trump's Response: Triumphalism With Caveats**

Trump's reaction to Araghchi's announcement tracked his pattern throughout the conflict: maximalist claims of victory tempered, on closer reading, by notable hedges.

On Truth Social Thursday night, Trump called the day "May have been a historic day for Lebanon," and added, "Good things are happening!!!" He expressed hope that Hezbollah would "act nicely and well during this important period" and said a deal with Iran was "very close," with a second round of negotiations expected "soon." White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt framed the development in characteristically aggressive terms: "The truth is that President Trump and our powerful military got Iran to agree to reopening the Strait of Hormuz, and ne-

gotiations will continue." The administration has been consistent in presenting each incremental development as a product of American strength and Trump's dealmaking instinct — a framing that plays well domestically but complicates the diplomatic reality of a situation in which Iran has repeatedly demonstrated it will not be coerced into permanent concessions.

What Trump has not done — and what analysts note is the significant absence — is declare the crisis resolved, or lift the U.S. naval blockade of Iranian ports. U.S. CENTCOM



con.rmedThursday that 14 ves- sels have "turned around to com- ply with the blockade" since it took e.ect.General Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said the military would "use force" on any shipsthat did not comply, and emphasized that U.S. forces re- main "postured and ready to resumemajor combat operations at literally a moment's notice."

This dual posture — celebrating the Hormuz opening while main- taining maximum militarypressure — re.ects the core tension in American strat- egy. The administration wants thediplomatic win without relin- quishing the leverage that pro- duced it. Whether that balance canhold long enough for negotia- tions to succeed is the de.ning question of the days ahead.

### What It Means for the World

The stakes of this narrow strait have rarely been more visible to the global public. For weeks, theclosure of the Hormuz has functioned as a live demonstra- tion of just how fragile the architectureof global energy sup- ply truly is.

Japan and South Korea, which import the vast majority of their energy through the strait, havebeen in crisis mode since February. Seoul this week hailed the passage of a crude oil tankerthrough an alternative Red Sea route as a "valuable achieve- ment" — underscoring just howdesperate the situation had become. Tokyo has been in in- tensive consultations with Washington,Riyadh, and the UAE, having ruled out sending its own naval vessels to the strait.

China faces perhaps the most acute exposure. Nearly half of China's total energy imports passthrough the Hormuz in peacetime, and almost 20 per- cent of its oil comes from Iran directly.Beijing has walked a careful line throughout the con.ict — vetoing a UN Security Councilresolution that would have authorized force to reopen the strait, while simultaneously pressuringIran through diplomatic channels. Chinese Foreign Min- ister Wang Yi told Araghchi this weekthat reopening the strait was "a unanimous call from the inter- national community" — rare andpointed pressure from Beijing toward Tehran.

India, which had secured pas-



sage for several of its LNG carri- ers under IRGC escort as part of thenations Iran originally permit- ted through, now faces the chal- lenge of navigating a more com- plex opening in which the terms of passage remain contested be- tween Iran and the U.S. navysimultaneously enforcing di.ferent rules.

Europe's situation is arguably the most immediately precarious. The IEA's warning about sixweeks of jet fuel supply has concentrated minds in Brussels, Paris, and London. French DefenseMinister Catherine Vautrin told French television Thursday that France, Belgium, and theNetherlands have mine- clearing capability and can provide convoy escort services in the strait.In Paris, Prime Minister Starmer and President Macron chaired a virtual summit of 40 nations —notably excluding the United States and Israel — to coordinate plans for restoring maritimnavigation once the war ends.

The fact that a 40-nation summit on Hormuz security took place without American participationspeaks volumes about the geopolitical fragmenta- tion the con.ict has accelerated.

### Iran's Calculus: Survival, Sovereignty, and Strategic Leverage

For Iran, the decision to declare the strait open — even condition- ally — represents a signi.canttactical calculation by a state that has su.ered enor- mous damage but has not been

defeated.

The Islamic Republic has ab- sorbed the deaths of its supreme leader and dozens of senioro.cials. Its military infra- structure has been systematically degraded. More than 3,300 of itscivilians are con.rmed dead, with many more feared unre- ported. Its economy, already undercrushing sanctions, has been hammered further. And yet, the regime has survived. The swiftappointment of Mojtaba Khamenei as the new supreme leader — despite protests fromWashington — demon- strated the system's resilience.

In this context, the Hormuz open- ing is both a concession and a statement of power. By linking itto the Lebanon cease.re, Tehran is signaling that it views the con.ict as a uni.ed regionalconfrontation, not a bilat- eral U.S.-Iran dispute. It is also demonstrating — to China, Rus- sia, India,and the broader Global South — that it can act as a re- sponsible stakeholder when its sovereigntyis respected. And by insisting on "coordinated pas- sage" through the strait, it is at- tempting totransform what began as an act of economic warfare into a permanent claim of maritimejurisdiction.

Iran's 10-point plan, while rejected by many Western governments as a maximalist openingposition, has been carefully designed to be negotiable. The demand for U.S. troop withdrawalfrom regional bases will likely be traded against something. The demand for sanctions relief may.nd an

echo in a Trump administration that has shown it values the dealmaking process as muchas the deal's content. The wildcard is the question of Iran's nuclear program — the original casusbelli of the war — which has not been publicly addressed in any of the cease.re frameworks thusfar.

### The Road to Full, Permanent Opening

The prospects for a full, perma- nent, and unconditional reopen- ing of the Strait of Hormuz dependon the resolution of at least four interlocking problems, none of which is close to being solved.

The .rst is the physical problem. Reports have con.rmed that Iran lost track of mines it plantedin the strait during the chaotic opening weeks of the war. Even if all par- ties agreed tomorrow tofull re- opening, the physical clearance of mines is a complex, danger- ous, and time- consumingoperation. France, Belgium, and the Netherlands have indicated willingness to con- tribute mine-clearance capabili- ties. The United States has al- ready begun some clearing op- erations, thoughIran has de- scribed these as cease.re viola- tions. Until there is a coordinated, internationallyagreed mine-clear- ance regime, the strait will remain hazardous regardless of what any foreignminister declares.

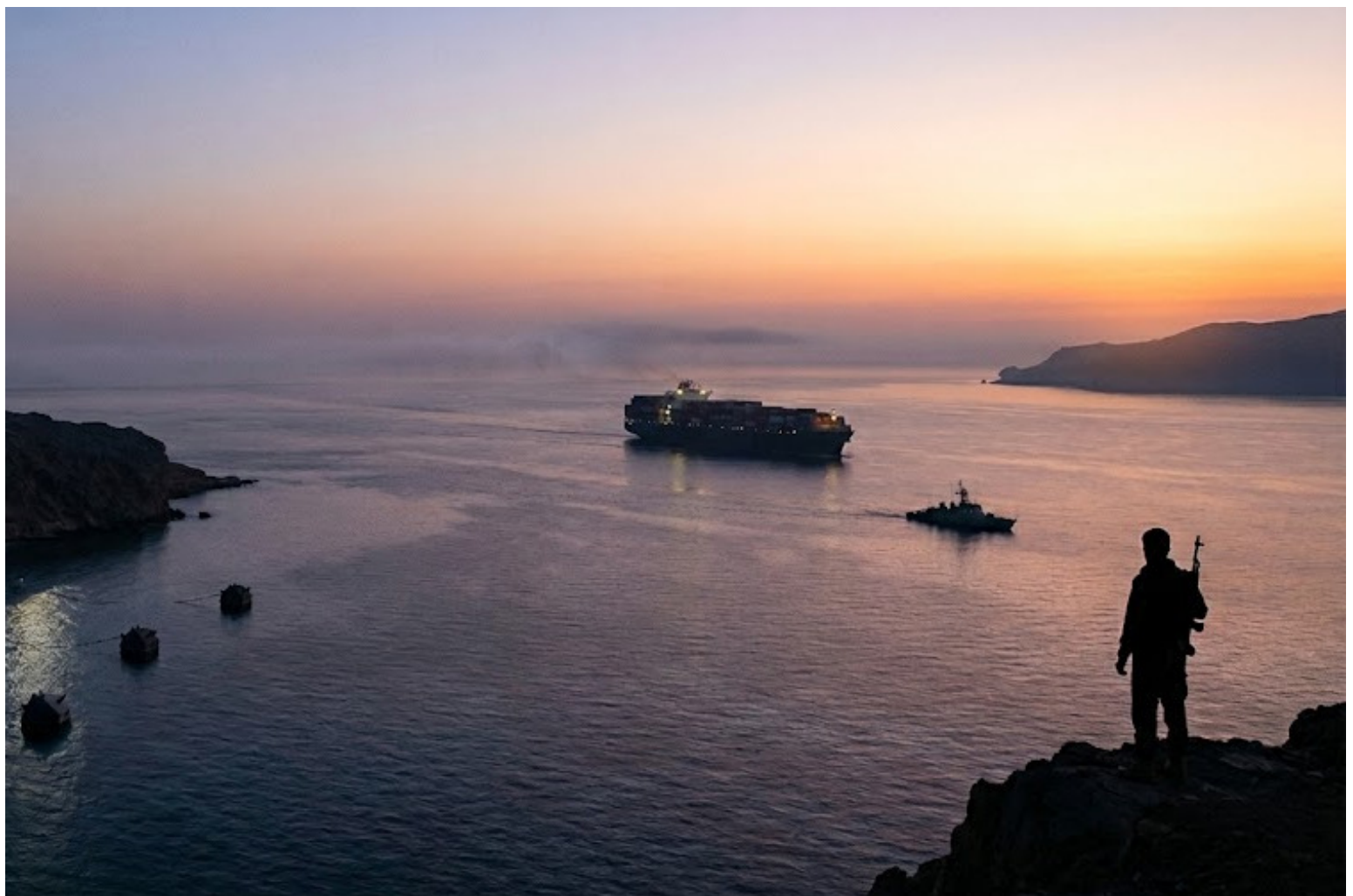
The second is the sovereignty problem. Iran's insistence on "co- ordinated passage" and "Iran'scontrol under the agreed framework" is fundamentally in- compatible with the principle

offreedom of navigation under UNCLOS — the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea — to whichthe international community insists the strait must be gov- erned. Bridging that gap will requireeither a face-saving for- mula that allows Iran to claim maritime authority while not actuallyexercising veto power over shipping, or a prolonged legal and diplomatic negotiation that couldtake months or years. The third is the regional prob- lem. Iran's condition that any comprehensive agreement mustaddress Lebanon, Hezbollah, and what it calls the "resistance axis" means that Hormuz cannotbe resolved in isolation. The 10-day Israel- Lebanon cease.re that prompted today's Hormuzannouncement is fragile in the extreme. Israel's defense minister said Thursday that the IDF'soperations in Lebanon "have not yet been completed." Hezbollah, which announced a pause inattacks, has kept its ".nger on the trigger." Any re- sumption of hostilities in Leba- non couldunravel the Hormuz opening overnight. The fourth is the negotiation problem. The col- lapse of the Islamabad talks last weekend revealedthe depth of remaining gaps between the two sides. A second round of talks has been tentativelyagreed upon, with Pa- kistan again as host. But the agenda — encompassing nuclear issues,sanctions, re- gional security architecture, and Hormuz governance — is ex-

traordinarily complex. The history of U.S.-Iran negotiations is one of repeated near-agreements that dissolved at the last moment. There is no reason to assume this time will be different, beyond the unprecedented destruction that both sides have already inflicted and absorbed. Trump's declaration that a deal is "very close" and that Iran's 10-point plan is a "workable basis" is either a genuine signal of diplomatic progress or — consistent with his established pattern — a performance of momentum designed to pressure both Iran and domestic audiences. Distinguishing between the two, in real time, is nearly impossible.

**A Fragile Dawn**

What the Hormuz strait represents, in the end, is not just a shipping lane. It is a mirror. It reflects, in stark and liquid form, the fragility of an international order built on assumptions of economic interdependence, the rule of law, and the sanctity of waterways. When those assumptions collided with the hard realities of geopolitical competition, regime survival instincts, and a U.S. administration willing to use



force in ways its predecessors had not, the world discovered — with a shock that has not yet fully registered — how quickly the architecture of globalization can fracture. Araghchi's announcement today is the best news the strait has produced in

48 days of war. It may prove to be a genuine pivot point — the moment when the machinery of diplomacy finally gained traction, and the world began the long, difficult journey back to normalcy. Or it may prove to be one more chapter in a conflict that has con-

sistently confounded optimists. The mines are still there. The blockade is still active. The negotiations have not begun. Hezbollah's anger is still on the trigger. And the new Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic has not yet told the world what kind of Iran he

intends to lead. The strait is declared open. Whether it stays that way is a question that no foreign minister's postcard can answer. Only the negotiators — and the next act of violence, or the next act of restraint — will tell us.

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Uncompromised and Unbiased

# THE ETERNAL MELODY

## Honoring the Life and Legacy of Asha Bhosle

### A Legacy of Unmatched Versatility

Born on September 8, 1933, into the illustrious Mangeshkar musical family, Asha-ji's journey began in the shadow of early tragedy. Following the loss of her father, Pandit Deenanath Mangeshkar, when she was just nine, she stepped into a world of struggle and responsibility. Yet, she forged her own path, carving out an identity distinct from the legendary Lata Mangeshkar.

Her career was a breathtaking odyssey of versatility. She refused to be boxed in, traversing genres with effortless grace—whether it was the classical nuance of a ghazal, the soulful depth of a romantic ballad, or the electric energy of a cabaret track that redefined the Bollywood sound of the 1970s and 80s. With over 12,000 songs to her name, she was rightfully recognized as one of the most recorded artists in music history, lending her voice to countless iconic actresses and shaping the cinematic experiences of millions.

### Highs, Lows, and the Strength to Rise

Asha-ji's life was as dynamic as her music. She navigated personal hardships—including a challenging early marriage—with a resilience that mirrored the boldness in her voice. She found her greatest artistic and personal synergy in her partnership with the legendary composer Rahul Dev Burman, to whom she was married from 1980 until his passing in 1994. Together, they revolutionized Hindi film music, creating a modern, experimental sound that remains timeless.

Even as her contemporaries retired, Asha-ji never stopped evolving. She embraced the wave of Indipop in the 90s, collaborated with contemporary maestros like A.R. Rahman, and even ventured into international collaborations, proving that her passion for music knew no age or borders. Beyond the recording studio, she expressed her love for creativity through her acclaimed international restaurant chain, "Asha's," bringing the flavors of her

heritage to the global stage.

### A Final Note

As we mourn her, we are left with the resonance of her songs—Piya Tu Ab To Aaja, Dil Cheez Kya Hai, Mera Kuch Saamaan, and so many others—that act as living time capsules for our memories. She once said of her transition to the "other side" that she would become one of the many sounds floating around us, eventually forming a beautiful tune for generations to come.

Asha-ji is survived by her son, Anand Bhosle, and her granddaughter, Zana Bhosle, who carry forward her remarkable legacy. While the physical voice that lit up our world has fallen silent, the music remains. She has become, as she predicted, a musical note in a song that will continue to play for thousands of years.

Rest in peace, Asha-ji. You were, and will always be, the voice of our hearts.



## H-1B visa selection rate hits a high of 75%, thanks to Trump



In several instances, the H-1B visa approval rate has reached 75%, with selections crossing 50% across the board. The turnaround, however, is mostly because of the US President Donald Trump's immigration policies that re-shaped the H-1B visa programme and slashed the pool of applicants. According to a report in US news outlet, Bloomberg Law, leading immigration firms and employers have seen significantly higher success rates in the lottery for the speciality occupation visa program. According to the report, the chances of selection earlier hovered around one in three, roughly 33%. This year, however, several top immigration law firms and service providers reported rates well over 50% across the board.

At business immigration law firm BAL, for instance, some clients achieved selection rates exceeding 60%.

Other immigration law firms, including Ogletree Deakins and

Erickson Immigration Group, along with Boundless Immigration, reported improved outcomes for H-1B approvals compared to recent years. For high-wage positions and applicants with master's degrees, rates climbed above 75% in some cases.

This boost in the approval rates did not happen by chance or accident. Rather, it is the impact of Trump administration policies that have reshaped the H-1B program.

While the administration introduced a new weighted lottery system designed to favour higher-paid and more senior workers, the most powerful factor in raising selection rates was a sharp reduction in the overall pool of applicants. The key driver behind this smaller pool was a \$100,000 fee imposed by the White House on all new H-1B workers hired from outside the US. The steep charge made international recruiting prohibitively expensive for many employers. It effectively

### AI INVESTMENTS, FOCUS ON SENIOR ROLES REDUCING H-1B USAGE IN US TECH SECTOR

Attorneys noted that these policy changes to the H-1B programmer achieved the Trump administration's aim of favouring senior talent. Alejandra Zapatero of Erickson Immigration Group was reported by Bloomberg Law as pointing out that her firm's largest clients saw selection rates ranging from 44% to 71%, with even stronger results for top wage levels. Additional factors contributed to the smaller pool of the H-1B applicants. According to the report, the tech sector, which has been a major user of the H-1B programme, has slashed hiring rates after making major investments in Artificial Intelligence (AI), and focusing on recruitment for senior roles. Many employers also adopted a cautious "wait and see" approach amid frequent policy shifts, choosing to sit out this year's lottery. For context, multiple lawsuits are

challenging the \$100,000 fee in federal courts, including the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, the Northern District of California, and the District of Massachusetts. Even if the fee is struck down, proposed regulations from the Labour Department could substantially raise required wage levels for H-1B workers, potentially pushing more employers toward alternatives. Hence to conclude, Trump's policies — most notably the fee on new hires from abroad — have successfully reduced the flood of applications, making the H-1B lottery far more predictable and winnable this year for those who participated. The program now tilts more strongly toward higher-paid, experienced foreign talent, though its long-term direction remains subject to court rulings and further regulatory changes.

halted most new hiring from abroad by universities and hospitals, sectors that had long relied on the H-1B visa program. Tech companies and other businesses which were subjected to the annual visa cap largely opted out of sponsoring workers from overseas. It's a group that accounted for about 40% of new H-1B employees in recent years, reported Bloomberg Law. As a result, the total number of lottery registrations dropped dramatically. Projections from immigration law firm, Lawfully, cited by Bloomberg Law, estimated between 195,000 and

235,000 applications for the H-1B visa this spring — a decline of up to 43% from the previous year and the lowest figure since the online lottery system launched in 2020. Just three years earlier, registrations for applying for the visa category had surpassed 750,000. Now, with only 85,000 visas available under the annual cap, the much smaller applicant pool naturally translated into higher selection probabilities. Immigration attorney Kelli Duehning of BAL described the \$100,000 fee as "the big delta," the primary reason for the improved odds. The fee

particularly benefited workers already present in the US, whose employers could enter them in the lottery without incurring the extra cost. The Trump administration also finalised an overhaul of the H-1B lottery process in December. The previous randomised system was replaced with a weighted framework that gives workers up to four attempts to apply, depending on their wage level. This overhaul prioritises higher-paid and more experienced roles, steering visas toward the most skilled and highly compensated individuals, instead of less experienced and lower-paid freshers.

# Twist in conman Sukesh's case, actor Jacqueline Fernandez seeks to turn approver



(TSAI BUREAU) In a major twist in a Rs 200-crore money laundering case against alleged conman Suresh Chandrasekhar, actor Jacqueline Fernandez recently told a Delhi court that she wants to turn an approver in the matter. The court informed her that she would have to make

a formal request to the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for the same.

The Patiala House Court on Friday issued notice to the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on her plea and listed the matter for hearing on April 20.

As per the procedure, such a request has to be made with

the probe agency, which would record her statement and then decide whether to move an application before the court to make her an approver. The development came months after the Supreme Court refused to cancel the criminal proceedings against Jacqueline in the case. Chandrasekhar, who is

currently lodged in jail in connection with multiple cases, has consistently claimed to be the actor's boyfriend. He has expressed his affection for the actor on multiple occasions by sending letters to her from jail, often on special occasions.

While leaked pictures suggest they both knew each other, Jacqueline has claimed in court that she was misled by Suresh into believing that he was a legitimate businessman. In September last year, the Supreme Court had refused to entertain Jacqueline's plea challenging the Delhi High Court's decision to not cancel money-laundering proceedings initiated against her by the Enforcement Directorate. The actor, who has categorically denied all allegations, maintains that she had no knowledge of Suresh's criminal background. The ED, however, has named her a co-accused in its chargesheet filed in Au-

gust 2022. In an earlier statement accessed by India Today TV, she said, "Suresh played with my emotions and made my life hell," adding that he "misled me" and damaged her career and livelihood. The central probe agency has alleged that Jacqueline accepted luxury gifts like jewellery, clothes and vehicles worth more than Rs 7 crore from Suresh despite knowing about his involvement in criminal activities. The ED also claimed that the actor deleted data from her phone after the conman's arrest and initially concealed details of her financial dealings with him before eventually admitting them when confronted with evidence. The particular case pertains to a Rs 215-crore fraudulent scheme through which Suresh would allegedly target high-profile individuals through impersonation and deceit.

## Special Feature

# American Pie Star Shannon Elizabeth Joins OnlyFans, Makes Bold Confession: 'Showing Off A Sexy Side'

Shannon Elizabeth joins OnlyFans and says she wants control of her career and a direct connection with fans.

(TSAI BUREAU) Shannon Elizabeth has joined OnlyFans, marking a new chapter in her career after years in Hollywood. The actor's decision is going viral, especially after she spoke about wanting control over her own image and work. Best known for American Pie, Shannon said the shift is about doing things on her own terms rather than following the traditional studio route.

### Why She Made The Shift

Opening up about her decision, Shannon explained that she wants to take charge of how she is seen and what she creates. In an interview with People, she said, "I've spent my entire career working in Hollywood, where other people controlled the narrative and the outcome of my career. This new chapter is about changing that, showing off a more sexy side no one has seen, and being closer to my fans."

She also spoke about the direct connection the platform offers. "I'm choosing OnlyFans because



it allows me to connect directly with my audience, create on my own terms, and just be free. I really do think this is the future," she added.

**Manager Backs The Decision** Her manager Andy Bachman also supported the move and called it

a strong step forward. In a statement to Variety, he said, "Shannon has always been someone who genuinely enjoys connecting with and giving back to her fans, and this allows her to do that in a more direct, meaningful way than ever before. It's a powerful model,

and right now, there's nothing more effective at facilitating that connection than OnlyFans."

### What is OnlyFans?

OnlyFans allows creators to share exclusive content through paid subscriptions. While it started as a platform for all kinds

of creators, it is now largely linked to adult content, which is why celebrity sign-ups often draw attention.

### From American Pie To Now

Shannon Elizabeth became a household name after playing Nadia in American Pie (1999) and later starred in Scary Movie (2000). These roles turned her into a major star in the early 2000s. She went on to feature in American Pie 2 and other projects, but her presence in mainstream Hollywood gradually slowed down. More recently, she appeared on Celebrity Big Brother and in Jay and Silent Bob Reboot (2019).

### Which other celebs are on OnlyFans?

Shannon is among several well-known names who have joined OnlyFans. Celebrities like Carmen Electra, Bhad Bhabie, Mia Khalifa, and The Sopranos actor Drea de Matteo are already on the platform.

# Pakistan Has Already Got Its 'Prize', Even If The US-Iran Talks Collapsed

**For all the brand packaging Pakistan has done in the last few days on the international stage, the backstage scenario remains pretty dangerous.**

(TSAI BUREAU) Only the eternal optimist or someone completely detached from reality could have expected the Islamabad talks between the US and Iran to lead to an actual peace deal. That the talks collapsed after marathon discussions doesn't come as a surprise. Even the 'event manager' - Pakistan - which was basking in its newfound glory as the global peacemaker, the saviour of the world, and centre of international diplomacy, had started to dampen its expectations. Mouthpieces of the regime had started spinning stories about how Pakistan had fulfilled its duty to the world by organising the talks between the two belligerents. They, however, insisted that the outcome of the parleys depended on the protagonists and not on Pakistan. Of course, had the talks succeeded, Pakistan would have taken the credit.

## A Pros And Cons List

As far as Islamabad is concerned, it has already milked the event for whatever it was worth and did all the virtue-signalling possible to burnish its image in the comity of nations. It will now take stock of all its gains and the possible losses it might incur in the coming days, weeks and months because of the role it played as a broker.

On the plus side of Pakistan's balance sheet is the profile it believes it has built up for itself as the venue of the talks. While talks between the US and Iran have been held earlier in various cities - Geneva, Muscat, Doha - Pakistan presented the Islamabad talks as something epochal. The hype within Pakistan and its military - and state-controlled private media - was bigger than anything in the international media. The global media mentioned Pakistan, in most part, only as the location of the parleys. The stream of phone calls between Pakistan's (nominal) Prime Minister and global leaders was nothing extraordinary and was part and parcel of the kind of international diplomacy practised in fraught times.



It in no way signified Pakistan's centrality to any peace deal. Even so, Islamabad was satisfied that after decades, the country's name was not being taken in a negative context - war, terrorism, double-dealing, instability, insolvency, military rule, stolen elections ... Well, it's a long list.

## The Real 'Medal Of Honour'

Pakistan can also claim to have won the goodwill of the Trump administration. After all, it went out of its way in trying to bail out Trump by pushing for a ceasefire. Not only did the Pakistanis copy-paste messages handed down to them from Americans, but they also tried to align Turkey, Egypt and even Saudi Arabia behind its efforts to push for peace talks. This drew appreciation from the US Vice-President, who thanked them quite profusely. For the Pakistanis, who have done everything possible to woo Trump & Co - from nominating him for the Nobel Peace Prize to signing crypto and mining deals with his buddies, and even entering into an agreement on the Roosevelt hotel in New York City - getting a pat on the head from the Americans will be worn as a medal of honour.

More substantively, the Pakistanis seem to have managed the Saudis rather well. Not only did they avoid jumping into the fray against Iran in defence of Riyadh, but they also managed to convince the Saudis that they were doing this to protect the in-

terests of the Kingdom. In doing so, they even managed to ingratiate themselves with the Saudis to a point that there were reports that Pakistan would be given a deposit of \$5 billion by the Kingdom to build up its foreign exchange reserves, which were depleted after the UAE asked them to pay back their money. There are also reports that Qatar will aid Pakistan financially and that the Saudis could make some big investments in Pakistan.

## A Bigger Role In Middle East?

In other words, the Pakistanis believe that, in tangible terms, they have managed to make some much-needed money by playing peacemaker. There is also an expectation that Pakistan has positioned itself to play a significant role as a net security provider and security guarantor in the Middle East. This would open up enormous diplomatic, political, economic and strategic opportunities for the country.

Domestically, the regime has cemented its position by creating an impression that the opposition can forget about any pressure from outside over the incarcerated Imran Khan.

## The 'Peacemaker's' Perils

There is, however, also a downside to the role Pakistan has played, especially since the talks collapsed and there is a real possibility of hostilities restarting. Worse, the second round of war could be far more

destructive and could pull Pakistan into the vortex. Under its mutual defence agreement with the Saudis, Pakistan is reported to have dispatched thousands of soldiers and some fighter aircraft to the Kingdom, presumably to support it against Iranian attacks if hostilities resume. If Pakistan gets dragged into the war, then Iran could be forced to target infrastructure in Pakistan. The damage to Pakistan's economy, in such a case, would be crippling. And the Middle East's regional instability will also spill into Pakistan.

For all the brand packaging Pakistan has done in the last few days on the international stage, the backstage scenario remains pretty dangerous. If anything, Pakistan itself is in a very precarious state - its economy is on the brink of collapse, poverty, unemployment, inflation are rising, growth is anaemic, industry is collapsing, two provinces are in the throes of full-blown insurgency, the eastern and western borders are active, and internal political divisions have left the regime with very little political capital. In such a situation, few can think about investing in the country, given especially the spectre of instability looming over the region. Of note is the fact that the governance record of Pakistan's unelected regime has received a thumbs-down from even benefactors like the Saudis, who have complained

that the country failed to come up with any bankable projects to invest in the country.

## Diplomatic Limits

Pakistan's vulnerabilities will not end because it played event manager. If the Saudis pump money into Pakistan, they will expect it to deliver its side of the bargain. One consequence of this will be the severe constriction of Pakistan's ability to resist political, military or even diplomatic demands made on it by external donor countries. Already, Islamabad appears to have attracted the ire of countries like the UAE and a few other Gulf states, which are incensed at what they see as Pakistan's efforts to bail out Iran. As for Iran, which has quite cleverly played along with Pakistan's diplomatic efforts, it could have a falling out if the latter is pushed into opening up a front against it. Over the last 40 days, Iran has been successful in stringing Pakistan along. Upon Islamabad's request, it agreed to limit attacks on Saudis, lauded Pakistan's peace efforts, and responded positively to Pakistan's diplomatic efforts. All that is not out of conviction, but convenience and cunning. Iran wants to ensure that Pakistan remains focused on diplomacy and stays away from making any military moves. There is also a rather awkward scenario. What happens if the Gulf states develop their relations with Israel to build a common front against a common enemy? Such an eventuality could complicate matters for Pakistan, which does not even recognise Israel.

While there is some concern within Pakistan over the fallout of the failed peace talks in Islamabad, by and large, the regime and the people are, for now, revelling in their fifteen minutes of fame. In a country where the future is always at a discount, it is the present that counts. The possibility that their expectations might come crashing down in the not-too-distant future is simply an afterthought. At least for now.

## The Interpreter's Dilemma: 35-Year Resident Meenu Batra Detained in High-Stakes ICE Enforcement Case

(TSAI BUREAU) HARLINGEN, TEXAS – In a case that has ignited a firestorm of debate over U.S. immigration enforcement, Meenu Batra, a 53-year-old veteran court interpreter and mother of four U.S. citizens, remains in ICE custody following her arrest on March 17, 2026. Despite living in the U.S. for 35 years and serving as a critical asset to the judicial system, Batra was detained at Valley International Airport while traveling for a court assignment. Her case highlights a growing tension between long-standing legal protections and the aggressive enforcement of decades-old removal orders.



### Background: A Decades-Long Legal Limbo

(TSAI BUREAU) Batra's history in the U.S. is a complex web of legal protections and technicalities:  
**Flight from Violence:** Batra, a Sikh, fled India 35 years ago after her parents were murdered during anti-Sikh religious violence.  
**"Withholding of Removal":** In 2000, a judge granted her "withholding of removal." This status acknowledges that she would face persecution if returned to her home

country, allowing her to live and work legally, but it does not grant permanent residency or a Green Card.  
**ICE's Stance:** The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) maintains that Batra is an "illegal alien" with a final removal order from 2000. They argue that work authorization does not confer legal status and that she remains subject to deportation to a third country.

### The Incident: Arrest at the Airport



(TSAI BUREAU) Batra was passing through security at Harlingen International Airport, en route to a case in Wisconsin, when she was approached by plainclothes agents. According to her legal team:  
**Lack of Identification:** Agents allegedly did not wear uniforms or display visible badges during the initial encounter.  
**The Exchange:** When questioned about her status, Batra cited her valid work au-

thorization. An agent reportedly responded, "That doesn't mean you can be here forever."  
**Detention Conditions:** Her attorneys claim Batra was held for 24 hours without food or water and is currently being denied consistent medical care at the El Valle Detention Center for a respiratory illness following major surgeries in December 2025.

## Rotary Club of Hicksville South Hosts Seminar on Special Needs Planning Awareness



(By our staff reporter) New York- An educational seminar was organized under the leadership of Club President Tahira Sharif and Club Secretary Dr. Neeru Bhambri at Levittown Hall in Hicksville, Long Island on Thursday, April 9, 2026.

(Image-Mizan Rahman)

### Future Course of Action

As of mid-April 2026, the legal battle is intensifying on several fronts:



(TSAI BUREAU) **Habeas Corpus Petition:** Her attorney, Deepak Ahluwalia, has filed a petition in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas, challenging the lawfulness of her detention and demanding her immediate release.  
**Military Parole:** Because her son is a member of the U.S. Armed Forces, Batra is eligible for "Parole in Place," a discretionary benefit for family members of military personnel. An urgent application has been filed on this basis.

**Temporary Restraining Order (TRO):** Her legal team is seeking a TRO to prevent ICE from transferring her to a different facility or deporting her to a third country while her case is pending.  
**Government Response:** DHS has until April 21, 2026, to officially respond to the legal filings.  
 The outcome of Batra's case may set a significant precedent for thousands of other "withholding of removal" recipients currently residing in the United States.

# NYC Mayor Zohran Mamdani's 100-Days Address and City-Owned Grocery Stores Announcement



criticism from business groups over delayed timelines on promises like free buses, yet progressive South Asian leaders praised the grocery-store plan as a bold, practical response to inflation. Diaspora media outlets noted the address's resonance: "Mamdani is showing that South Asian leadership means fighting for working families, not just high-tech visas," one community organizer told India Abroad. With an Emerson poll approval rating hovering around 43% (stronger among his base), Mamdani remains the most visible South Asian elected official in the U.S., inspiring younger Indian and Pakistani Americans while drawing national attention to how local progressive policies intersect with broader immigrant anxieties under the current administration. The story dominated community WhatsApp groups and social channels throughout the weekend.

(TSAI BUREAU) On April 13–14, New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani delivered a high-profile 100-days address and press conference that captivated South Asian American audiences nationwide. The 34-year-old democratic socialist — born in Uganda to Gujarati Indian parents and the first South Asian and Muslim mayor of America's largest city — announced an ambitious \$30 million plan for municipally owned grocery stores, with the flagship location set for La Marqueta in East Harlem and additional sites planned across all five boroughs by 2029. The initiative directly targets food deserts and skyrocketing prices, issues that rank among the top concerns for Indian American families according to recent community surveys. Mamdani highlighted early wins, including advancing universal free childcare in partnership with Governor Kathy Hochul and taking a firm stance against ICE following recent border-patrol incidents that resulted in two deaths. He faced

## Mamdani's Ongoing Policy Battles as Prominent South Asian Mayor

(TSAI BUREAU) Mayor Zohran Mamdani's first 100 days continued to generate headlines and community debate as he navigates budget battles, universal childcare negotiations, and vocal opposition to federal immigration enforcement. His administration's push for city-run groceries and free buses has become a litmus test for progressive governance, with South Asian business owners expressing both support for affordability measures and concern over potential tax



implications. Mamdani's background as a former state assemblymember and his identity as a proud South Asian progressive have made him a role model for second-generation Indian and Pakistani Americans, many of whom cite him in surveys as boosting community political engagement. National progressive outlets and diaspora publications alike framed his tenure as proof that South Asian politicians can lead on issues beyond tech visas and trade.

## Persistent Green Card Backlogs and H-1B Limbo for Indian Tech Workers

(TSAI BUREAU) Historic employment-based green card backlogs continue to trap hundreds of thousands of Indian professionals in temporary H-1B status, with wait times stretching 10–20+ years for certain categories. This week, fresh attorney reports and personal stories on platforms like Desi Reddit illustrated the human toll: inconsistent corporate sponsorship and engineers unable to buy homes, start families,



or plan long-term futures. "Aging out" fears for H-4 dependent children turning 21 added another layer of anxiety, with estimates suggesting nearly 134,000 Indian youth could lose status before their families secure permanent residency. The limbo is compounded by inconsistent corporate sponsorship and policy uncertainty.

## Build-Up to Indian American Impact's "We Belong" Summit & South Asian Hill Day (April 20–21)



(TSAI BUREAU) The week of April 11–15 saw intense mobilization for Indian American Impact's marquee 2026 "We Belong" Summit, Hill Day, and Gala, set for April 20–21 at the historic Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. Organizers reported record early registrations as the community's largest spring civic event prepares to convene hundreds of South Asian elected officials, advocates, organizers, and emerging leaders for policy workshops, advocacy training sessions, and direct meetings with members of Congress. The "We Belong" theme strikes a chord amid ongoing immigration enforcement debates and H-1B anxieties. South Asian Hill Day on April 21 will focus on pressing lawmakers on visa backlogs, hate-crime protections, and economic equity. IA Impact's 10-year milestone — noting the leap from just five Indian American elected officials in 2000 to over 300 today — is being highlighted in promotional materials. Executive Director Sonal Shah stated, "This summit is about turning visibility into power at a moment when our community feels both celebrated and targeted." The build-up included virtual town halls and training webinars that drew thousands of participants, underscoring the organization's role in turning demographic growth into political muscle ahead of the 2026 midterms.

## Shifting South Asian Political Dynamics and "New Power Brokers" Discussions

(TSAI BUREAU) Analyses circulating this week highlighted an evolving shift in South Asian American political influence, moving beyond traditional Indian-American tech and business networks toward a broader, multi-ethnic cohort of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Nepali, and Sri Lankan voices. Commentators noted that the "new power brokers" are less India-centric and more focused on regional South Asian issues, including immigration reform and anti-discrimination efforts. This conversation gained traction in think-tank briefings and community forums tied to the upcoming IA Impact Summit

## H-1B Holders Receiving Early Deportation Notices Within Grace Period

(TSAI BUREAU) Immigration attorneys from firms such as Greenberg Traurig and the Murthy Law Firm reported a surge in cases of Indian professionals on H-1B visas receiving Notices to Appear (NTAs) within weeks of job loss — sometimes as little as 14 days into the 60-day grace period. One in six Indian H-1B holders or someone they know has been affected, according to informal surveys shared in community forums. The notices threaten permanent bars from the U.S. and have sparked panic among tech workers in Silicon Valley, New Jersey, and Texas. Families are scrambling for legal counsel, with many describing sleepless nights and contingency plans to leave the country. The issue dominated Reddit threads, LinkedIn groups, and South Asian media, amplifying fears that stricter enforcement is turning the American Dream into a nightmare for highly skilled Indian immigrants who form the backbone of the H-1B program.

**Broader 2026 Immigration Crackdown Impacts on Indian Immigrants**

Ongoing enforcement actions and proposed legislative caps on H-1B visas have disproportionately affected Indian nationals, who receive the majority of these visas. Community organizations reported heightened stress, with some families exploring relocation options to Canada or returning to India. The crackdown has intersected with national stories about border security, keeping immigration top-of-mind for Indian American households.

**H-1B Registration Declines and Policy Uncertainty**

USCIS data for FY2026 showed the lowest H-1B selections since 2021, attributed to higher fees, stricter multiple-registration checks, and overall policy uncertainty. Analysts linked the drop to the current administration's immigration priorities, sending ripples of concern through Indian student and early-career networks.

**U.S.-India Interim Trade Deal Remains in Flux Post-Supreme Court Tariff Ruling**

Fresh talks in Washington aimed at solidifying the February interim trade agreement remain stalled over tariffs, non-tariff barriers, medical devices, and India's continued purchase of Russian oil. The U.S. Supreme Court's recent ruling cast doubt on parts of the tariff framework, prompting Indian delegations to seek clarity. The deal's fate directly

impacts Indian-American businesses, supply chains, and family remittances. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick's earlier New Delhi visit was still referenced in optimistic community commentary.

**Indian Delegation and Commerce Talks Momentum**

References to recent bilateral engagements highlighted renewed momentum despite court setbacks, with implications for diaspora-linked industries in tech, pharma, and energy. Community business associations monitored developments closely.

**April APISAA Heritage Month Celebrations Underway**

Universities nationwide are hosting events under the 2026 theme "Rooted and Rising: APISAA in Bloom," featuring cultural performances, panels on resilience, and student-led programming that celebrate South Asian contributions. Cal State Fullerton and other campuses reported strong turnout, using the month to counter discrimination narratives and highlight achievements.

**Zakir Khan 2026 North American Tour Ramp-Up**

Promotion for Indian stand-up comedian Zakir Khan's tour intensified, with his April 17 opening at Radio City Music Hall in New York already generating sell-out buzz. Subsequent stops in Houston, San Jose, Seattle, Austin, Los Angeles, Boston, and D.C. are drawing South Asian families seeking laughter amid tense times. Khan's relatable humor on diaspora life has made him a cultural staple.

**Hasan Hates Ronny, Ronny Hates Hasan" Comedy Event Build-Up**

Anticipation is building for the April 23 comedy showdown at Prudential Center in Newark, NJ, pitting Hasan Minhaj against Ronny Chieng. Tickets are moving fast, and the event is being billed as one of the year's biggest South Asian American cultural moments. (151 words)

**Discrimination Experiences Among Indian Americans**

The 2026 Carnegie/YouGov Indian American Attitudes Survey data remained widely discussed, revealing that roughly one in two respondents experienced discrimination in the past year — often tied to skin color, accent, or religion. Stories of workplace bias and online harassment circulated alongside calls for greater advocacy at the upcoming IA Impact Summit. (157 words)

**Top Community Concerns: Economy, Healthcare, Immigration**

Survey insights showed inflation and prices (21%), jobs/economy (17%), healthcare (13%), and immigration (11%) dominating Indian American priorities. These concerns were echoed in everyday conversations and policy briefings this week.

**Broader "Model Minority" Narrative Critiques and Diaspora Diversity**

Analysts continued critiquing how the high median Indian American household income (\$151,200) flattens the diverse experiences of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and Nepali Americans, who receive less political attention. Calls for more inclusive advocacy gained traction.

**Indian American Political Representation Milestones**

Recognition of the community's growth to over 300 elected South Asian leaders nationwide was tied to mobilization efforts for the IA Impact Summit, celebrating a remarkable rise from just five officials in 2000.

**Evacuation of Stranded Indian Fishermen from Iran**

Around April 11–12, reports confirmed the safe return of approximately 312 Indian fishermen via Armenia after being stranded amid regional tensions. The operation highlighted diaspora vulnerabilities in global crises and drew praise for swift consular coordination. Families expressed relief on social media.

**South Asian American Network Activities and Talent Connection**

Organizations like ASAN continued linking professionals, elected officials, and students through virtual and in-person networking, building on earlier Q1 momentum and preparing for April's heritage-month events.


**Economic and Policy Ripple Effects on Diaspora**

Broader national discussions on inflation, jobs, and immigration policy intersected with community survey findings showing cooling yet still notable Democratic leanings and enthusiasm for leaders like Mamdani (68% in prior data). These ripple effects shaped conversations in temples, gurdwaras, and family gatherings throughout the period.

# The Beginning

**MAD MEN**  
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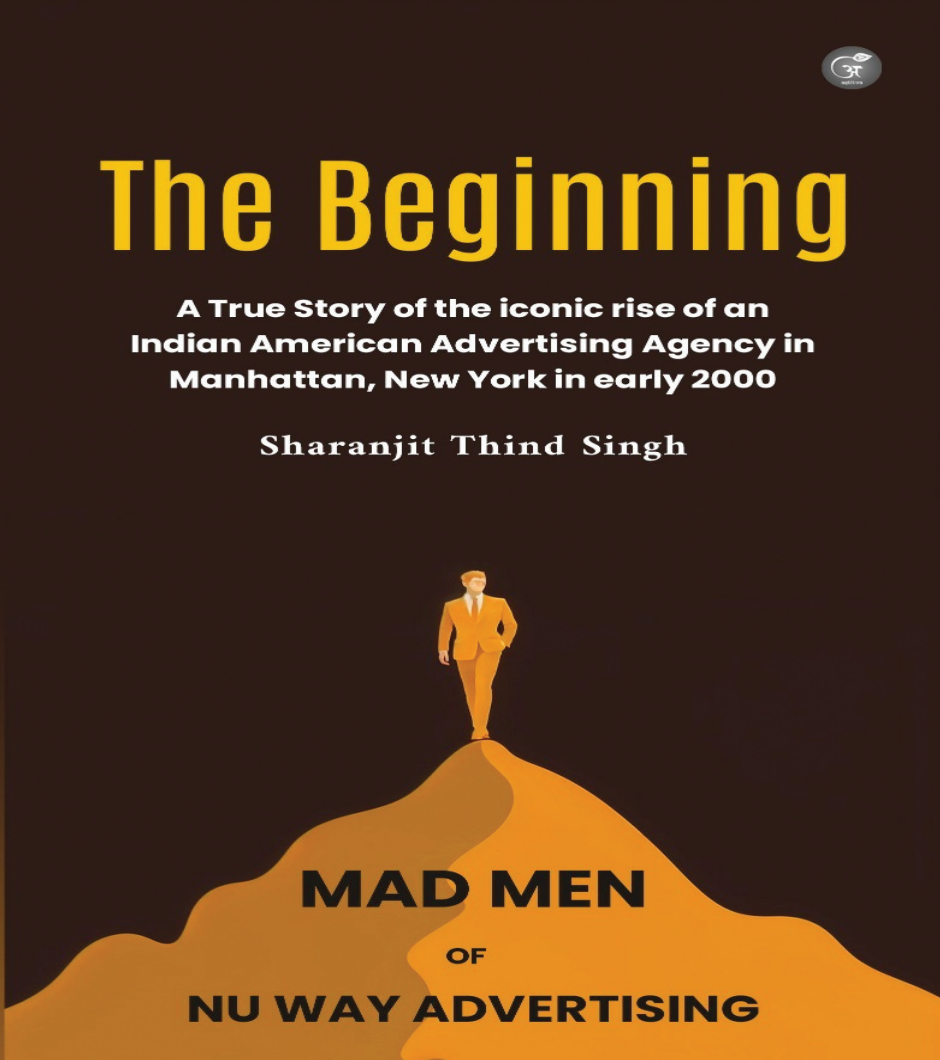
About the Author



Sharanjit Thind Singh, for more than 29 years has spent his career immersed in the world of advertising, marketing, and media. His professional journey includes working with well known Media, FMCG and Telecom Companies in India and the US.

Hailing from a small postal stamp size city in Punjab, Thind's academic background reflects his drive for excellence. After completing a Bachelor of Commerce degree, he pursued an MBA. He further strengthened his expertise with a Post Graduate Diploma in Journalism and Mass Communication. This combination of business knowledge and media insight became the foundation of his career.

He founded and, is CEO of Nu Way Advertising in Manhattan now known as Nu Way Media Group Inc. He has served as a Commissioner of the Nassau County Human Rights Commission in New York.



**The Beginning**

A True Story of the iconic rise of an Indian American Advertising Agency in Manhattan, New York in early 2000

**Sharanjit Thind Singh**

**MAD MEN**  
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# The inherited intolerance of 'my-god-the-only-god'. Why peace fails

**3 Abrahamic nations in conflict in West Asia should force us to examine the nature of monotheistic animosity.**

Over millennia, men, social groups, and countries have fought over land, resources, women, even honour, but the arrival of Abrahamic monotheism brought in a new edge to these usual causes of conflict. When God becomes the primary or additional cause of conflict, there are no easy off-ramps available. The ongoing war in West Asia, where three Abrahamic nations (Israel, US and Iran) are in conflict, and several other Abrahamic ones face collateral damage, should force us to examine the nature of monotheistic animosity. The problem is not monotheism itself, for many people accept that there is a higher order or universal God who oversees the world that was created. The advent of science has not modified this belief in any way, except to the extent of acknowledging that both science and God can coexist, for the latter's existence cannot be disproved. Belief in God is an unfalsifiable proposition.

So, regardless whether your belief system is polytheistic, henotheistic, pantheistic or monotheistic, the problem is not the belief per se. It is the super irrational monotheistic belief that there is one God, and he (always a he) happens to be the one I worship. Worse, this belief in My-God-The-Only-God comes with a binary vision and negative corollary: if you do not believe My God, you are worshipping false gods, the devil or shaitan. Abrahamic monotheism is thus a perversion of a more universal idea of monotheism, and specifically comes with the intolerance of rubbishing other gods and other faiths.

Worse, even God's powers get limited here. If you believe in Allah, you must also believe that he has sent his last prophet, and that there will be no more prophets. If you believe in Christ as the Son of God, the possibility of other sons being sent to give mankind a new message is gone. Monotheism thus comes with a computer binary: you are either one or zero. If My God is One, yours is Zero, Zilch, Nothing. This is a false binary, and excludes other more rational definitions of monotheism. This idea of monotheism comes from the idea of the divine rights of kings, who needed to be granted solo powers in their domains. God did not create a single belief system for all of mankind, kings did.

Sigmund Freud, the world's most famous psychologist, many of whose theories have now been discarded as too narrow (for they reduce almost everything to the sex drive), wrote an interesting book titled *Moses and Monotheism*, first published in 1939. This book, however, is not about psychoanalysis, but a speculative work on the origins of Moses in Egypt, which many scholars still argue about, and where he got his ideas of monotheism from.

The earliest votaries of monotheism date back to two eras: the era of Amenhotep IV, of the 18th Egyptian dynasty, who ruled from 1353-1336 BC, give or take a year or two. Then we had Zoroaster (or Zarathustra), who is dated anywhere from

1500 BC to 500 BC. He was the man who created a new monotheistic religion, whose practising descendants are now known as Parsis.

As Freud tells the story, when Amenhotep ascended the throne of Egypt, the state was becoming a world power. The people worshipped Amon but another god, the Sun God Aton, was in the ascendant. As the Egyptian empire started expanding to places in Syria, Nubia, Palestine and Mesopotamia, he needed a new and more abstract god who could be acceptable to the many peoples in the growing empire. Amenhotep changed his name to Akhenaten (with Aton, the Sun God, now added to his name), and chose to follow a rigid sort of monotheism. It was not popular, and the priesthood abandoned this monotheism once his dynasty ended.

Says Freud: the growth of the Egyptian empire led to a new imperialism, and "this imperialism was reflected in religion as universality and monotheism". He adds: "Religious intolerance, which was foreign to antiquity before this and for long after, was inevitably born with the belief in one God."

Akhenaten added "something new that turned into monotheism the doctrine of a universal god – the quality of exclusiveness." One of the Pharaoh's hymns runs thus: "O thou only God, there is no other God than Thou." This is eerily similar to what Islam preaches today. Freud says that to understand the core of this new Egyptian monotheism, it is important to not only know its positive content, but what it repudiates". Freud's book is, of course, on Moses and whether he was an Egyptian who crossed the seas to become the law-giver of the Jews. He surmises that Moses may have got his initial ideas on monotheism from Akhenaten's brief experiments with monotheism, but we shall not get into that. Just Freud's ideas on the underlying basis on which Abrahamic monotheism is built.

In Persia, Zoroaster was creating another monotheism, possibly in a reaction to the polytheistic peoples to the east in India, who believed in worshipping many gods. The new monotheism had a dualistic approach, separating good and evil, with Ahura Mazda representing the good and eternal, and Angra Mainyu the evil and destructive force. In the Zoroastrian world, Ahura (Asura to Hindus) represents important divinities, while Devas (Hindu divinities) are to be rejected. Clearly, the Indo-Iranian peoples split into two separate groups and theological disputes could have been one reason. The net result, though, is that when a stronger monotheism emerged from Arabia in the seventh century, the Zoroastrian one started losing ground and its last adherents had to flee to India to nurture what was left of their faith and heritage.

The point I would like to underscore is that the monotheism that has endured has two attributes: one good, and the other bad.

**R Jagannathan**

# A Pragmatic Breakthrough in a Volatile Chokepoint

The Strait of Hormuz is no ordinary waterway—it is the jugular of the global energy economy. Roughly 20% of the world's seaborne oil trade and a significant share of liquefied natural gas pass through this narrow 21-mile corridor between Iran and Oman. When Iran imposed restrictions and effectively blockaded it during the February–March 2026 escalation with the U.S. and Israel, the world faced the real prospect of an energy shock not seen since the 1970s. Shipping insurance rates spiked, tanker traffic froze, and oil prices surged, rippling into inflation, supply-chain chaos, and higher costs for everything from gasoline to manufacturing inputs.

Today's announcement changes that calculus. Iran's foreign minister explicitly signaled safe passage for commercial vessels during the ceasefire window, while Trump's reaction framed it as a concrete outcome of sustained pressure: threats of escalation, an active U.S. naval presence, and diplomatic maneuvering (including reported Pakistan-mediated talks). The result is not a grand treaty but a functional de-escalation. Ships can move again. Markets are breathing easier. The immediate economic dividend is already visible in plunging energy futures. If this reopening proves true and lasting—and that remains the operative caveat in a region where ceasefires have historically been fragile—it represents a tangible win for both Trump's foreign-policy approach and for global stability.

For Trump, it is a textbook validation of "peace through strength." He entered the fray demanding the strait's complete, immediate, and safe reopening as a non-negotiable condition. Rather than endless sanctions or purely diplomatic pleading, the administration combined credible military leverage (the blockade and implied further strikes) with off-ramps for Tehran. Iran's decision to declare the passage open, even under its own military coordination and "technical limitations," shows the regime calculated that continued closure carried higher costs than compliance. Trump can credibly

claim credit for restoring a critical global commons without a prolonged, open-ended conflict. In an election-year or post-election context, that narrative of decisive results—lower energy prices, resumed trade, no new forever war—lands as effective leadership.

For the world, the upside is even clearer. Energy security is not a partisan issue; it is the foundation of modern economies. Reliable passage through Hormuz means lower and more predictable fuel costs for Europe, Asia, and the United States alike. It spares consumers from price spikes that disproportionately hurt lower-income households. It prevents cascading disruptions in global supply chains already strained by other conflicts. And it reduces the risk that a single chokepoint could trigger broader economic contagion or force desperate measures (diversionary shipping routes add weeks and billions in costs). In short, an open Hormuz is a public good that benefits importers and exporters, producers and consumers, without requiring any side to declare total victory. None of this erases the underlying tensions. Iran retains significant leverage over the strait, the ceasefire is time-limited and conditional, and deeper issues—nuclear ambitions, regional proxies, sanctions—remain unresolved. Previous compliance lapses during the initial two-week window underscore how quickly things can unravel. Yet today's development is not symbolic theater; it is operational. Tankers can sail, markets have responded, and the temperature in the Gulf has dropped, at least for now. In an era when great-power competition and regional flashpoints too often produce stalemate or escalation, a narrow but functional reopening of the world's most important energy artery stands out. If it holds, it demonstrates that calibrated pressure paired with pragmatic diplomacy can deliver results where pure confrontation or pure accommodation have repeatedly failed. For Trump, that is a foreign-policy notch worth noting.

**By TSAI Editorial Board**



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**Editor in Chief**

**Sharanjit Singh Thind**

**Tel: 646 875 8495**

**Managing Editor:**

**Amaninder Singh Thind**

**Email: editor@thesouthasianinsider.com**

**Aruna Singh**

**Resident Editor (New Delhi)**

**Mailing Address:**

**NuWay Media Group Inc.**

**223 W, 38th Street, Suite 4**

**Manhattan, New York 10018**

**For General and Advertising Inquiries:**

**thesouthasianinsider@gmail.com**

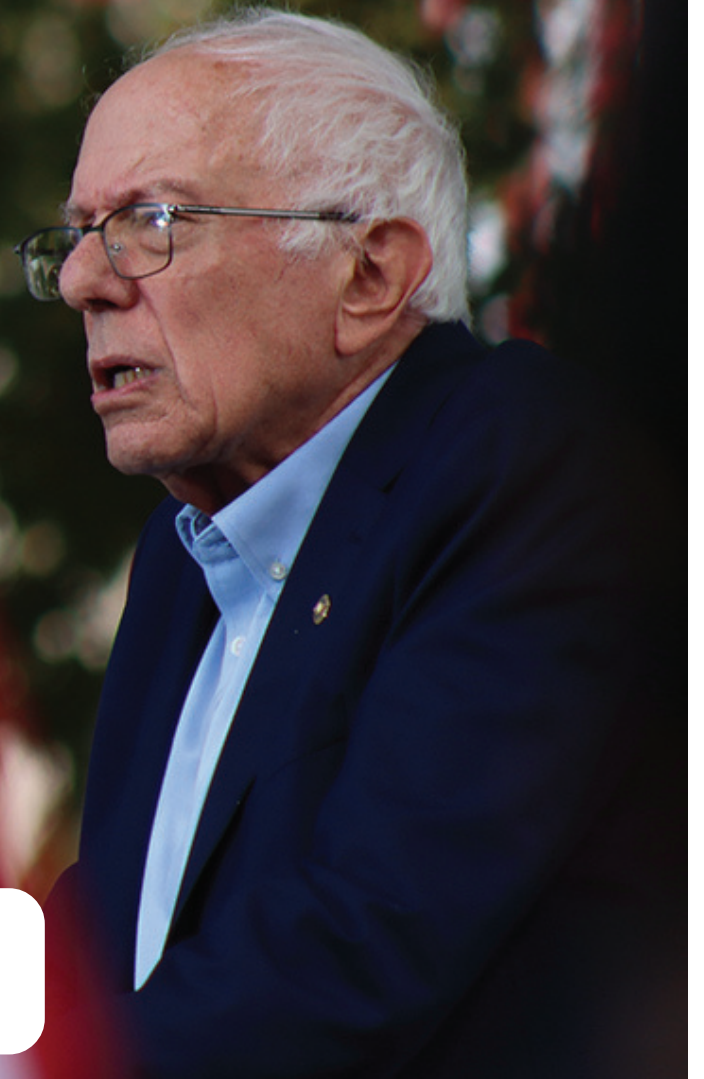
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(AI edited/generated image, used for reference purposes only)

# Artificial intelligence is coming for the working class. We must fight back



**AI oligarchs do not want to just replace specific jobs, the reality is that they want to replace workers**

Artificial intelligence (AI) is the most transformational technology in the history of the world — and will have a profound impact on the life of every man, woman and child in our country. And, if you're currently in the workforce, there's a good chance it will take your job.

Recently, I took a trip in a self-driving Waymo car in San Francisco. There was no one behind the wheel. Waymo is already operating in 10 major cities and, along with other driverless car companies, intends to expand rapidly. In Texas, 18-wheelers are now traveling down highways without a driver. Left unchecked, it is likely that millions of truck drivers, bus drivers, taxi drivers and rideshare drivers will lose their jobs in the next decade.

But it's not just job loss in transportation. A few weeks ago, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Jeff Bezos, the fourth-richest man alive, is seeking to raise \$100 billion to purchase factories all over America. Not content with replacing the 600,000 workers in his Amazon warehouses with robots, he intends to do the same with millions of factory workers.

Meanwhile, Elon Musk, the richest man alive, is converting Tesla into a robot company with the goal of building 1 million robots per year. What will these robots do? They will not only replace factory and warehouse jobs, they will displace workers in healthcare, grocery stores, the hospitality industry, call centers and every other part of our economy.

AI will not only be devastating for blue-collar workers, but for white-collar workers as well. Mustafa Suleyman, the CEO of Microsoft AI, said most white-collar work "will be fully automated by an AI within the next 12 to 18 months." A Stanford

paper called "Canaries in the Coal Mine?" found there has already been a 16% decline in employment for younger workers in jobs exposed to AI—like computer programming and customer service.

The reality is that the AI oligarchs do not want to just replace specific jobs. They want to replace workers. As Dario Amodei, the head of Anthropic, has said, AI "isn't a substitute for specific human jobs but rather a general labor substitute for humans." According to OpenAI's charter, its mission is to build "highly autonomous systems that outperform humans at most economically valuable work."

Why are AI and robotics being pushed so aggressively by Big Tech oligarchs like Musk, Bezos, Zuckerberg, Ellison, Altman and Thiel? The answer is obvious. They are implementing a technology that will make them and their corporate clients even richer and more powerful. Why would any business want to hire a human worker when it can install AI and robotics and cut its labor costs by 80 to 90%? AI and robots don't take a salary, need a vacation, require health care, or form a union. They just keep working — 24/7.

Replacing workers with revolutionary new technology is a good investment for billionaires. But for the working class of this country, AI and robotics could well be a nightmare. If AI and robotics eliminate millions of jobs and create massive unemployment, how will people survive if they have no income? How will they feed their families or pay for housing or health care? If workers and their employers are not contributing into

Social Security and Medicare, what happens to these programs that provide life-and-death support for elderly and disabled Americans?

The American people see what is coming. And they don't like it. According to a recent poll by Blue Rose Research, 79% of voters are concerned that the government does not have a plan to protect workers from AI job losses. Fifty-six percent are concerned about losing their job or having someone in their family lose their job in the next year. The next year!

Further, the overwhelming majority of Americans do not trust the motives of the AI oligarchs. For good reason.

We've heard this story before. In the 1990s, the working class of this country was told by corporate America and their media that unfettered free trade would be a boon to the economy and that it would create millions of new jobs and raise wages. As many of us understood then, that claim was a lie, which is why we opposed trade deals like NAFTA and PNTR with China. The true goal of these deals was to shut down thousands of factories in the U.S., allow companies to move abroad where they could pay desperate workers starvation wages, and greatly enhance profits for large corporations. And they accomplished exactly what they set out to do.

Now, in the midst of the coming AI revolution, what should we be doing? It's not complicated.

Congress must act to ensure AI benefits all of us—not just a handful of billionaires racing forward for power and profit.

That is why I have introduced legislation to impose a federal moratorium

on the construction of new AI data centers until strong safeguards are enacted. What does that mean?

It means that if AI and robotics are going to be deployed, these technologies must improve the lives of workers instead of just throwing them out on the street.

It means that as productivity greatly increases, the workweek should be significantly reduced with no loss in pay.

It means fundamentally rethinking the American social contract. If AI and robotics are going to create unprecedented wealth, we as a nation must guarantee all Americans a high-quality standard of living: decent housing, health care, education, and more.

It means that if AI and robotics will be used by children, guardrails must be established to make sure they do not harm their emotional well-being or their capacity to learn.

It means that our democracy must be secured from those who would use these technologies to lie and distort reality, and it means that our privacy must be protected from huge surveillance corporations that can use AI to increasingly track and record every aspect of our lives. And last, but certainly not least, it means that we need to protect the American people and the world from the existential threat many scientists fear may be coming. If AI and robotics become smarter than humans, there is a real possibility they will function independently of human control, with possible catastrophic outcomes. That obviously must not be allowed to happen. The international community must come together to prevent this nightmarish scenario.

**By Sen Bernie Sanders**

# Amid Trump's War On The World, How Effective Really Is India's Strategic Autonomy?

**India cannot mechanistically base its positions on preferred international norms, unmindful of its own direct interests.**



In a recent op-ed in February, India's External Affairs Minister assessed, "The world has entered a volatile and uncertain era, possibly the most turbulent in living memory". In a subsequent public comment on April 4, he went on to say that "everything today is being leveraged, if not actually weaponised", and that "arriving at an optimal mix of equities, exposure and risks is a far more complex calculus".

## **The Challenge With Staying Neutral**

India's striving for and assertion of the strategic autonomy of its decision-making has thus become even more an imperative, and also challenging at the same time. Since 2000, India has built a deepening economic, technological, political and defence partnership with the US, with the latter declaring India as a Major Defence partner and describing the relationship as a defining feature for the 21st century. US leaders also repeatedly said that they saw the rise of India to be in the US's interest. Contrast this with President Trump's comment in July 2025 that he did not want US companies to hire in India, and that of US Deputy Secretary of State Landau at the Raisina dialogue in March this year, that the US would not make the same mistake with India that it did with China. The Quad also does not appear to be getting the same summit-level traction in Trump 2.0 as it did in the preceding Biden administration.

Trump's 50% tariffs on Indian products levied last year were seen as a vindictive measure driven by his personal pique at India not crediting him with a role in the ceasefire following Operation Sindoor in May 2025.

## **Before US-Israel, There Was Russia**

Yet, India avoided direct criticism of the US and Israel for initiating the conflict with Iran, while asserting in its February 28 statement that "sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states must be respected", and expressing only deep "concern at the recent developments". By contrast, in a conversation with the President of the UAE on March 1, the Indian Prime Minister "strongly condemned the attacks on the UAE" and "expressed that he stands in solidarity with the UAE in these difficult times". The Indian Prime Minister's visit to Israel, just two days before the start of the US and Israeli actions, has also raised questions about the appropriateness of the timing and appearance of partisanship, when the outbreak of conflict was expected.

Similarly, India had refrained from direct criticism of Russia when it violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine in February 2022, with the Indian Prime Minister diplomatically telling Russian President Vladimir Putin in September 2022 at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Samarkand, that this was "not an era

of war". Russia's deep and longstanding defence cooperation partnership with India, and political support over decades in international fora, no doubt influenced the nuance of India's position.

## **What Strategic Autonomy Really Means - In The Real World**

All these legitimately raise questions about what strategic autonomy entails. Clearly, it cannot imply that India mechanistically base its positions and articulations on certain widely articulated, heretofore, positions of preferred international norms, unmindful of its own direct economic, technological, defence and political interests. No major power does that. China had in 2016 rejected the ruling of an international arbitration tribunal on the South China Sea, calling it "not worth the paper it was written on", and proceeded to militarise several islands and features in violation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The 2026 US National Defence Strategy asserts that the US would no longer support "cloud-castle abstractions like the rules-based international order".

In the immediate aftermath of independence, India had adopted non-alignment as a strategy to avoid subservience to decisions made elsewhere in the two competing superpower-led military alliances. In the post-1990 unipolar phase in global affairs, the assertion of its strategic autonomy

enabled India to ward off US-led attempts to universalise norms based on American preferences. These had included the indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1995 and attempts to bring into force the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996.

## **'Hedging', Not Isolation**

In the current context of India striving for productive relations with different poles in the international system, along with the growing weaponisation of dependencies by all major players, strategic autonomy can be sustained only if India builds up further its own economic, technological and military strengths. Given the competitive advantages that can be derived from cooperation and partnerships, isolation is not a viable strategy. But hedging certainly is. Each of our partners needs to be aware that India has other options, too.

In the current situation, the effective multiplicity of options is under strain. Russia has been preoccupied with the Ukraine conflict for more than four years, straining its ability to provide supplies in time or be impactful in other international contexts. Russia was not able to do much to deter a US-driven "regime change" action in Venezuela, or the enhanced embargoes in Cuba. Europe and Japan caved in to maximalist US trade demands in 2025 because they continue to be security-dependent on it, through NATO or through bilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific. There are security-related limits to India's options for exploring the economic and technological options with China, despite its now-established strengths in manufacturing and many frontier technologies.

However, the US's re-assertion of "America first" in Trump 2.0 and its denigration of allies and partners has prompted a search in Europe, Japan and elsewhere for independent capabilities. If this endures, it will certainly enhance options for India.

The concern and hand-wringing in some public commentary in India over Pakistan's role as a facilitator in the recent US-Iran discussions can only be attributed to the unease about the current geopolitical flux. Established utility in a specific context can only be transitory, as Pakistan has found in its perennial waxing and waning relationship with the US. However, the enduring influence of a country will depend on its own economic, technological and military strengths. India's actions and words should derive from that, and in the consolidation of its strategic autonomy.

# For Now at Least, the Iran War Seems to Be Failing



If you're winning a war, you don't typically need to impose a naval blockade after peace talks collapse, threaten to "destroy an entire civilization," or scramble to blame everyone from European allies to the media for the lack of swift victory. Yet here we are, just days into the enforcement phase of President Trump's campaign against Iran, and the rhetoric and actions suggest a conflict that, for now at least, is not delivering the decisive results the administration promised.

The sequence is telling. High-level talks in Islamabad between U.S. and Iranian delegations ended without agreement last weekend. Accusations flew: the Iranians claimed excessive American demands; the Americans pointed to Iranian intransigence. Almost immediately, the U.S. announced and began implementing a naval blockade of Iranian ports and coastal areas. CENTCOM insists it targets only Iranian maritime traffic, not the entire Strait of Hormuz, but the distinction has done little to calm global markets or regional nerves. Oil prices have ticked upward. Shipping insurance costs are rising. China has condemned the move as dangerous escalation. President Trump, never one for understatement, has alternated between declaring the conflict "very close to over" and warning of catastrophic consequences for Iran if it doesn't bend. On social media and in briefings, the tone has grown more frustrated. Allies are scolded for insufficient support. Domestic critics are dismissed as weak or disloyal. This

- **Market Volatility:** Rising oil prices and shipping insurance costs threaten global economic recovery.
- **Geopolitical Friction:** Strong condemnation from China and lukewarm support from Europe highlight America's growing diplomatic isolation in this theater.

is not the language of a commander whose forces have achieved clear dominance. Victors don't usually sound as if they are still searching for the knockout blow.

Recall the initial objectives. The administration sought to neutralize Iran's nuclear ambitions, curb its support for proxy militias, and reassert American leverage in the Middle East after years of perceived weakness. Early strikes and pressure tactics produced some tactical gains—disruption of supply lines, setbacks for Hezbollah and other groups. Yet the core regime in Tehran remains intact. The two-week ceasefire, fragile from the start, has held tenuously but without producing the broader strategic breakthrough. Iran has not capitulated on its nuclear program or regional influence. Instead, it has used the pause to regroup, appeal to international sympathy, and exploit divisions among America's partners. The blockade itself highlights the challenge. Enforcing it requires significant naval resources, even if the Pentagon claims it is using only a fraction of U.S. capability. Iran has threatened retaliation, raising the specter of asymmetric responses—

mines in shipping lanes, attacks on commercial vessels, or renewed proxy actions. History is littered with examples of powerful navies struggling to turn blockades into political victories without broader diplomatic or ground support. The British learned this in the Napoleonic era; the U.S. confronted similar limits in different contexts. A blockade can inflict pain, but pain alone rarely forces a regime like Iran's—ideologically hardened and economically sanctioned for decades—to sue for genuine peace on American terms. Worse, the domestic and international messaging has muddied the waters. Mixed signals from the White House—optimistic declarations one day, dire warnings the next—have left even supporters uncertain. Europeans, already wary after years of transatlantic friction, have offered limited backing. The recent defeat of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, while celebrated in some quarters as a triumph of democracy, underscores how quickly populist strongmen can lose public support when economic realities bite. If the Iran campaign drags on without clear wins, similar fatigue could set in here at home.

None of this is to say the effort

was misguided in principle. Iran's behavior—nuclear brinkmanship, sponsorship of terrorism, threats to global energy flows—has long demanded a firmer response than the half-measures of previous administrations. President Trump deserves credit for rejecting the failed appeasement of the past and for recognizing that weakness invites aggression. The use of maximum pressure, including military tools, was always going to carry risks. But wars, even limited ones, must be judged by outcomes, not intentions. For now, the results look disappointing. The Islamic Republic has absorbed the initial blows without collapsing. Negotiations have stalled. The blockade, while disruptive, risks becoming another open-ended commitment that drains resources and tests American patience. Allies are divided. Global opinion, shaped by images of civilian hardship, tilts against Washington. And the administration's rhetorical escalation—threats of civilizational destruction, scapegoating of partners—suggests a strategy still in search of success rather than one savoring it.

This does not mean defeat is inevitable. Wars evolve. A second

round of talks could yield breakthroughs. Targeted pressure might yet force concessions on the nuclear file or proxy networks. But realism requires acknowledging the current trajectory: ill-conceived in execution if not in concept, the campaign has so far failed to deliver the swift, transformative victory that would justify the risks and costs.

America's adversaries watch closely. Iran senses an opportunity to outlast U.S. resolve, as it has before. China and Russia calculate how far American attention can stretch. The lesson for Washington is old but perennial: in the Middle East, wars are easier to start than to end cleanly. Boldness without clarity of ends and means can turn potential strength into strategic frustration. For now at least, the Iran war seems to be failing. The coming weeks will determine whether this is a temporary setback or the beginning of a longer, costlier stalemate. Prudent leadership would adjust course—sharpen objectives, rebuild coalitions, temper the rhetoric—before frustration hardens into failure. The stakes, for the region and for American credibility, are too high to pretend otherwise.

# Democracy Lives in Europe, After All

Viktor Orbán's 16-year grip on Hungary ended not with a whimper but with a landslide. On April 12, Hungarian voters turned out in record numbers—nearly 80%—to deliver a crushing defeat to the man once hailed as the standard-bearer of “illiberal democracy.” Péter Magyar, a former insider who broke with Fidesz only two years ago, led his Tisza party to a supermajority of 138 seats in the 199-member parliament. Mr. Orbán's Fidesz coalition was left with just 55. The outcome was decisive, peaceful and, for many pundits in Brussels and Washington, entirely unexpected.

This is not the story the doomsayers told. For years, Western elites warned that Europe was sliding into fascism. Hungary under Orbán was Exhibit A: a captured judiciary, state-controlled media, crony capitalism dressed up as national conservatism. The European Union threatened funding cuts. American progressives saw a preview of Donald Trump's America. Yet when Hungarians had the chance to vote, they chose change. Democracy, it turns out, still works—even against a leader who spent more than a decade tilt-

ing the playing field in his favor.

The reasons were refreshingly mundane. Voters were fed up with stagnation. Economic growth last year scraped along at 0.4%, unemployment hit a 10-year high, and the health-care system crumbled while corruption scandals piled up. Mr. Orbán's culture-war rhetoric and alliances with Moscow and Beijing could not mask the fact that ordinary Hungarians were worse off. Péter Magyar ran on competence and anti-corruption, not ideology. He assembled a broad coalition of conservatives, liberals and pragmatists who simply wanted a functioning government. In the end, bread-and-butter issues trumped strongman posturing.

This result echoes Poland's earlier rejection of its own populist experiment. In both cases, the pattern is the same: incumbents who promised sovereignty and traditional values delivered economic underperformance and institutional decay. Voters noticed. Turnout surged. Institutions held. The “end of democracy” narrative, peddled by those who equate any conservative victory with authoritarianism, has once again been exposed as hyper-

bolic. None of this means populism is dead. Mr. Orbán built a formidable machine, and his ideas on migration, family policy and EU overreach still resonate across the continent. But Hungary's election proves those ideas must compete in the arena of results. When they fail to deliver prosperity and clean governance, voters can—and do—throw the bums out. That is the genius of democracy, however imperfect. For Americans watching from afar, the lesson is timely. The United States is in the middle of its own experiment with bold executive leadership under President Trump. Critics warn of democratic backsliding; supporters celebrate a long-overdue correction. Hungary reminds us that elections remain the ultimate check. Even entrenched leaders with loyal bases and favorable rules can be defeated when citizens mobilize around tangible failures—corruption, inflation, institutional rot.

Mr. Magyar's victory also carries a warning for the global right. Alliances with authoritarians abroad, whether in Moscow or elsewhere, come at a domestic cost when they distract from fixing the home

front. Vice President JD Vance's pre-election visit to Budapest to rally for Orbán now looks like a miscalculation. Foreign endorsements do not buy votes; competent governance does. The same holds for any political movement that confuses grievance with governance.

Europe is not out of the woods. France and Germany face their own populist pressures. The EU's bureaucratic tendencies remain a threat to national sovereignty. Yet Hungary's voters have shown that democratic resilience is real. Predictions of fascism proved premature. The continent's institutions, however flawed, still allow course correction when leaders lose touch with reality. This should be a source of cautious optimism, not complacency. Democracy lives because citizens bother to show up and demand better. In Hungary they did. Americans would do well to remember that the same mechanism—free, fair elections and engaged voters—remains available here at home. The sky did not fall in Budapest. It is unlikely to fall in Washington either, provided citizens keep faith in the ballot box rather than in the counsels of despair.

## Warning Shot for Parents – A Clear Look Ahead

Parents, the threat is no longer coming — it is already here, and it is accelerating.

Your daughter's (or Son's) innocent smile in a school photo, family vacation selfie, or social media post can now be taken and turned into realistic deepfake pornography in minutes. Free or low-cost AI tools make it possible for anyone — classmates, ex-partners, strangers, or trolls — to strip her face and place it onto explicit images or videos without her knowledge or consent. The results look disturbingly real.

This is image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), and it has moved far beyond traditional “revenge porn.” Deepfake technology has made non-consensual explicit content scalable, anonymous, and nearly impossible to fully erase once it spreads. Social media plays a central role by encouraging young people to share photos and videos while its algorithms push sexualized content. Platforms like OnlyFans have mainstreamed pornography, training millions to treat intimate images as casual entertainment or commodities. This cultural shift supplies both the raw material (everyday photos) and the demand for more explicit “content.”

Look just a few years into the future: as generative AI becomes even more powerful and accessible, creating convincing deepfake porn will become faster, cheaper, and more widespread. What begins as a cruel prank in middle school or high school can haunt your child for decades — affecting college applications, job inter-



views, relationships, and mental health. Victims often feel profound betrayal, shame, and helplessness because the content keeps reappearing online despite takedown requests. We are heading toward a world where explicit, non-consensual images of almost anyone with an online presence could circulate widely. Privacy and consent are being eroded at scale. The good news is that we still have

time to act. Demand that tech platforms implement strong age verification, automatically block and hash known abusive images, and face real legal accountability when they profit from or enable this abuse. Support laws that treat synthetic image-based sexual abuse with the same seriousness as physical violations.

If we do nothing, we risk normalizing a future in which our children's faces and

bodies can be hijacked and exploited for entertainment or profit without their permission. The warnings from 2018–2023 have already proven true. The next, more dangerous wave is building right now. Protect your children today — before the internet turns their innocence into someone else's permanent digital nightmare. The window for meaningful change is closing.

# Trump doesn't understand Iran. So how will he make a deal?

**Trump joined Netanyahu in the war without clearly defining its objectives or giving any thought to an exit strategy. If Iranians play hardball and drag out the conflict until the US mid-term elections, deepening the energy crisis, Trump's Republican Party could lose control over Congress, making him a lame-duck president.**

Pakistan Army Chief Asim Munir's unexpected visit to Tehran on Wednesday fuelled speculation that a second round of talks between the US and Iran is imminent. Donald Trump appears to have tasked his favourite Field Marshal to coax Iran to discuss a revised deal to end the war. But either side refusing to blink raises questions about the likelihood of a quick deal working out.

## TRUMP'S WAY IS WRONG

The recent peace talks in Islamabad failed due to a lack of trust between the two sides. Trump appears to believe that military pressure can force Iran to agree to a deal, despite its resistance during 38 days of relentless bombardment, heavy losses to its military and civilian infrastructure, and the killing of its top leadership.

All other American presidents in the past four decades rejected Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's repeated pleas to invade Iran. They heeded Iran experts' advice against such a dangerous adventure.

But Trump appears to have listened only to Bibi, who convinced him that Iran would collapse in a few days and would bring the US a quick victory. He ignored the advice of his Gulf allies, his military commanders, and his vice president. He even forgot his own speeches from previous years, where he argued against taking the US into another foreign war.

In his book, "War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars", veteran US diplomat Richard Haas argues that you must not go to war against a country you do not understand. Had he consulted any Iran expert, Trump would have been told about Iran's experience of sustaining an eight-year war against Iraq and the nature of the Islamic regime, which has survived multiple attempts to threaten its existence in the last five decades. It has also been preparing to fight a war against Israel and the US for decades.

## ART OF THE DEAL

US Vice President JD Vance, who led the US delegation to Islamabad last weekend, said on Tuesday that Trump wants to achieve a "grand bargain" that offers Iran economic prosperity if Iranians commit not to develop nuclear weapons — and not a

"smaller agreement." This again suggests a lack of understanding of Iran.

What Iran want is respect — and its assets unfrozen and sanctions lifted in return for a compromise on the nuclear issue and the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz. Washington needs to understand that, since the war began, the Islamic regime has become more assertive and uncompromising. Iran is therefore unlikely to now accept a deal that it would have accepted before the war.

Disagreement over nuclear enrichment was the main hurdle in Islamabad, according to Vance. The US is insisting on zero enrichment for at least 20 years — though Trump has said he doesn't want Iran to have any enrichment on its soil ever.

In the 2015 international agreement, which Trump unilaterally cancelled in 2018 despite Iran complying with its terms, Iran was permitted to enrich uranium to up to 3.6 per cent for 15 years. Since then, Iran decided to increase enrichment levels, which reached 60 per cent a year ago, according to the UN nuclear watchdog.

More than 400 kilos of such enriched uranium are believed to be buried in the debris of nuclear facilities in Isfahan since the US attacks last year. Israel fears Iran could retrieve it and enrich it to 90 per cent to make 11 nuclear weapons. Tehran is prepared to negotiate this issue, but wants to retain its right to enrichment.

## ISRAEL AND LEBANON

Trump also needs to assure Iran that he is serious about the ceasefire announced on April 7. Before the second round of talks, a ceasefire in Lebanon would go a long way towards gaining Iran's trust.

Israel continued bombing Lebanon, even as the US and Iran met in Pakistan. Trump needs to tell Netanyahu to stop the attacks, which have killed more than 2,100 people, most of them civilians, over the past six weeks.

Netanyahu ordered a dramatic bombardment of Lebanon hours after Trump announced the ceasefire, killing more than 300 people within minutes. That prompted Iran to keep the Strait of Hormuz closed. America's



allies have asked Israel to pause its operations in Lebanon, but Netanyahu has ignored those pleas. He will only listen to Trump.

Last week, Trump asked Netanyahu to scale back the attacks, but to no avail. Netanyahu and his close allies in Israel may be the only people who would like the conflicts in Iran and Lebanon to continue. He has been accused in Israel of keeping the country in a state of perpetual war for his own political interests. Israelis have genuine security fears. But they also feel that wars have not made them any safer. They are also concerned about their country's worsening international image, particularly since the military operation in Gaza that has led to the deaths of more than 72,000 Palestinians.

## WIDER IMPLICATIONS

Trump joined Netanyahu in the war without clearly defining its objectives or giving any thought to an exit strategy. His decision has wreaked havoc on the global economy. Tuesday's IMF report warned that the war will lead to higher inflation and could even trigger a recession. It has cut the US GDP forecast to 2.3 per cent, down from the government's estimate of 3.5 per cent. Gulf countries will suffer more.

But the worst impact of the Iran conflict is the deepening crisis in the energy market. Every day, "we are losing 13 million barrels per day, and tomorrow it may be bigger," warns Fatih Birol, the head of the International Energy Agency.

In Europe, a barrel of oil is trading at up to \$150. In the US, the

average retail price for a gallon of petrol is now \$4.12. Before the war, the price was \$3 per gallon. For Trump, it has already become a political issue. If he is unable to reach a deal with Iran to end the conflict, the petrol prices will go even higher. If Iranians play hardball and drag out the conflict until the US mid-term elections, petrol prices could double from current levels. That will almost certainly defeat Trump's Republican Party, lose his control over Congress, and make him a lame-duck president.

## ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM IS CHINA

Trump wants to end the war soon. He has already postponed his scheduled trip to China once. He is due to meet President Xi Jinping in mid-May and needs a deal in place before then. Xi is keen for the Strait of Hormuz to reopen, as 40 per cent of China's energy passes through it. He has given his blessing to Pakistan to facilitate a deal between Tehran and Washington. On Tuesday, Xi condemned Trump (without naming him) for what he called the law of the jungle. He is unhappy with Trump's decision to impose a blockade at the Strait of Hormuz. There are fears of a confrontation between China and the US if one of the Chinese tankers is hit by the US Navy. But Trump claimed on Wednesday that China is "very happy" with him as he is "permanently opening the Strait of Hormuz." As often happens, Trump didn't elaborate.

US intelligence reports recently said China had been sending arms to Iran. Tehran's ballistic missile programme has been

sustained over the years through dual-use equipment sales from China, but US reports mentioned some recent deliveries of missiles.

Beijing denied the reports, and Trump also said that China had agreed not to provide any weapons to Tehran. Beijing, being the main rival of the United States, would be happy for Iran to gain the upper hand in the conflict, as it keeps the US engaged in the Middle East, away from the Indo-Pacific.

## SELF DECEPTION

The second round of talks between the US and Iran will be welcomed by most of the world. Trump's desperation suggests he has realised that what he called "a little excursion" in the early days of the war has proved too costly for him and the US.

But he needs to make an effort to understand Iran and to fight self-deception. Rather than rushing into a quick agreement, Trump should give his team time to build confidence with their Iranian counterparts. The 2015 Iran nuclear deal took nearly two years of effort and painful negotiations by the Obama administration before it was signed. Iran's leaders should also recognise that continuing the conflict will only inflict further pain on its people. Iran's military and civilian infrastructure have been severely damaged, and thousands have been killed. It should be clear to Tehran and Washington that they would suffer even more if the war escalated rather than ended. That should be a sound reason to make progress in talks.

**By Naresh Kaushik**

# Why were these two US immigration judges fired?

The case of two fired judges – and one who kept his job – offers a lesson in the administration's view of free speech

The Trump administration believes some noncitizens may not even have first amendment rights. And it's turning that legal fantasy into a reality by making immigration judges choose between the constitution and their jobs.

Last week, the judge who rejected the deportation of Rumeysa Öztürk, the Tufts doctoral student whose only offense was co-writing an op-ed critical of Israel, was fired after upholding the law. Judge Roopal Patel rejected the administration's argument that expressing views shared by millions of Americans disturbed by the carnage in Gaza – sometimes including Donald Trump himself – equates to supporting terrorism and antisemitism. Also let go by the Department of Justice, which hires and fires immigration judges, was Judge Nina Froes. She terminated the removal case against Mohsen Mahdawi over his involvement in campus protests at Columbia. The secretary of state, Marco Rubio, perplexingly argued, in a memorandum supporting the removal, that Mahdawi's antiwar activities interfered with the administration's purported goal of ending the war in Gaza peacefully. But while Froes and Patel pack their bags, Blake Doughty, an immigration judge in Atlanta, remains on the bench. And his recent opinion ordering the deportation of Ya'akub Vijandre – a Daca recipient, Red Cross-trained first aid responder, activist and photojournalist – may have secured his seat on the bench for the foreseeable future. There's precedent: the Louisiana immigration judge Jamee Comans was promoted to acting assistant director of the office of policy at the Executive Office for Immigration Review months after ordering the pro-Palestine activist Mahmoud Khalil removed. The constitutional cluelessness reflected by Doughty's order is appalling. In other words, it's the exact order the Trumps and Stephen Millers of the world probably wish Patel and Froes had written, and it's the kind of legal analysis they hope to see

from judges economically incentivized to deport journalists, writers and activists who exercise their free speech rights.

Vijandre drew the administration's ire through posts on social media expressing support for defendants known as the "Holy Land Five" and others convicted on terrorism-related charges. The Five were leaders of the Holy Land Foundation, which was the largest Muslim charity in the US before the government designated it a terrorist organization for giving money to organizations it claimed were tied to Hamas. There was no evidence the foundation's money bankrolled terrorism or violence. Vijandre believes they were wrongly convicted and therefore has supported their legal defense. He has advocated for their right to due process and better prison conditions. Doughty found this amounted to material support for terrorism. It's like claiming The Innocence Project supports murder by advocating for convicted murderers to be freed. In what universe is believing someone didn't do what they're accused of doing equivalent to supporting what they're accused of? Doughty did not point to a single post by Vijandre that actually supported alleged terrorism. If he had, that wouldn't have cured the constitutional issues with his order, but we don't even need to go there, because he didn't. Here's Doughty's convoluted reasoning in his own words: "Given the respondent's acknowledged ignorance of the specific criminal convictions [of the Holy Land Five], the Immigration Court reasonably concludes respondent's belief in their innocence is based on ideological affinity with HLF rather than a factual understanding of the criminal conduct."

Under this logic, the first amendment is only for subject matter experts. You can't defend someone unless you have full command over the nuances of their case – and if you don't, your



advocacy only proves your extremism.

But plenty of highly informed people have criticized the Holy Land Foundation prosecution. A 2022 letter calling on then president Joe Biden to pardon the Five was signed by more than 70 lawyers, activists, rights organizations and others. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have, like Vijandre, raised concerns about the treatment of Aafia Siddiqui, who was convicted in 2010 of attempted murder after allegedly attacking US officers in Afghanistan.

That means agreement with the world's leading human rights organizations is now evidence of support for terrorism.

Of course, opinions not held by scores of scholars are also constitutionally protected, whether or not a judge agreed with them. But Judge Doughty's order nonetheless dismisses Vijandre's credibility and first amendment rights with condescending pseudo-psychological pronouncements that have no legal significance.

"The respondent's worldview is informed by extremist ideology to such an extent that he no longer has the ability to provide reliable or credible factual statements," the ruling states matter-of-factly. Doughty goes on to opine, based on exactly nothing, that Vijandre is "so heavily influenced by fringe online elements" he lacks a "meaningful grasp of truth regarding terrorism".

The same judge who thinks Vijandre's résumé doesn't qualify sees himself as perfectly competent to serve as the arbiter of objective truth and conduct of unlicensed psychoanalysis. I'd say he shouldn't quit his day job, but he actually should.

Doughty's reasoning is even more dangerous under the broadened domestic terrorism guidelines of NSPM<sup>7</sup>, which, it seems, the Trump administration can't wait to abuse. Will the next immigrant who questions, for example, the convictions of alleged members of so-called Antifa for wearing black or possessing zines be subject to deportation? How about someone who merely opposes Trump's immigration enforcement actions, which, ICE agents have claimed, earns them a spot on a domestic terror watchlist?

Or, under a future administration, how about someone who defends Trump's pardons of convicted participants in the January 6 attack? There's no reason to think the powers Trump claims to fight domestic terror won't be used by other presidents, regardless of party. We saw a preview when the Obama administration adopted much of Bush's global war on terror playbook for everything from mass surveillance to targeting journalists and whistleblowers to covert drone strikes in the Middle East. Those in charge

rarely relinquish powers handed to them by their predecessors.

And while social media was Vijandre's medium, nothing in Doughty's ruling exempts journalists, commentators or opinion writers from similar treatment. Öztürk, of course, was abducted by masked ICE goons over an op-ed, while journalists like Mario Guevara, who was deported to El Salvador, and more recently Estefany Rodríguez have allegedly been targeted due to their coverage of Trump's immigration policies and protests against them. The British journalist Sami Hamdi was thrown in ICE jail amid a speaking tour.

A recent email to law students at conservative Liberty University reportedly said that, in order to work for Trump's justice department: "The two most important requirements are you MUST be aligned politically with President Trump and his administration and you must be willing to work hard ... GPA is not a strong factor." The administration has similarly lowered hiring standards for immigration judges specifically. It's a hiring policy designed to recruit more judges like Doughty and fewer like Patel and Froes. And in case any of those law-over-loyalty judges slip through the cracks and acknowledge that immigrants are entitled to have opinions, now they're on notice.

By Seth Stern

# Trump's Favourite Field Marshal: How Munir Became The President's Best Man

The photograph of Pakistan's Army chief being received by Iran's Foreign Minister in Tehran this week has its real backdrop not in the Iranian capital - the real context lies in the White House Oval Office in June 2025. A uniformed Pakistani general serving as America's most trusted diplomatic courier in one of the world's most dangerous standoffs is striking. But once you understand how Donald Trump runs American foreign policy, it is entirely predictable. Trump does not send career diplomats when things get serious. He sends people he has personally decided to trust. Right now, that man is Asim Munir.

To understand why, you have to understand not just the President but the remarkable structural symmetry between the two states he and Munir respectively represent.

## Two Systems, One Illogic

Pakistan and the United States are not obvious analogues. One is a nuclear-armed developing state with a GDP per capita below \$1,500, perpetually on IMF life support, where the military has historically governed from behind civilian facades. The other is the world's largest economy, a constitutional republic with 2.5 centuries of institutional continuity. And yet, under their current leaderships, both countries are governed by a strikingly similar operating logic: institutions are weak or weakened, personalities dominate, and outcomes depend less on process than on who knows whom and what they have to offer each other. In Pakistan, this is a structural condition. The military has always been the institution that actually decides. Civilian governments come and go; the army remains. Munir has simply made this arrangement more explicit than most predecessors.

In Trump's Washington, institutional erosion is more recent but directionally similar. Pakistani officials quickly diagnosed it: access to this White House runs through Trump family businesses as much as through the State Department. Career diplomats and inter-agency processes still formally exist, but they are increasingly decorative. What matters is the personal



relationship with the President, and what you can offer him and his circle.

## The Art of the Offer

Islamabad understood that in a personalised system, the entry point is commerce and flattery, not diplomatic convention. The courtship was methodical. The first move was counterterrorism. Pakistani intelligence helped the US capture a key Islamic State-Khorasan operative responsible for the 2021 Abbey Gate bombing, the kind of concrete, nameable result Trump could announce and claim as his own. Then came the commercial offers. World Liberty Financial, a crypto venture in which the Trump family holds substantial interests, sent executives to Islamabad, where Pakistan signed an MoU on stablecoin adoption. Munir personally welcomed the delegation, signalling an alignment between Pakistan's military and Trump-linked business entities. Pakistan simultaneously pitched claims to trillions of dollars in rare-earth minerals, and a Missouri-based US firm subsequently signed an MoU with a military-owned Pakistani company to develop rare-earth resources. Neither offering rests on fully verified foundations, but in a system where personal enthusiasm substitutes for institutional due diligence, the offer is the relationship.

## Recognising Each Other

Into this environment walked Munir, and Trump responded to him in a register he reserves for a very specific kind of leader. "Trump likes people who are in charge of their countries and he likes

strongmen," said analyst Husain Haqqani. "Field Marshal Munir is very much in that category." Both men operate in systems where formal rules are negotiable, loyalty is personal rather than institutional, and the consolidation of authority in a single figure is treated not as a problem but as a solution. PM Modi is also a strongman by any reasonable definition, but one - according to Trump's view - 'burdened' by institutions that retain real force: courts that rule against the government, a federal structure with genuine provincial weight, a meritorious bureaucracy with its own stygian inertia. For Trump, accustomed to leaders who can simply decide, mediation registers as friction. Munir has none of these 'pitfalls'. The June 2025 White House lunch was unprecedented, the first time a US president hosted Pakistan's Army chief alone, without civilian officials present. Trump called Munir his "favourite field marshal", a knowing nod to the recently bestowed title that made Munir only the second Pakistani ever to hold it. The civilian-military distinction that organises conventional democratic diplomacy simply does not structure Trump's thinking.

## What Was Discussed In The Oval Office

The September 2025 Oval Office meeting between Trump and Munir was notable for what surrounded it as much as what was reported from it. No American officials were present for portions of the discussion. No readout detailed the

substance. What is on the record is what happened in Pakistan shortly afterwards. In November 2025, Pakistan's parliament passed the 27th Constitutional Amendment, entrenching the military's political role, elevating Munir to the new post of Chief of Defence Forces over all three services, and securing for him lifetime immunity from criminal prosecution. Constitutional cases moved from the Supreme Court to a new Federal Constitutional Court whose judges would be appointed by the executive. Two senior Supreme Court judges resigned in protest, with one declaring that "the Constitution I swore to uphold is no more".

We do not know what was said in that Oval Office. It would be speculative to draw a direct line between the meeting and the amendment. But the sequencing is worth noting: Munir visited Washington in September, was received with exceptional warmth by a President who openly admires consolidated personal power, and returned home to preside over the most significant concentration of military authority in Pakistan's constitutional history in November. Whether Trump endorsed this trajectory, encouraged it, or simply created the atmosphere in which Munir felt emboldened to move, the outcome served both men's apparent preferences.

## Flattery as Currency

Pakistan also ran what can only be called an industrial-scale flattery operation, and this fits the Trump template precisely

because, in a personalised system, ego maintenance is a form of statecraft. Sharif and Munir endorsed Trump's Nobel Peace Prize bid at least half a dozen times, with Sharif telling him at the Egypt summit: "You're the man this world needed most at this point in time." Pakistan hired lobbying firms staffed by Trump's former associates and positioned itself as offering concrete deliverables across counterterrorism, minerals, and crypto. Both men understand instinctively that power in their respective systems is relational, not procedural. The Nobel nominations and the crypto deals are the currency of the system both men inhabit.

## The Tehran Crescendo

The Iran mediation role is where this structural alignment has produced its most consequential foreign policy outcome. When Trump needs something done, he calls someone he personally trusts. Trump said he agreed to the Iran ceasefire "based on conversations with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir of Pakistan", adding that they had "requested that I hold off the destructive force being sent tonight to Iran". Munir had access. Munir had the relationship. Munir made the call. Trump this week called him "fantastic" and said Iran talks would return to Pakistan specifically because of his efforts. The State Department was not the story.

A former Pakistani envoy offered the appropriate caution: "No relationships are assured in perpetuity". The warmth of the Modi-Trump relationship of the first term couldn't save India from Trump's tariff aggression in the second term. The envoy argues that personalised systems are contingent on the person; when the individual changes or loses interest, the relationship evaporates because there are no institutions beneath it to hold it together.

For now, in Tehran, Pakistan's army chief carries America's message. Two men, two systems, one illogic. It works, until it doesn't.

**(The author is a Research Fellow in the Geostrategy Program at the Takshashila Institution)**

# Behind the bluster, Donald Trump desperately needs a peace deal with Iran. Here's a solution

Washington and Tehran will have to make compromises and the current deadline must be extended. But with the will there's clearly a way



The failure of the Islamabad talks to end the US-Israel war on Iran was hardly surprising, given the stark differences between Washington's 15-point proposal and Tehran's 10-point equivalent. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which capped Iran's uranium enrichment, took more than two years to negotiate, and its roots actually reach back to 2003. The US vice-president, JD Vance, spent less than a full day in Islamabad for negotiations that included the nuclear question and several others. The surprise was Vance's explanation for the failure – that Iran rejected the terms presented by the US. The American side was not in a position to dictate terms because Iran stood firm when the 8 April ceasefire took effect. But Vance seemed to believe,

as does his boss Donald Trump, that the Iranians had been defeated and the US didn't have to budge. Following Vance's return, Trump, true to form, quickly upped the ante by imposing a naval blockade on all ships sailing to or from Iranian ports through the strait of Hormuz. A blockade is an act of war, so things are already dicey. They could get much worse if Iran responds to the blockage of its oil exports by attacking the energy infrastructure of the US-aligned Gulf monarchies, something it has already threatened to do. That would drive up the price of oil, diesel, liquefied natural gas (LNG) and other critical commodities. Trump might resume attacks on Iran and Israel would probably follow. Full-on war would be back. Hence the urgency of

restarting talks.

So what next? Fortunately, neither side has ruled out further negotiations. Moreover, intermediaries – Pakistan and Egypt – are diligently working behind the scenes to bridge the gaps between Tehran and Washington. Both Tehran and Washington have reasons to avert renewed war. Trump knows more war will deepen the hole he dug by accepting the methodical assurances of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his team that an unprovoked war on Iran would bring down the regime. Inflation is rising, his already low poll numbers are falling, and the midterm elections loom. Iran withstood a fearsome assault, but the massive damage it suffered will only increase if fighting resumes, making reconstruction harder

and prolonging the economic hardship that has fuelled mass unrest in the past.

These circumstances are favourable to renewed diplomacy, but that requires a feasible framework. My potential framework doesn't pretend to be comprehensive – Iran's ballistic missile programme remains a live issue – but it does address the central issues in dispute.

First, it requires that the United States recognise Iran's right to enrich uranium – which it has as a signatory of the non-proliferation treaty – for non-military purposes and subject to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. Enrichment would be capped at 3.67% – which was the 2015 JCPOA limit anyway – with electronic and onsite IAEA monitoring and the dismantling and storage of Iranian centrifuge cascades. Iran could go further by agreeing to cease all enrichment beyond the five-year maximum it has offered without acceding to Washington's demand for a 20-year moratorium. After Trump ditched the JCPOA in 2018, Tehran no longer felt bound by its enrichment limit because he reimposed – even tightened – the sanctions that had been lifted in keeping with the agreement. Iran now has 440kg of 60% enriched uranium. The US would settle for supervised down-blending, rather than insist on its full removal. The enrichment agreement could run for 20 years, and be renewable.

My framework calls on Iran to make a written pledge not to develop nuclear weapons, in line with the injunction of the late Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was himself killed by a US-Israeli strike on 28 February. Iran's government often cites his injunction, so it should be able to offer the no nuclear-weapons pledge. After Khamenei's death, Iran's foreign minister said he anticipated no major change in Tehran's position, but Khamenei's son and successor, Mojtaba, could help by reaffirming his father's prohibition, in conjunction with a parallel Israeli pledge –

guaranteed by the US and the members of the UN security council – to never initiate a nuclear attack on Iran. After being attacked twice in less than a year by Israel and the US, Iran may balk at renouncing nuclear weapons. That's why the other parts of this framework contain compelling incentives.

Iran should drop its war reparations demand, which the US will never agree to pay. In return, the US lifts primary and secondary sanctions fully and all frozen Iranian assets are released. Iran also receives the right to levy its \$2m (£1.5m) fee per oil tanker transiting the strait of Hormuz – providing Tehran commits to upholding the right of innocent passage, overseen and guaranteed by a coalition of countries from the region and beyond, including Russia and China. Given that the Gulf monarchies allowed the US to use their bases to wreak massive destruction in Iran, Tehran's insistence on funds for economic reconstruction isn't unreasonable. Moreover, the transit fee arrangement will end once reconstruction costs – which should be estimated by a neutral party – are met, and the surcharge will, as Iran itself proposed, be split with Oman, which is on the other side of the strait.

The US and Iran should sign a non-aggression pact, ratified by their legislatures and embedded in a UN security council resolution. Iran abandons its unachievable demand that the US armed forces fully withdraw from the Middle East, but the non-aggression pact offsets this concession, and Tehran and the Gulf states can sign similar agreements.

Ultimately, three conditions must hold for this – or any – plan to be adopted. First, Washington must make compromises, not Iran alone. Second, Trump must extend his 22 April ceasefire deadline and accept that talks of this complexity take time. Third, an Israeli attack on Iran could derail everything. While talks continue, Trump must stay Netanyahu's hand.

By Rajan Menon

## Islamabad Peace Summit Stalls

High-stakes ceasefire negotiations between the U.S. and Iran commenced in Islamabad, Pakistan, on April 11, marking the most significant direct diplomatic engagement between the two nations since 1979. The American delegation, led by Vice President JD Vance and special envoy Steve Witkoff, met with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. While the U.S. proposed a two-phase framework focusing on the immediate reopening of the Strait of Hormuz and nuclear constraints, Iran countered with a 5-point plan demanding war reparations and security guarantees. By April 12, Vance departed without a signed deal, though President Trump remains publicly optimistic about a second round of talks mediated by Pakistan's Army Chief.

## Naval Blockade of Iranian Ports

Following the lack of a breakthrough in Islamabad, the U.S. military moved from threat to action. On April 13, at 14:00 GMT, a full naval blockade of major Iranian ports and the Strait of Hormuz took effect. CENTCOM declared maritime dominance, deploying advanced mine-clearing assets to secure the corridor for non-Iranian traffic while effectively choking Tehran's oil exports. The Iranian government condemned the maneuver as "maritime piracy" and "an act of war," threatening to launch retaliatory strikes against regional trade hubs and oil facilities in neighboring countries if the blockade is not lifted. The international community remains on edge as global shipping insurance rates skyrocket.

## The US-Vatican Diplomatic Rift

A rare and pointed public feud has erupted between the White House and the Holy See. Pope Leo XIV issued a scathing critique of the ongoing conflict, characterizing the U.S. military strategy as a violation of "just war" principles and calling for an immediate, unconditional ceasefire to prevent further civilian suffering. Vice President JD Vance, a prominent Catholic, issued a sharp rebuttal on behalf of the administration, defending the war as a necessary

defensive measure against state-sponsored terror. Vance's instruction for the Vatican to "stick to matters of morality" rather than military strategy has sparked intense debate among the American electorate and Catholic leaders worldwide.

## Israel-Lebanon Washington Summit

Against the backdrop of "Operation Eternal Darkness"—Israel's massive aerial campaign—U.S. officials managed to bring Israeli and Lebanese representatives to Washington on Tuesday. The summit aims to establish a buffer zone and halt the escalating violence that has claimed over 2,000 lives in Lebanon since early March. The urgency of the talks was highlighted by "Black Wednesday" (April 8), when Israeli strikes in Beirut killed over 350 people in a single day. While the UN and Lebanon describe the situation as catastrophic, Israel maintains it is targeting Hezbollah headquarters and intelligence centers. The Washington talks represent a fragile hope for a separate regional de-escalation.

## China's "Clear Stand" Against the Blockade

China has emerged as the leading vocal critic of the U.S. naval blockade. Foreign Minister Wang Yi called on the international community to take a "clear stand" against actions that undermine the fragile 14-day ceasefire framework brokered by Pakistan. Beijing argues that the blockade is a provocative escalation that threatens global energy security and complicates the diplomatic path forward. While hosting a series of high-level meetings with Russian and Spanish officials, China has positioned itself as an alternative peace broker, explicitly denying President Trump's allegations that it has been providing covert military hardware or weapons to the Iranian regime during the conflict.

## Global Energy & Inflation Crisis

The implementation of the U.S. blockade has sent shockwaves through global markets, with Brent crude oil prices surging past \$118 per barrel. The IMF released a sobering report warning that energy volatility and retaliatory tariffs are now responsible for roughly half of the

sustained inflation in the U.S. and Europe. Beyond the gas pump, the "war chill" is hitting labor markets; in hubs like Dubai, thousands of migrant workers have faced furloughs or pay cuts as regional trade and tourism ground to a halt. President Trump has countered these concerns by predicting that energy prices will eventually drop "tremendously" once the Iranian threat is neutralized.

## Resignation of Rep. Eric Swalwell

Representative Eric Swalwell (D-CA) announced his resignation from Congress on April 13 following a series of serious sexual assault allegations. The most severe claim involves a former staffer who alleged she was raped twice by the congressman. Swalwell, who had recently suspended a gubernatorial campaign, stated that while he intends to fight what he calls "false allegations," he cannot allow his personal legal battles to distract his constituents. His departure coincides with a wave of misconduct cases in the House, including the resignation of Rep. Tony Gonzales (R-TX) and the indictment of Rep. Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick (D-FL), prompting calls for systemic ethics reform.

## DOJ Moves to Erase Jan. 6 Convictions

In a move that has stunned legal experts, the Department of Justice filed a request on April 14 to throw out the seditious conspiracy convictions of several Proud Boys and Oath Keepers leaders. Following President Trump's sweeping clemency for January 6 defendants earlier this year, the DOJ—under the direction of U.S. Attorney Jeanine Pirro—is now seeking to erase the convictions entirely from the record. The government argues that dismissing these indictments is in the "interests of justice." If granted by the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, the move would effectively nullify the most significant legal outcomes of the investigation into the 2021 Capitol attack.

## Tax Day 2026 & The "Big Beautiful Bill Act"

As Americans reached the April 15 tax deadline, the first full effects of the "Big Beautiful Bill Act" became clear. The IRS reported that the average tax refund is approximately \$350

higher than the previous year, a fact the administration is touting as a major win for the middle class. However, the holiday was marked by intense debate on Capitol Hill. While the President signaled a desire for further tax cuts in a second term, critics point to the ballooning federal deficit exacerbated by war spending. Discussions regarding the 2027 budget have been dominated by the need to balance these tax breaks with the massive costs of the blockade and Middle East operations.

## Dismissal of WSJ Defamation Lawsuit

A federal judge has officially dismissed Donald Trump's \$10 billion defamation lawsuit against the Wall Street Journal. The lawsuit stemmed from the paper's reporting on Trump's historical social ties to Jeffrey Epstein. The judge ruled that the reporting met the standards of protected journalistic inquiry and that the plaintiff failed to prove "actual malice." The dismissal is a significant legal setback for the President's ongoing campaign against major media outlets he frequently labels as "fake news." Despite the ruling, the White House issued a statement condemning the decision and reasserting that the reporting was intended to interfere with the political landscape.

## The Stonewall National Monument Agreement

In a move seen as an olive branch to the LGBTQ+ community, the Trump administration reached a formal agreement this week to return the Pride flag to the Stonewall National Monument in New York City. The site, which commemorates the 1969 riots that launched the modern gay rights movement, had been at the center of a symbolic tug-of-war after federal officials previously ordered the flag's removal. The new agreement allows for the permanent display of the flag on federal land, ending a period of intense local protest and litigation. Supporters view this as a rare moment of cultural de-escalation amidst a highly polarized political climate.

## Legal Immigration Pathways Shrink

A comprehensive study released this week highlights a significant shift in U.S. demographics. While much of the political discourse

remains focused on illegal border crossings, the report finds that administrative changes and tightened vetting procedures have cut legal immigration pathways by nearly 40% over the last year. This includes reductions in H-1B skilled worker visas and family reunification programs. Economists warn that the sharp decline in legal arrivals could exacerbate labor shortages in the tech and healthcare sectors, though proponents of the policy argue that the "pause" is necessary to prioritize national security and wage growth for native-born workers.

## Historic Election Defeat for Viktor Orbán

The European political landscape was rocked on April 12 as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's 16-year tenure came to an end. Challenger Péter Magyar and his Tisza party secured a landmark victory, with early data suggesting they may even achieve a two-thirds "supermajority" in parliament. The election saw a record 77.8% turnout, signaling a massive rejection of Orbán's "illiberal" model. EU leaders in Brussels have hailed the result as a turning point for European democracy, though conservative circles in the U.S. expressed surprise at the loss of a key ideological ally. Magyar has pledged to restore democratic institutions and strengthen ties with the EU.

## King Charles III Plans U.S. State Visit

Buckingham Palace and the White House have officially announced a four-day state visit for King Charles III and Queen Camilla, scheduled for later this month. The itinerary includes high-profile stops in Washington, D.C., New York, and Virginia. The visit is strategically timed to mend diplomatic ties that have been frayed by disagreements over U.S. military actions in the Middle East and shifting trade priorities. The trip will feature a garden party, a military ceremonial review, and a rare address to a joint session of Congress. Diplomats view the visit as an essential "soft power" effort to reaffirm the "Special Relationship" during a period of global instability.

**Japan Eases Arms Export Rules**

In a historic departure from its post-WWII pacifist stance, Japan's ruling party under Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has approved a significant easing of arms export restrictions. The move is a direct response to concerns over U.S. security commitments and the strain on American weapons supplies due to the Iran and Ukraine conflicts. One of the first major deals expected under the new rules is the export of used frigates to the Philippines to assist in South China Sea tensions. European nations have also expressed interest in Japanese military hardware, seeing Tokyo as a reliable alternative to build defense supply chains that do not rely solely on the United States.

**Sudan Civil War Enters Fourth Year**

On April 15, the United Nations issued a somber report marking the fourth anniversary of the civil

war in Sudan. Describing it as the world's "abandoned crisis," the UN highlighted that over 25 million people are in need of humanitarian aid, with famine now reaching catastrophic levels in regions like Darfur. Despite the scale of the massacres and displacement, the conflict has struggled to gain international attention compared to the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine. The UN is calling for a "surge in diplomacy" and \$4 billion in emergency funding to prevent a total societal collapse in the East African nation.

**Record-Breaking April Heat Wave**

An "unprecedented" heat wave has been shattering records across the Eastern United States since Saturday. Meteorologists from AccuWeather noted that the duration of this April heat is borderline historic, with temperatures hitting the mid-90s from Georgia to New York City.

The unseasonable heat has triggered early-season "Red Flag" fire warnings and put unexpected strain on local power grids as residents turned to air conditioning weeks earlier than usual. Climate experts point to the event as a stark reminder of shifting weather patterns, while local governments in cities like Philadelphia and D.C. have opened cooling centers to assist vulnerable populations.

**Midwest Tornado Outbreak**

While the East Coast sweltered, the Midwest faced a violent storm system on April 13 and 14. A series of powerful tornadoes touched down across Kansas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, causing catastrophic damage to infrastructure and residential areas. In Ottawa, Kansas, a pipe manufacturing facility was leveled, and several small towns reported dozens of homes destroyed. National Guard units have been deployed to assist in

search and rescue operations and to clear debris. The National Weather Service warned that the collision of the unseasonably warm air from the East with cold northern fronts created the "perfect storm" for this early-spring outbreak.

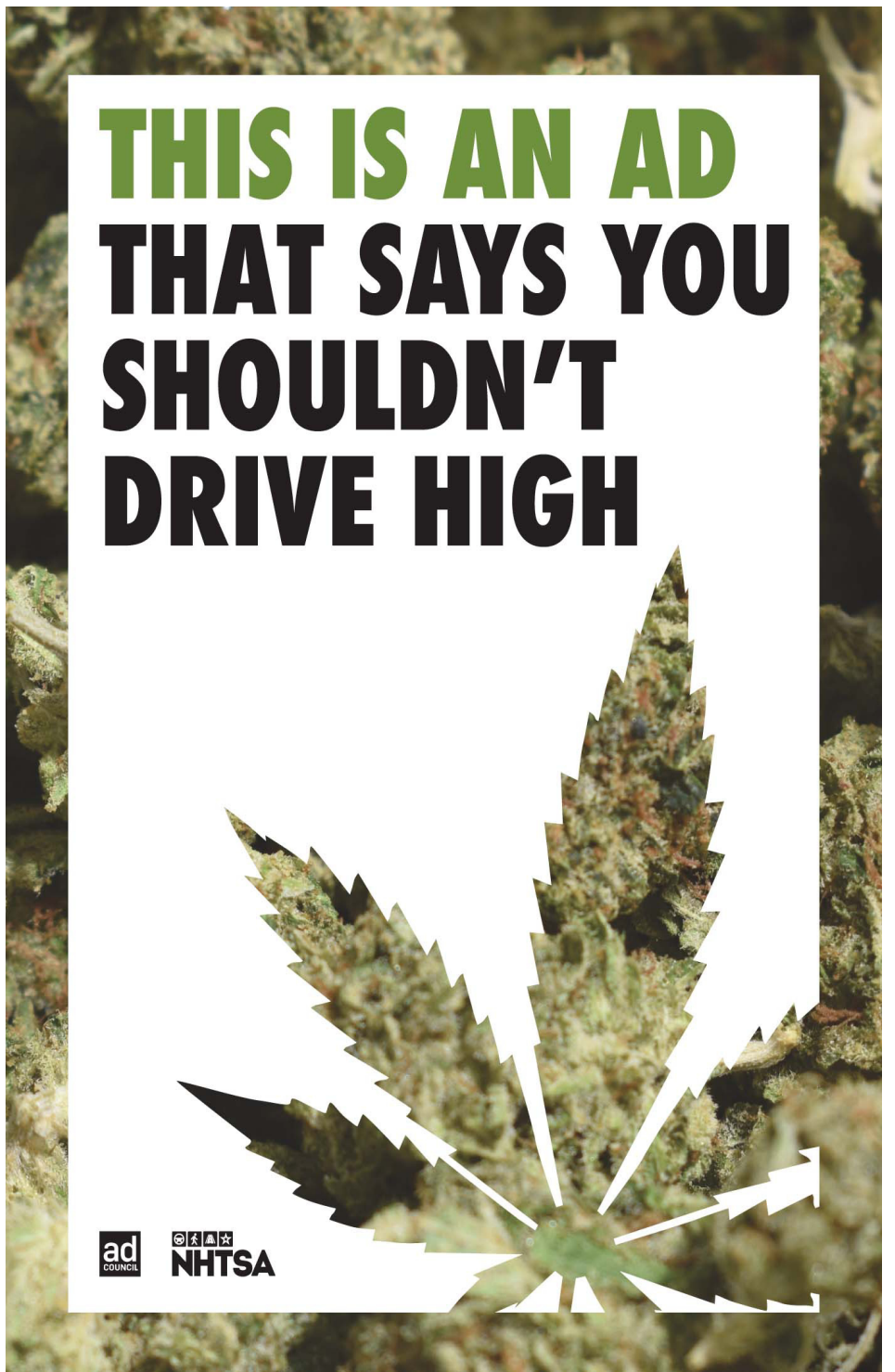
**Artemis II Moon Mission Success**

Humanity marked a giant leap on April 10-11 as the Artemis II mission concluded with a "textbook" splashdown in the Pacific Ocean. The crew—NASA's Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover, Christina Koch, and Jeremy Hansen—became the first humans to orbit the Moon since 1972. During their 10-day journey, the astronauts traveled nearly 700,000 miles, testing critical life-support systems for the planned 2028 lunar landing. Commander Wiseman described seeing an eclipse from lunar orbit as a "sight no human has ever seen." The mission's success

has revitalized public interest in space exploration and confirmed the Orion capsule's readiness for more complex deep-space missions.

**U.S. Agricultural Crisis**

American farmers are facing a mounting financial crisis as the conflict in the Middle East spills over into the heartland. The "double squeeze" of skyrocketing diesel prices (up 30% due to the Iran blockade) and retaliatory export tariffs from trade partners has made the 2026 spring planting season the most expensive on record. Major agricultural groups warn that without federal intervention or a swift end to the conflict, many family farms could face bankruptcy by harvest time. The crisis has sparked calls for emergency subsidies, as the rising costs of production are expected to lead to significantly higher grocery prices for U.S. consumers by late summer.



# 'Still sleeping?' The most annoying question in Indian homes

Tell us you've never been judged for sleeping a little extra or taking an additional nap, and we'll stop right here. The truth is, Indians love shaming others for sleep, even though it is one of the most essential things the body needs to function properly.

Be honest, how many times have your parents taunted you for sleeping till 9 am? How many times have you been called lazy or even unproductive for taking an afternoon nap? How many times have you seen raised eyebrows when you said you need eight hours of sleep to function properly?

We know you've lost count because it happens practically every other day. Sleep is something every human being needs, yet in our culture, it comes with a surprising amount of judgment.

People love bragging about surviving on just a few hours of sleep and still getting through the day. And it's not just older generations; even people our age do it. You probably know that one colleague who glorifies late-night work and then shows up proudly for an early morning meeting.

Even Alia Bhatt was questioned when she recently shared that she gets around eight to nine hours of sleep every day. After the actor's remark, Sadhguru responded with a question that caught her off guard: "That's a fourth of the day. When will you live?"

Rest is treated like a luxury, while exhaustion is often worn like a badge of honour.

In short, Indians love sleep shaming. Judging how others sleep may seem harmless, even playful, but it points to a bigger problem: the belief that being constantly busy matters more than being healthy.

**But why do Indians do it so much?**

Society loves people who look productive and always rewards visible hard work, whether that means putting in long hours or pushing through discomfort. So naturally, sleep takes a back seat, even when it comes at the cost of our health.

According to Dr Sharadhi C, consultant – psychiatry, Aster CMI Hospital, Bengaluru, in many Indian families, sleep-shaming happens because people often link waking up early with discipline, success, and good character, while sleeping longer is seen as laziness.

"This thinking comes from traditional values, older routines, and a culture that praises hard work



and visible effort. Social comparison also plays a role, as people judge others to feel better about their own habits."

Further, she tells India Today, "Psychologically, it shows a need for control, validation, and following social norms, where people believe their way is correct and expect others to behave the same way."

And then, there is the generational pride around struggle, which, as per Dr Sharadhi, plays a strong role in sleep-shaming in India, as many older people grew up with limited resources, strict routines, and the belief that success comes only through hard work and sacrifice.

This creates a mindset where suffering is respected, and comfort is questioned. Not just this,

but we also misunderstand taking rest quite often. This happens because we confuse it with laziness instead of seeing it as a basic need for health and recovery. There is also limited awareness about how rest helps the brain process information, repair the body, and improve focus and performance. "People may feel guilty resting because they tie their self-worth to how much they do, not how well they feel. This leads to ignoring signs of fatigue and undervaluing rest as an important part of a healthy life," mentions Dr Sharadhi.

**Understand the real cost of sleep-shaming**

When people are repeatedly mocked for needing sleep, they often start ignoring their body's signals. They stay up longer than

they should, wake up earlier than needed, or feel guilty for simply resting. Over time, poor sleep can take a serious toll on mood and mental health, focus and memory, immunity, heart health, hormones, metabolism, work performance, and even relationships. "It can increase stress, anxiety, and even lead to burnout, especially for those already dealing with demanding schedules. It also spreads misinformation by promoting the idea that less sleep equals success, which is not true," the expert explains. It is also vital to understand that when it comes to sleep, there is no one-size-fits-all. Some people feel great after seven hours. Others need nine. Teenagers naturally tend to sleep later. New parents are sleep-deprived. Night-shift

workers live against the clock. People recovering from illness need more rest.

**The need for change**

Isn't the world already exhausting enough? Long commutes we can't avoid, digital overload we can't escape, academic pressure, demanding jobs, and financial stress that now has many people chasing side hustles. All of it leaves so many of us running empty, and that's exactly when we need support, not sarcasm for sleeping and recharging. What needs to stop is commenting on how much someone sleeps and glorifying burnout while treating rest like a flaw.

Dr Sharadhi adds that this mindset needs to change because sleep is not a luxury but a basic need for the body and mind to function properly. Respecting different sleep patterns and encouraging healthy rest can improve overall well-being, performance, and happiness, and create a more supportive and understanding environment for everyone.

**Before you go back to sleep**  
Sleep is not laziness. No, it is not weakness, and definitely not a character flaw. It is a basic human function. So the next time someone casually says, "Still sleeping?", "You youngsters are always tired," or "When we were your age, we woke up before sunrise," know that it's not just banter. It's a problematic mindset.

## You can earn in lakhs selling feet photos, but is it legal in India?

One income stream just doesn't cut it any more. So now, alongside their 9-to-5, people are juggling side hustles, be it influencing, freelancing, or reselling thrifted finds on Instagram.

In today's ever-expanding internet economy, the definition of "work" is constantly evolving, and unconventional gigs are no longer eyebrow-raising. If anything, people are finding increasingly creative ways to monetise well, almost anything. Which brings us to a trend that's been quietly, and somewhat curiously, gaining traction worldwide: selling feet photos. Yes, it sounds odd at first. Maybe even a little uncomfortable. But dig a little deeper, and you'll find that for many, this isn't just a bizarre internet fad; it's a legitimate digital side hustle.

In fact, scroll through social media, and you'll come across countless creators claiming they've funded holidays, shopping sprees, and even rent, all by selling pictures of their feet. Strange? Maybe. Profitable? Apparently, very. But here's the real question: can something like this actually work in India, and more importantly, is it legal and safe? The answer isn't a simple yes or no. It sits somewhere in between, shaped by laws, platform policies, cultural perceptions, and very real concerns around privacy and safety.

**Is selling feet photos legal in India?**

Selling feet photos in India is generally legal, as long as you follow some basic rules. You must be an adult, use your own photos, and make sure the content

is non-explicit. It's also important to declare any earnings for taxes and be aware that some social media platforms may block or restrict your content if they believe it violates their rules. So, while selling feet photos is not illegal, it's essential to stay safe, responsible, and mindful of both legal and platform guidelines when doing it. It is vital to understand that our country does not have a law that specifically bans selling feet photos. However, broader laws such as the Information Technology Act, 2000, and sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) prohibit the distribution of obscene or sexually explicit material online. The definition of "obscene" is subjective and can vary depending on the context and interpretation by authorities.

# Your Gut Is Your Second Brain-And It Might Be Running the Show

*The trillions of microbes living inside you may have more influence over your mood, your mind, and your choices than science once dared to imagine.*



***"The gut sends far more signals to the brain than the brain sends to the gut — roughly 90% of the traffic flows upward."***

Picture the brain — that magnificent three-pound organ sitting in your skull, orchestrating every thought, emotion, and decision you make. Now imagine there is another command center in your body, humming away quietly, sending signals northward, nudging your chemistry, and shaping how you feel before your conscious mind even wakes up. Welcome to your gut: the organ scientists are now calling your "second brain." The enteric nervous system — a vast web of more than 500 million neurons lining your gastrointestinal tract — operates with a degree of independence that has startled researchers for decades. It can regulate digestion entirely without instructions from your brain, manage immune responses, and, crucially, communicate back up the vagus nerve in ways that influence everything from anxiety levels to appetite.

## **The Microbiome: A Community You Cannot Live Without**

But the enteric nervous system is only half the story. Living within your gut is an ecosystem of approximately 38 trillion

microorganisms — bacteria, fungi, viruses, and archaea — collectively known as the microbiome. This community is so vast, so biochemically active, and so deeply integrated with your physiology that many scientists now speak of it as an organ in its own right. These microbes produce neurotransmitters — the very chemicals your brain uses to regulate mood. Roughly 90 percent of the body's serotonin, the neurotransmitter most associated with feelings of wellbeing, is manufactured in the gut. They also produce gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), dopamine precursors, and short-chain fatty acids that cross the blood-brain barrier and influence neural function directly. The implications are staggering. Studies have found that people with depression, anxiety, autism spectrum disorder, and even Parkinson's disease show measurable differences in their gut microbiome composition compared to healthy controls. Researchers at institutions including the Salk Institute and University College Cork have demonstrated in animal models that transplanting the gut bacteria of anxious mice into germ-free mice can transfer anxious behaviour — a finding that upended conventional thinking about where mood originates.

## **What Disrupts Your Inner Community**

If the microbiome is so powerful, why are so many people struggling? The honest answer is that modern life wages near-constant war on microbial diversity. Antibiotics — miraculous when truly needed — can wipe out entire bacterial families in days, and recovery can take

months or years. Ultra-processed foods, which now make up more than 60 percent of calories consumed in the United States, deprive gut bacteria of the fibre they need to survive. Chronic stress elevates cortisol, which alters gut permeability and shifts bacterial populations toward less beneficial strains. Even disrupted sleep — a topic we explore in our second article today — measurably changes the microbiome within 48 hours. The result, for many people, is a gut environment that is less diverse, less resilient, and sending a very different set of signals to the brain than it should be.

## **What You Can Actually Do This Week**

The good news is that the microbiome is extraordinarily responsive to change — in both directions. Here is what the current science supports: Eat more fibre, and eat it in variety. Different bacterial strains feed on different plant compounds, so dietary diversity matters as much as quantity. Aim for 30 different plant foods per week — a target that sounds daunting until you realise herbs, spices, nuts, and seeds all count. Each one feeds a slightly different corner of your microbial community. Add fermented foods. Live-culture yoghurt, kefir, kimchi, sauerkraut, kombucha, and miso all introduce beneficial microbes directly into the gut. A landmark Stanford University study published in *Cell* found that a diet high in fermented foods increased microbiome diversity and reduced inflammatory markers significantly over just ten weeks. Protect your sleep. The gut and the body's circadian clock are

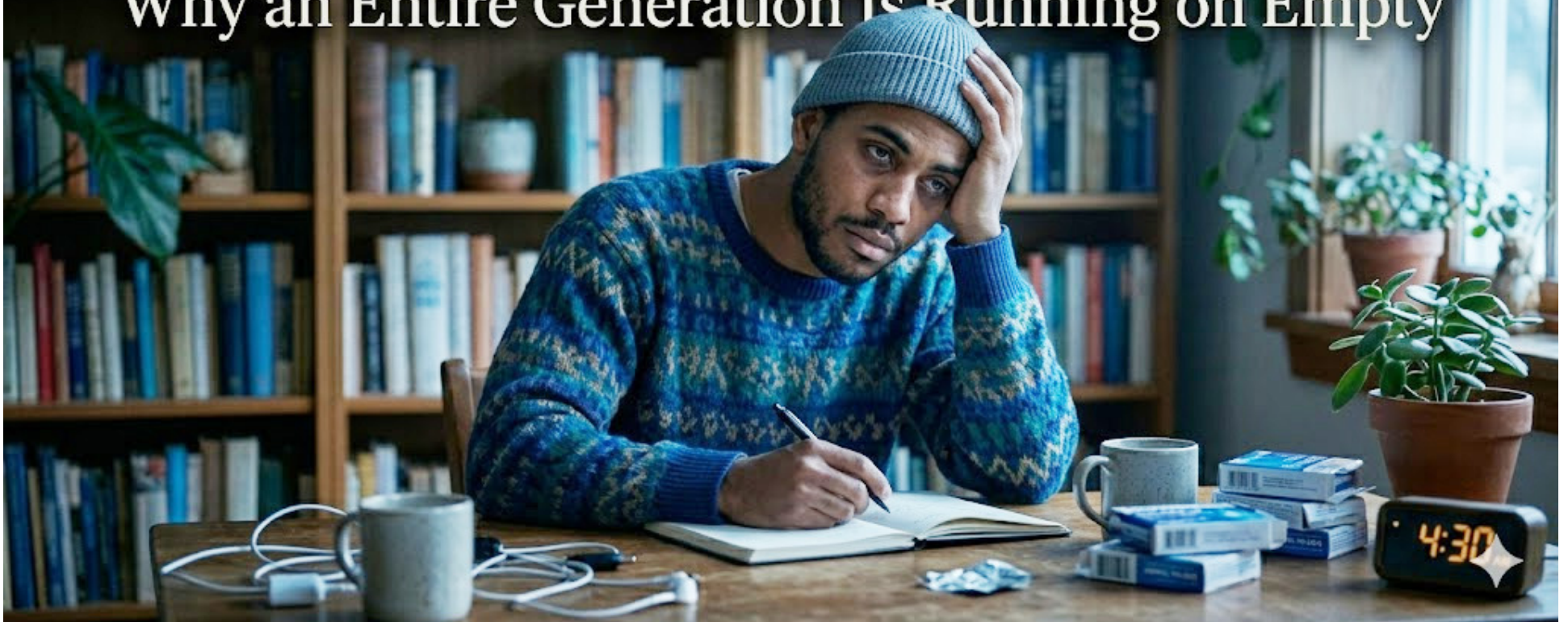
deeply linked. Irregular sleep schedules have been shown to reduce the abundance of *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* — two of the most beneficial bacterial genera — within days. Manage stress actively. Mindfulness, breathwork, exercise, and even forest walks have all been shown to positively shift gut microbiome composition, partly by lowering cortisol and partly by activating the vagus nerve — that critical communication highway between gut and brain. We are still in the early chapters of gut-brain science. Microbiome-targeted therapies for depression, anxiety, and neurodegenerative disease are advancing through clinical trials right now. Faecal microbiota transplants — once considered fringe — are already approved treatments for certain recurrent infections and are showing early promise for metabolic and mental health conditions. But you do not need to wait for the medicine to catch up. Your fork is already a remarkably powerful instrument. The second brain has been listening all along. It is time to start feeding it well.

***"Every meal is a negotiation with 38 trillion microbes. Feed them well, and they return the favour."***



# THE SLEEP RECESSION

## Why an Entire Generation Is Running on Empty



*We have convinced ourselves that exhaustion is a badge of honour. The science says it is quietly dismantling our health - and there is a way back.*

There is a particular kind of tiredness that has become so common it has stopped feeling like a symptom. It is the tiredness that greets you when the alarm goes off, that shadows you through the afternoon slump, that makes the sofa feel like a reasonable place to spend the evening even when you had other plans. It is the tiredness that millions of people have quietly accepted as the baseline texture of modern life.

They should not have. What is being described is not a personality trait, a motivational failure, or simply the price of a busy life. It is a public health crisis hiding in plain sight — and its consequences are only now being fully understood.

### The Numbers Are Alarming

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in three American adults regularly fails to get the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep per night. Among teenagers, the figures are worse: the American Academy of Sleep Medicine reports that more than 70 percent of high school students are chronically sleep-deprived. Similar patterns are documented across Western Europe, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, where the terms "karoshi" (death by overwork) and "inemuri" (sleeping in public from exhaustion) have entered cultural vocabulary as markers of normalised fatigue.

Matthew Walker, a neuroscientist and sleep researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of the landmark book *Why We Sleep*, has described insufficient sleep as "the greatest public health challenge we face in the 21st century." That is not rhetorical

flourish. It is a conclusion drawn from decades of converging evidence across neuroscience, immunology, cardiovascular medicine, and metabolic research.

### What Happens Inside a Sleep-Deprived Body

Sleep is not passive downtime. It is a period of intense biological activity during which the body performs maintenance that simply cannot happen while you are awake. The brain, in particular, uses sleep to flush itself clean.

The glymphatic system — a waste-clearance network that operates almost exclusively during deep sleep — pumps cerebrospinal fluid through the brain, washing out metabolic debris including amyloid beta, the protein whose accumulation is a hallmark of Alzheimer's disease. Studies have shown that even a single night of poor sleep produces a measurable rise in amyloid beta in the brain. Chronic sleep restriction, researchers now believe, may be one of the most significant modifiable risk factors for dementia — more so than many better-publicised contributors.

Elsewhere in the body, sleep deprivation raises cortisol and inflammatory markers, suppresses natural killer cell activity (the immune system's first line of defence against viruses and abnormal cells), disrupts the hormones that regulate hunger — increasing ghrelin, the hunger signal, while suppressing leptin, the satiety signal — and reduces testosterone levels in men by the equivalent of ten years of ageing after just one week of sleeping five hours per night. The cardiovascular consequences are equally stark. Research published in the

European Heart Journal found that sleeping six hours or fewer per night was associated with a 20 percent higher risk of heart attack compared to those sleeping seven to eight hours. The relationship persists even after controlling for diet, exercise, smoking, and socioeconomic status.

### How We Got Here: The Culture of Exhaustion

Understanding the sleep recession requires understanding how it was manufactured. For much of the 20th century, sleep was gradually reframed — culturally, economically, and eventually personally — as an obstacle to productivity. Thomas Edison, who was legendarily dismissive of sleep and once described it as "a criminal waste of time," helped create the electrical infrastructure that made it possible to extend waking hours indefinitely. The corporate world adopted sleep deprivation as a marker of dedication. "I'll sleep when I'm dead" entered the vocabulary as something between a boast and a philosophy.

Technology accelerated the collapse. Smartphones emit blue-wavelength light that directly suppresses melatonin production — the hormonal signal that the brain uses to initiate sleep — for up to three hours after exposure. Social media and streaming services are algorithmically engineered to exploit the brain's dopamine system, making disengagement physiologically difficult. The result is what researchers call "revenge bedtime procrastination": the phenomenon of staying up late not because you have to, but because it is the only unstructured time in a day that

has otherwise been entirely scheduled, demanded, and consumed by others.

### The Road Back: What Science Actually Recommends

The encouraging truth is that the body is remarkably willing to recover, and many of the most effective sleep interventions cost nothing and require no prescription. Here is where the evidence is most robust:

Anchor your wake time. The most powerful lever in sleep science is consistency. Waking at the same time every day — including weekends — regulates your circadian rhythm more effectively than any other single intervention. Your brain builds its entire hormonal and neurological sleep architecture around your wake time, so treat it like a non-negotiable appointment. Guard the 90 minutes before bed. Use this window to dim household lights, avoid screens, and lower your core body temperature — a drop of just one to two degrees Fahrenheit in the bedroom significantly accelerates sleep onset. A warm shower or bath paradoxically helps by drawing heat to the skin's surface and then releasing it rapidly, cooling the body's core.

Treat caffeine as a morning drug. Caffeine has a half-life of approximately five to seven hours in most people — meaning that a 2pm coffee still has half its stimulant effect circulating in your bloodstream at 7pm. The research on adenosine blockade (the mechanism by which caffeine creates wakefulness) suggests a hard cutoff before 1pm for anyone with sleep difficulties.

# Missiles Make Noise, Dhurandhars Win Wars: Why Human Intelligence Still Rules

**A responsible state responds not with rhetoric but with penetration — into networks, funding streams, & into the psychology of planners. The work is thankless and often invisible.**



There is a detail in the recent Iran conflict that should unsettle any serious state more than a dozen missile strikes ever could. Credible reporting suggests that Israeli leaders were shown an image of Ayatollah Khamenei's body recovered by Mossad agents before Iran had even completed the ritual choreography of confirming and shaping the narrative of the death of its own Supreme Leader. If that account is accurate, it marks something far more consequential than tactical prowess. It signals penetration — the sort that renders geography irrelevant and sovereignty porous.

This was not an isolated demonstration of reach. Reports indicate that Israeli intelligence had already embedded itself far deeper within Iran's operational landscape. Mossad agents are said to have established a covert drone base on Iranian soil, from which unmanned systems were launched to strike surface-to-surface missile platforms aimed at Israel. Other accounts point to commandos positioning precision weapons near critical air defence installations, degrading Iran's ability to respond and effectively opening its airspace.

These operations are not feats of engineering alone. They require local access, logistical cover, recruitment networks, and the ability to operate undetected within hostile territory over extended periods. They are, in essence, the outcome of human intelligence functioning at its most sophisticated level.

We live in an age intoxicated by circuitry. The popular imagination assumes that wars are now won by screens:

satellites that see everything, algorithms that decode everything, drones that reach everywhere. The mythology of technological omniscience has become a comforting substitute for strategic realism. Yet satellites do not read loyalty. Encryption does not erase ambition. Intercepts cannot always penetrate discipline. What determines the fate of states, particularly in covert conflict, is human access — the cultivated source, the disillusioned insider, the long-turned asset who has learned to live in the bloodstream of the adversary.

Intelligence services that survive hostile neighbourhoods understand this with almost Darwinian clarity. They are not content to hover near borders. They seek proximity to decision-makers, to inner rooms, to the quiet exchanges where policy is shaped and doubt is born. That proximity is not achieved through spectacle. It is built through years of patience, linguistic immersion, moral compromise, and political backing that does not crumble at the first whiff of controversy.

India's strategic predicament since 1947 makes this lesson neither exotic nor optional. The Republic has rarely enjoyed the luxury of clear, declared war. Instead, it has endured infiltration masquerading as uprising, militancy nourished by foreign sanctuaries, terror networks threaded through financial conduits, and ideological propaganda. From the tribal incursions of 1947 to the infiltration campaign of 1965, from Punjab's insurgency to the prolonged turbulence in Jammu and Kashmir, from Parliament to

26/11 and the recurrent exposure of sleeper cells, the pattern is unmistakable. It is a slow, deniable contest in which the adversary wagers that exhaustion will succeed where frontal assault might fail.

In this environment, intelligence ceases to be a technical department and becomes a condition of survival. The fashionable language of "soft power" has its uses in diplomacy and commerce, but it is an inadequate shield against handlers, hawala channels, and radical modules. A state under covert pressure requires early warning rooted in human networks, deep penetration into hostile ecosystems, and the institutional nerve to disrupt plots before they ripen into spectacle.

It is here that democratic societies often falter. The armchair moralist delights in dissecting operations after the fact, rehearsing ethical anxieties once the danger has passed or the outcome has become politically inconvenient. Far less enthusiasm is reserved for the mundane investments that make prevention possible: budgets for field tradecraft, language capability, source protection, inter-agency fusion, and counter-infiltration units. These are unglamorous line items that rarely attract attention. They form the scaffolding of deterrence.

Popular culture, of course, prefers a different story. Films such as Dhurandhar attempt, with commendable seriousness, to portray the mechanics of human intelligence — the painstaking recruitment of an asset across hostile lines, the handler's moral isolation, the incremental assembly of fragments into foreknowledge. Even there, narrative necessity demands heroism and closure. The audience must see the villain unmasked, the conspiracy thwarted, the protagonist vindicated. Reality is less theatrical. A source may take a decade to cultivate and be lost in a moment. Success is frequently defined by absence: an explosion that

never occurs, a convoy that never moves, a communiqué that never leaves the room.

To argue for robust intelligence is not to indulge in chest-thumping nationalism. It is to recognise that modern conflict is decided by who sees first and who understands first. The state that possesses foreknowledge shapes the tempo of events; the state that reacts perpetually finds itself drafting explanations. Deterrence in the twenty-first century rests less on public declarations and more on the adversary's suspicion that his secrets are already compromised.

If the first dimension of modern intelligence is penetration, the second is far less discussed and considerably more disquieting: the manipulation of information through informal, deniable channels. The classic lexicon of HUMINT speaks of sources, assets, and intermediaries — individuals who carry information across boundaries, sometimes knowingly, often not. In a media-saturated political ecosystem, that category now extends to influential personalities who operate close to power and occasionally imagine themselves to be participants in it. The controversy surrounding Tucker Carlson sits squarely in this grey zone. Carlson has publicly claimed, in a video posted on X, that U.S. intelligence agencies accessed his private communications and were preparing potential action against him under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. Parallel reporting and speculation have suggested that he may have functioned, directly or indirectly, as a conduit in messaging involving Iran. The specifics remain contested. The implications do not.

The question, therefore, is not simply whether a journalist conveys information. It is whether, in believing himself to be shaping events, he becomes part of a larger design he does not control. Influence can cut both ways. The individual who sees himself as an adviser may,

in fact, be functioning as a channel — a node through which signals are tested, messages are floated, and reactions are gauged.

This is not intelligence as it is traditionally understood. It is intelligence as ecosystem.

In recent years, India has signalled a growing recognition that internal security, external intelligence, and narrative management are not discrete silos but parts of a single continuum. The strengthening of intelligence capabilities, greater coordination across agencies, and a willingness to act pre-emptively suggest a leadership that is attentive not only to threats, but to timing, signalling, and ambiguity.

"Terrorist-harboursing neighbours" do not issue formal declarations before striking. They deploy intermediaries, money, narratives, and sleepers. A responsible state responds not with rhetoric but with penetration — into networks, into funding streams, into the psychology of planners. The work is thankless and often invisible. It rarely produces medals, and it never produces cinematic applause.

Under this new ecosystem, states can now project signals, introduce ambiguity, or even misdirection without formal attribution. Narratives travel through voices that appear independent precisely because their independence makes them credible. Whether deliberate or incidental, such channels blur the distinction between agency and instrument. Within this landscape, perception is no longer a by-product of strategy. It is strategy. Sovereignty in a difficult neighbourhood is preserved precisely by such invisibility. Intelligence is not an accessory worn during crises. It is the architecture beneath them, the quiet discipline that prevents the headline. In a world where surprise is weaponised and deniability is strategy, the state that neglects human intelligence in favour of technological vanity is not enlightened. It is simply exposed.

**Gautam Chintamani**

# How Netanyahu Is Fast Turning Into The Worst 'Deal' Trump Ever Made

**Netanyahu sold the White House fantasy after fantasy - and got away with it even when they backfired. Now, Trump can't seem to rid himself of this big albatross around his neck.**

On April 11 and 12, delegations from the United States and Iran held talks in Islamabad to discuss mutually acceptable terms amidst a two-week ceasefire. Late on April 12, US Vice President JD Vance, who led the US delegation, asserted that the talks had failed to yield an outcome, and US President Trump announced that the US Navy would "blockade" the Strait of Hormuz. Amidst uncertainty, two fundamental characteristics of the ceasefire still remain - neither Tehran nor Washington have ruled out further talks, and Iran is yet to resume missile/drone attacks at US bases in the Gulf (which keeps the US-Iran ceasefire technically intact). A third, more crucial, characteristic also remains intact: that Israel (which was not in the room in Islamabad) continues to significantly influence, if not upend, American diplomacy with Iran. Regardless of the substance, the Iranian delegation (led by Parliament Speaker Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf) meeting JD Vance represented the highest level of direct US-Iran contact in 47 years.

However, it became evident that while talks began on a positive trajectory, with technical teams, written exchanges, and structured discussions, the Iranians maintain that a call by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to VP Vance turned the US position more untenable in subsequent negotiations, which lasted for 21 hours overall.

## **An Old Show**

Israeli influence over US decision-making is old, as is its impact on broader US foreign policy. However, two elements are new: the first is the degree to which Israel has influenced Trump, and the second is the fresh challenges that this influence is facing.

Since 1985, the last five US Presidents prior to Donald Trump have overseen considerable consistency in American financial assistance to Israel, through a combination of economic and military aid. From Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, this aid has remained between approximately \$2.8 billion and \$3.5 billion annually. By 2008, towards the end of George Bush's second

term, American financial assistance to Israel became almost exclusively military. By 2012, under President Barack Obama, the US Congress legislated that it was US policy "to help the Government of Israel preserve its qualitative military edge". Functionally, this meant that no defence deal that the US would conclude with other states in the region could threaten Israel's QME. A prominent example of this policy is that Israel is the only country that operates the F-35s with specific customisations, while other Arab states continue to fail in their efforts to procure the world's most potent fighter jet. The cornerstone of this historically lopsided relationship has been the influence of the 'Israel Lobby', a diffuse but coherent political action group that has historically succeeded in directing US policy towards pro-Israel positions, even when not in the US national interest, as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt note in their 2007 book of the same name.

## **Palestine As An Outlier**

However, neither domestic compulsions nor the institutional sustenance of US deference to Israel's security needs could prevent multiple US Presidents from keeping US policy on Palestine in line with international law, at least nominally, and account for the Arab interest. Among other things, this meant officially viewing Israeli settlements in the West Bank (and Gaza before 2005) as illegal, recognising Tel Aviv as Israel's capital (and not Jerusalem, as Israel had maintained since 1980), and not recognising Israel's rights over the Golan Heights in Syria, which the former had been occupying since the 1967 war. More importantly, successive US Presidents have not hesitated to criticise Israel. Ronald Reagan famously characterised Israel's massive - at the time unprecedented - bombardment of Beirut in 1982 as a "holocaust", forcing then Israeli PM Menachem Begin to change course (even as Israel continued its larger invasion of Lebanon). George Bush actively encouraged Ariel Sharon to withdraw Israeli military forces as well as illegal settlements from

the Gaza Strip in 2005. And the Obama Presidency saw the most significant public rifts between Washington and Tel Aviv, especially as the former progressed with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran.

## **Trump's First Term - And His 'Mega Donors'**

By the time Donald Trump took office in 2017, however, the Middle East was in significant transition. After decades of instability (due to the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, the Arab war in Yemen, and significant Arab-Iran tensions), Gulf leaders such as UAE President Mohammad bin Zayed and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman were focusing significantly on conflict cessation and pushing for conciliation-driven regional stability. Hence, as a candidate who received significant support from pro-Israel "mega donors" such as Miriam and Sheldon Anderson, Donald Trump arguably found greater space than ever before to fulfil long-rebuffed Israeli demands. In a single term, President Trump recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital (even as East Jerusalem remained illegally occupied territory under international law) and Israel's claim to the occupied Golan Heights, moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and reversed decades of US policy deeming Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank illegal. Trump was vindicated by several Arab states (led by the UAE) acquiescing to these changes and sidelining their own 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, by acceding to the Abraham Accords by 2020. Most importantly for Israel, Trump was quick to withdraw from the 2015-era Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. Naturally, Trump was (in Netanyahu's words), Israel's "best friend in the White House". Fundamentally, however, Trump's deal-making approach remained. This would have to include both peace in Palestine as well as a deal with Iran - as long as it was better than Obama's. From Israel's perspective, such attempts would be tolerable if worked out under an overly pro-Israel President. However,

Trump's election loss scuttled both his plans for a grand peace in Palestine (with little to no concessions to Palestinian sovereignty/self-determination) as well as a new deal with Iran, which could also eliminate Iran's missile programme along with its nuclear enrichment capabilities - a core Israeli demand.

## **The First Fissures**

By Trump's second term, the Middle East had transitioned again. Israel's tactical military successes across the region had dealt severe blows to Iran's Axis of Resistance and its regional heft. Notwithstanding growing global criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza - characterised as a genocide by an independent UN commission in September, 2025 - Netanyahu was arguably determined to press these advantages home by driving Washington towards war with Iran.

As it became evident that Trump was seeking a deal with Tehran, Israel both encouraged the US President to take maximalist positions as well as acted on its own to create a new fait accompli. This was especially evident in June 2025, when Israel directly struck Iranian nuclear sites unilaterally - in the middle of US-Iran talks - while convincing the US President that it bettered Washington's bargaining posture. That Israel's means and ends were both different from those of the United States was especially evident in how both these states prosecuted their military action - Israel kept up two weeks of bombardment while the US conducted a single bombing raid on Iranian enrichment facilities with bunker-busting munitions and declared a ceasefire. When Israel sought to test Trump's ceasefire commitments by attempting to continue bombardment, the US President's public tirade against Israel was a microcosm of a larger fact - that Washington could not afford to tow Israel's means even if Tel Aviv presented them as optimal for the ends that Trump was seeking.

2 Things That Emboldened Trump By January 2026, two key developments shifted Trump's posture again: the stunning success of the US operation to capture Venezuelan President

Nicholas Maduro and large-scale anti-government demonstrations in Iran by December 2025-January 2026. The former unarguably increased Trump's confidence to replicate the operation elsewhere (especially Iran), while the latter gave the impression of domestic Iranian support for US military action. Both were ultimately proven wrong. However, by February, Benjamin Netanyahu was personally involved in convincing the US President that an intense bombing campaign could foster an Iranian opposition-led overthrow of the Islamic Republic. As a New York Times report detailed later in April, the Israeli Prime Minister made a detailed presentation to this end, in the White House Situation Room. By April 8, after the Islamic Republic proved its resilience as well as its ability to decisively choke the Strait of Hormuz, it became largely clear that the Israeli PM's rationale for encouraging US military action was ill-founded.

On April 8, as the US negotiated a ceasefire with Iran, sans Israel, Tel Aviv found a new opportunity to keep the US engaged in the war, due to Iran's demand that a ceasefire include the cessation of Israel's military action in Lebanon. Having rejected Iran's demand - despite its earlier, private, acceptance by President Trump - Tel Aviv intensified its bombing of Lebanon on the same day to test or undermine Iran's commitment to Beirut/Hezbollah and make it harder for it to uphold the ceasefire (which, if broken by Iran, would warrant a resumption of US attacks). At the same time, Washington agreeing to send the Vice-President himself to negotiate was a categorical concession to Iran's need for new negotiators, since Iran deems Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner to be pro-Israel actors.

## **That Damned Call**

Crucially, Iran's response to Israel's continuing bombardment of Lebanon - as well as Iran's belief that Netanyahu's call to Vance derailed efforts that were close to drafting an "Islamabad Memorandum" - did not lead to immediate Iranian attacks on US bases but rather a continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

# Mines, Submarines, Drones: Why World's Mightiest Navy Won't Get Too Close To Hormuz

Iran is relying on the symmetric advantage of geography to fight against the brute power of the world's largest and most powerful navy, the US.



When the US and Israel launched pre-emptive strikes into Iran on February 28, the 'existential' and 'imminent' threats cited by them were more associated with Iran's nuclear programme and its ballistic missile capabilities. Obviously, the regime in Iran was a major irritant too. What was definitely not in any equation or calculation was the Strait of Hormuz and how this narrow sea passage connecting the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean could become the primary issue in the conflict.

Result? Iran blockaded the Strait of Hormuz early in the war claiming that it is open but only if the ships follow its 'technical instructions'. As soon as a few tankers defying the diktat were bombed and up in flames, the Strait became automatically closed, remaining open technically only to select ships on a case-by-case basis and, as per reports, payment of a premium to Iran. Iran also claimed to have mined the main channels in the Strait and redesignated the 'in-and-out channels' closer to its shores, on either side of its Larak Island. The US Navy, threatened by Iranian missiles and drones, had to retreat out of the Persian Gulf, into a safe distance into the Sea of Oman, and President Trump issued a warning that if the free passage through the Strait of Hormuz is not opened by 8.00 PM EST on April 7, 2026, the US and Israel will bomb and destroy Iran's power infrastructure and bridges.

With Iran not relenting, Israel in fact, bombed and damaged a crucial railway bridge, the Yahya Abad railway bridge in

central Iran's Kashan city on April 7, while the US conducted airstrikes on the Kharg island of Iran targeting critical oil infrastructure on the same day. Just as it was looking like the conflict could escalate sharply, against the run of play, Trump unilaterally declared a 15-day ceasefire mere 90 minutes before the deadline was to expire, stating that it was based on conversations and request from Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir, and subject to the Islamic Republic of Iran agreeing to the "COMPLETE", "IMMEDIATE", and "SAFE OPENING" of the Strait of Hormuz. He added that the US had received a 10-point proposal from Iran, and believed it was a workable basis on which to negotiate. As a result of the ceasefire, which Iran agreed to, the first ever face-to-face talks since the 1979 Iranian Revolution between Iran and the US took place in Pakistan on April 10. The extremely high-profile and crucial meeting was led by Vice President JD Vance from the US and Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. However, after 21 hours of talks, there was no breakthrough and President Trump promptly announced a 'naval blockade' of the Strait of Hormuz, virtually blocking the 'technical blockade' imposed by Iran earlier, making it clear that the Strait of Hormuz has emerged as the most important point of contention in any efforts to break the deadlock.

**The Geography Of Hormuz**  
The narrow sea passage is about 30-50 km wide, with the narrowest point being just about 21 km. It links the vital

Persian Gulf to the West to the Oman Sea, and further the Arabian Sea to the East, making it a crucial sea link that has no physical alternative in near vicinity. It is a global lifeline through which 20% of global crude oil and LPG transits. In 2025, about 20 million barrels of oil and oil products passed through the Strait of Hormuz per day, according to estimates from the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), which itself was worth nearly USD 600 billion.

It has two distinct sea channels earmarked for passage, deep enough for Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCC) tanker ships, each having a capacity to carry up to 2 million barrels of oil, to pass through.

## Iran's Military Edge

The closure of Strait of Hormuz, first by Iran and now by the US, is raising the prospects of a potential military option to forcefully open it. The question however, of whether the Strait of Hormuz can be forcefully opened, needs to be examined in detail.

It may be recalled that the US Navy had deployed its aircraft carrier group, Abraham Lincoln, in the Persian Gulf in the initial days of the war but had to move it out to the Arabian Sea, away from the missile range of Iran, as it was being interdicted; there were fears of damage as well as embarrassment for the US in case any missile or drone did succeed in a direct hit. In fact, President Trump, in one of his public addresses, did accept the fact that more than hundred missiles and drones were fired at the aircraft carrier, though they were successfully thwarted. Why did an imposing weapon platform like the US aircraft carrier face such a situation and had to withdraw to a safe distance? The answer lies more in geography, and, to a certain extent, in the asymmetric tactics employed by Iran.

The Strait, as mentioned earlier, is merely 21 kilometres wide at its narrowest, and that implies that Iran has close

watch on any ship that transits the Strait, right from its coastline. It also implies that Iran has the capability to militarily interdict any ship through its artillery guns, short-range missiles and drones. It is also reported to have a large number of fast-attack boats, many of them unmanned, and which, therefore, can be employed in a Kamikaze role to ram into any ship. Plus, it has something unique: shallow water submarines, which remain largely undetected and can surprise any commercial and military ship with almost no warning time.

The three islands in the Strait - Qeshm, Hormuz, and Larak - located in the vicinity of its narrowest part, add another layer of strength to Iran's defensive battle. These islands are the gateway or the 'toll gate' to the Strait of Hormuz, and anyone who controls them has significant leverage over keeping the waterway open or closed. With very strong fortifications, close proximity to Iran's coastline and lack of natural cover, any sustained operations over it are likely to be met with stiff resistance. Plus, Iran has already notified that the main channels in the Strait have been mined with floating, submerged and remote mines. Most experts are of the view that in case the US Navy does undertake a mine-clearing operation, not only will it be extremely time-consuming but also vulnerable to interdiction from Iran.

As regards commercial ships, Iran does not have to interdict each and every ship but only instil a sense of doubt and fear in the shipping and insurance companies, to force them to follow its 'technical instructions'. For the US Navy to enforce a military blockage, few issues need to be noted. As of April 15, none of the allies, including the Gulf nations and Europe, have agreed to support the US in its military adventure. Secondly, an average of 120-130 commercial ships used to transit the Strait of Hormuz before the war. Even if 50% of

these ships came from non-Iranian ports, will the US be able to ensure safe passage in case Iran decides to interdict them? How much naval power is required to do that, and that, too, on a daily basis? Thirdly, a number of ships originating from Iranian ports and transiting the Strait are China-bound. Will the US Navy interdict these ships? Chinese Defence Minister Admiral Dong Jun has already issued a warning: "We have trade and energy agreements with Iran; we expect others not to interfere in our affairs." He also asserted that the Strait of Hormuz remains open for China.

## Fear Factors - And China

The double blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, on one side by Iran and on the other side by the US, has rapidly transformed the war from the issues on the mainland of Iran to a war over the chokepoint. Iran is relying on the symmetric advantage of geography to fight against the brute power of the world's largest and most powerful navy, the US. As the days progress and the deadline of the current ceasefire ends on April 21, it is a battle that is likely to be fought more in the mind than on the ground.

Can Iran instil enough fear and caution to deter any ship that it does not approve of, or can the US physically ensure an improbable task of ensuring safe passage of ships that it approves? Will China sit quiet if its ships originating from Iran are stopped? If not, then whether this will drag China into the war, for the first time, is a big question. If the circumstances do not change, will Trump still go forward with his visit to China on May 14-15? Many more questions will emerge if the deadlock continues. What is, however, clear is that the Strait of Hormuz has rapidly emerged as the 'Centre of Gravity' and the jugular vein, the resolution of which holds the key to future trajectory of the war.

**(The author is a retired Army officer and a senior research consultant at Chintan Research Foundation)**

# Islamic NATO Or Europe - Is Gulf Rethinking Its Options After Trump's 'Betrayal'?

Almost two hours before US President Donald Trump's deadline to 'end the whole of civilisation' through massive bombings on the night of April 7, his post on Truth Social announced a two-week-long ceasefire brokered by Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and the army chief Field Marshal Asim Munir. Speculations were divided: many doubted Iran would act on Trump's threats, while a significant number believed a strike against Iran's energy infrastructure was imminent. The security landscape in the Gulf has been permanently altered by the ceasefire, which now hangs in limbo as talks between US and Iran held in Islamabad collapsed. The escalation from the US, Iranian retaliation, and Europe's limits have reshaped Gulf security in ways Washington did not anticipate.

Every major war in West Asia has reshaped the region's power politics, with global implications. After the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the Jewish state emerged victorious with more territory under its control than it had before it. Similarly, the 1956 Suez crisis ended the global influence of Britain and France, the two major colonial empires. The 1967 Six-Day War reestablished Israel's military dominance and laid the groundwork for the present-day Gaza crisis. In 1973, the Yom Kippur War caused a major oil crisis after Saudi-led oil-producing countries refused to sell to the US over its support for Israel. The aftermath of the war saw the emergence of the petro-dollar system and the start of the US-Saudi military partnership in exchange for the trade of oil in dollars. The Gulf wars of 1991 and 2003 weakened and later led to the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, making Iran the sole rival to Saudi Arabia in the region. Similarly, the 2026 Iran-US war has turned the region increasingly vulnerable, has left its energy infrastructure more exposed, made Iran weaker, and forced the Gulf to rethink its security partnership with the US.

## Gulf Disillusioned?

The US and Israel have had strong ties for over eight decades. The Arab world witnessed a thaw in its relations with the Americans, especially with the emergence of the petro-dollar trading system, which further increased the demand for the US dollar in exchange for security guaran-



tees. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which include Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, and Oman, have invested heavily in their relationship with the US, assuming their interests would be well-considered over Israel's. However, Donald Trump, who is known for being unpredictable, has prioritised Israel's goals over the GCC's. Though Iran has remained a threat to these countries, as neighbours, the GCC and Iran maintained trade relations despite differences.

The primary driver behind the Iranian attacks on its neighbours was the presence of the US military in West Asia, especially in the Gulf. Even in its 10-point peace plan, Iran demanded a US military withdrawal from the Middle East.

The Gulf countries acted cautiously. The crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad Bin Salman, reportedly pushed Trump to continue the war, seeing it as an opportunity to reshape the power dynamic in the region. The goals of the GCC were hedged against the assumption that a regime change would take place soon. However, Iran's attacks on oil refineries and natural gas infrastructure continued. According to an assessment from the Stimson Centre, in a month, the GCC received 83% of Iranian drones and missiles compared to just 17% launched at Israel. The message was clear - Iran attacked both military and civilian assets to destabilise the region's energy infrastructure and ensure that the ripple effects of the war go beyond the region. Only a ceasefire has been established, but hostilities remain.

## Is Europe A Safer Bet?

In this context, Europe can emerge as a better partner for the Gulf than the US. One of the key reasons behind this observation is Europe's stance of not inter-

vening directly in the war. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer vehemently rejected America's request to send British troops to fight the war against Iran; however, the UK allowed the US to use its bases to launch attacks. In response, Iran fired ballistic missiles at Diego Garcia, located 4,000 km away.

Even so, Europe is unlikely to emerge as a genuine alternative to the US in the near future, largely due to its own continued reliance on American air defence systems for both wide-area and localised protection. This dependence was highlighted, for instance, during the conflict when the redeployment of two Patriot missile system batteries from Germany to Turkey created air defence gaps across Europe.

Secondly, American weapons sales have seen a dramatic increase, soaring from 27% to over 50% following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is because US-made systems, such as the Patriot, THAAD, NASAMS, and Stinger air defence platforms, remain globally dominant.

While the newly elected German Chancellor Friedrich Merz called for Europe to pursue strategic 'independence' from the US in 2025, the continent collectively remains reliant on American defence capabilities. But, despite its military dependency on the US, Europe remains a middle power and a strong economic partner, which can anchor the Gulf countries, and Asian countries such as India, South Korea, and Japan, which in future can help create a military partnership that does not have the US as the foundational pillar.

## US-Europe Fracture

Trump's rhetoric and actions in West Asia have been more destabilising for Europe than for Russia recently. In 2022, Europe faced an energy crisis due to its reliance on Russian gas. The ef-

fects of the energy crisis still exist, though the continent has agreed to phase out its dependence on Russian gas and actively depends on the US, Norway, Algeria and Australia for fossil fuel supplies.

Now, the Iran war has had a disastrous effect on European economies, with at least 18 countries announcing relief packages for their citizens. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which Trump withdrew from, is also a case in point. It was considered a European and American diplomatic victory under the Obama regime to stop the Iranian nuclear programme and integrate Iran into the global economy.

Another key takeaway from the war is Trump's increased skepticism of NATO as an unreliable partner. He has called out members of the alliance for not increasing the defence budget to 5% of the GDP, and laments the US taking the burden of spending more.

He has threatened to take Greenland by military force and ranted about NATO allies not supporting the US to reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Last week, he said, "NATO wasn't there when we needed them, and they won't be there if we need them again. Remember Greenland, that big, poorly run, piece of ice!" The US President also betrayed his desperation when he wrote an expletive-laden post on Truth Social on Easter. However, not once has Trump hinted at implementing Article 5 of the NATO charter, which states that any attack on a member will be deemed as an attack on the entire alliance. Article 5 has been implemented only once after the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

Donald Trump's threats to take over Greenland by force, attacking Iran without consulting its European partners, and criticising NATO for not joining in its war

efforts have caused fissures in their relationship.

## A Catalyst For Islamic NATO?

A former US security official, who has extensively studied Iran, recently said in London that forming an "Islamic NATO" would be incredibly challenging due to the diverging strategic interests of countries. In the 1950s, the CENTO or Central Treaty Organization was considered an extension of NATO in Asia. It was dissolved in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Pakistan, Turkey, Iran and the UK were members of the military alliance. In 2026, Israel is a military superpower in the region, along with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, possessing a strong military. The Gulf countries have had differences with Iran, but they continue to cooperate with Tehran because of the vulnerabilities of their energy infrastructure to any attack from Iran or vice versa. The worst-case scenario, which the US wargamed for years - of Iran's violent strikes on its neighbours - just became real for the Gulf. Despite that, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other countries refused to get actively involved, instead letting the US finish the job. Who would, then, be the adversary if an Islamic NATO were to be established? Pakistan sees Iran as an important neighbour. At the same time, a military alliance without Pakistan, which offers a nuclear umbrella, would be impotent.

Even so, the world has now witnessed Pakistan taking a stronger diplomatic role, and any future engagement concerning Iran would involve Islamabad. A wounded Iran, which is emboldened by its experience of attacking its neighbours and hijacking the global energy supply chain, makes a strong case for Islamic countries in Central Asia to partner militarily.

The war is still on. Iran has reasserted the significance of geography in global politics through its control of the Strait of Hormuz. The conflict allowed Israel to bomb Hezbollah targets in Lebanon south of the Litani River, attacking bridges and railroads, to create a military buffer zone to defend northern Israel. Now, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu has agreed to speak to Lebanon for a ceasefire.

The next two weeks will decide the fate of this war.

**Divyam Sharma**



## MTG's Great Party Switch: From "Trump's Warrior" to "Democratic Darling"? or Brilliant Rebrand?

Here is a comprehensive exploration of **Marjorie Taylor Greene** (MTG)'s major past controversies. She served as U.S. Representative for Georgia's 14th district from January 2021 until her resignation effective January 5, 2026. Her career featured a pattern of promoting conspiracy theories, inflammatory rhetoric, and provocative actions that drew widespread bipartisan criticism, media scrutiny, and formal congressional responses. Many incidents stem from pre-2021 social media posts that resurfaced after her election.

### Pre-Congress and Early Career Controversies (2017–2020)

Greene built a following through conspiracy-laden online activity before entering politics. Key examples include:

**QAnon and Pizzagate:** She

endorsed QAnon (a baseless theory alleging a Democratic cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles) and Pizzagate (a related claim of a child sex-trafficking ring run from a D.C. pizzeria). She called Q a "patriot" and engaged with related narratives.

**False Flag Mass Shootings:** She promoted claims that events like the 2012 Sandy Hook, 2018 Parkland, and 2017 Las Vegas shootings were staged or "false flag" operations to advance gun control. She also questioned aspects of 9/11 (e.g., suggesting no plane hit the Pentagon) and spread "Clinton Body Count" theories alleging the Clintons orchestrated murders.

**Jewish Space Lasers:** In 2018, she suggested California wildfires (including the deadly Camp Fire) were caused by

"space solar generators" or lasers linked to the Rothschild family (an antisemitic trope), PG&E, and a high-speed rail project. This became one of her most mocked claims.

**Endorsement of Violence:** She liked or shared posts suggesting execution or harm to Democrats, including one calling for a "bullet to the head" of then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi. She also engaged with extreme theories like "Frazzledrip" (a graphic, fabricated claim involving Hillary Clinton).

She later distanced herself from some of these, stating she no longer believed in QAnon due to "misinformation" and acknowledging school shootings and 9/11 as real events.

**Congressional Actions and Formal Reprimands (2021 Onward)**

Upon taking office in January 2021 (just days before the January 6 Capitol riot, which she objected to certifying Biden's win), Greene faced immediate backlash:

**Committee Stripping (February 2021):** The House voted 230-199 to remove her from the Education & Labor and Budget committees. All Democrats and 11 Republicans supported it, citing her past endorsements of violence and conspiracies. This was an extraordinary early punishment for a freshman.

**Impeachment Efforts and "National Divorce":** She filed articles of impeachment against President Biden on his second day in office and later pursued multiple resolutions. She also called for a "national divorce" between red and blue states amid rising political tensions.

**Malapropisms and Gaffes:** In 2022, she referred to Capitol Police as "gazpacho police" (confusing it with Gestapo). She also said "peach tree dish" instead of Petri dish. These drew widespread ridicule.

**Freedom Caucus Expulsion (2023):** She was ousted from the conservative House Freedom Caucus after insulting Rep. Lauren Boebert. She also failed in an attempt to oust Speaker Mike Johnson in 2024.

**Antisemitic and Inflammatory Rhetoric:** She faced censure resolutions for antisemitic comments, Holocaust comparisons (e.g., equating COVID policies to the Holocaust), and other remarks. She harassed trans Rep. Sarah McBride and made repeated anti-LGBTQ+ statements, including calling Democrats the "party of pedophiles" and opposing gender-affirming care.

**Hunter Biden Displays and Other Stunts:** In committee hearings, she displayed censored explicit images related to Hunter Biden, prompting ethics complaints.

Her rhetoric often targeted LGBTQ+ issues, immigrants, and political opponents, leading to accusations of Islamophobia, racism, and transphobia.

### Later Controversies and Rift with Trump (2025–2026)

Greene's tenure ended amid a dramatic public break with former ally Donald Trump:

- **Epstein Files Push:** She advocated for full release of Jeffrey Epstein-related documents, appearing with victims

and joining Democrats on legislation. Trump opposed aspects of it and called her "Marjorie Traitor Greene," rescinding his endorsement and threatening to back primary challengers. This feud escalated over foreign policy (e.g., her criticism of actions in Iran and Gaza, which she called a "genocide" in some contexts), healthcare subsidies, and government shutdowns.

- **Resignation:** In November 2025, she announced her resignation effective January 5, 2026, citing a desire to "vote our conscience" and frustration with "toxic politics." In interviews, she expressed regret for some past vitriol, especially after events like the assassination of Charlie Kirk. Post-resignation, she continued criticizing Trump as "insane" on certain issues.

- **Anti-Trans Legislation:** One of her final acts was pushing bills to restrict or criminalize gender-affirming care for minors, which she framed as protecting children.

### Broader Context and Impact

Greene's style—confrontational, meme-friendly, and unapologetic—made her a MAGA star but also a lightning rod. She was suspended from platforms like Twitter (now X) for misinformation. Late-night shows, comedians, and media frequently satirized her (e.g., SNL sketches). Critics from both parties accused her of eroding democratic norms, while supporters viewed her as a fearless truth-teller against elites.

In her final months and post-Congress, she attempted to reframe herself as more reflective, apologizing for contributing to division while maintaining core conservative positions. Her trajectory highlights the tensions within the Republican Party between hardline populism and institutional loyalty.

This overview draws from documented public records, votes, and reporting. Many of her early posts were deleted, but archives and investigations preserved them. Controversies often polarized reactions: Democrats and some Republicans condemned them as dangerous, while segments of her base celebrated her defiance. For the absolute latest developments, check major news sources, as her post-Congress activities continue to evolve.