

## Farming for coins and fusion: The Squad Busters' way

Hyderabad: Supercell's five games have cumulatively exceeded six billion downloads in their various lifetimes and aggregate 220 million active players, numbers that tell you how successful the Finnish studio has been since the launch of 2012's Hay Day and Clash of Clans. However, with Squad Busters, Supercell's first full global release since 2018's Brawl Stars, the studio hopes for not just a successful game but an experience that will reverse the studio's downward sliding fortunes and help it hold ground against platforms like Netflix and TikTok.

Thus, this review comes in the midst of Supercell's unique five-minute ads where Hollywood star power in Chris Hemsworth, Christina Ricci, Ken Jeong, Will Arnett, and Auli'i Cravalho try to convince us that Squad Busters is worth our time. Squad Busters is a 10-player multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) where you select characters from Supercell's universe, use them to collect coins and gems to farm, and then combat other players. Each game lasts four minutes and you beat NPC characters to collect gold coins and/or gems and then access chests scattered around the map for more characters to add to your troupe.

The game's strengths lie in the unique abilities that each character possesses – abilities that resonate with the characters' identities in other Supercell games – and in elements like fusion where three of the same characters merge into a single large character. The game offers incentives to take down other players and the mechanics (vines and gem mines) encourage you



to go to the centre of the map for a final showdown. In non-play elements, Squad Busters rewards players for finishing games and in classic Supercell fashion you unlock chests. The better you finish in a game the larger/rarer the chests you find, and they offer you shards to level up characters and unlock skins. However, the number of chests one can unlock is limited as players need tokens to earn them and each token takes three hours to refill. This scar-

city/time wait mechanic is both annoying and dated (from the days of Clash Royale) as it limits play time in a game where a match lasts just four minutes while also limiting progression. For example, I have woken up after eight hours of sleep only to find I have not replenished my tokens and am empty 10 minutes later. Wait for another 10 hours, I guess. The repeat-login format is punishing and after a while seems too much of a bother. MOBAs traditionally

have always been about skill, progression, strategising and marathon play sessions. Squad Busters, though, offers neither the time nor the opportunity to master any of these elements making me wonder if this was the right kind of iteration for a mashup between the MOBA form, the live service form, and freemium gaming. Not a great experience but worth a try. It's a Supercell game after all and is bound to be fun for a while.

## Access to spectacles tough for students

Hyderabad; Ensuring access to spectacles among school children and providing them with timely treatment from eye-related refractive errors that result in blurred and impaired vision, continues to remain a challenge in Telangana. A recent study of school children in the State, taken up over a period of four years in 354 different schools by researchers, indicated that 38 per cent of children, who have vision problems, do not get access to proper spectacles. Poor eyesight due to refractive errors (RE) like myopia (shortsightedness), hypermyopia (long sightedness) etc among school children, can negatively impact their academic performance, career prospects, productivity and quality of life. And this is what is happening to school children due to limited access to treatment for eye-related errors and eye-glasses for vision correction. The study titled 'Effective refractive error coverage and spectacle cover-

age among school children in Telangana, South India', conducted by researchers from Hyderabad-based LV Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI), published in Nature journal (March, 2024) also measured effective refractive error coverage (e-REC), which is an indication of access to adequate refractive correction like spectacles, eye-lenses, among children. "Results of the study indicate that e-REC must be increased by at least 43 per cent in this region," the researchers including Winston Prakash, Dr Rohit Khanna, Dr Srinivas Marmamula and Dr Jill Keefe, said. There is a need for increasing spectacle coverage among the school-children in Telangana by 38 per cent and also increase e-REC coverage by 43 per cent, the researchers pointed out. The LVPEI study screened 7,74,185 school children of which 51.49 per cent boys and the prevalence of Uncorrected Refractive Errors (URE) was 1.44 per cent.



# Political promises in an aspirational ethos

The current election cycle has seen inequality regaining a prominent place in political discourse. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has been talking about the overwhelming influence of a few business houses in a style reminiscent of his grandmother. After ignoring his arguments for a while, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) responded by presenting the Congress as a party of the extreme Left. The immunity to issues of inequality that political debates had gained since liberalisation appears to have worn off.

The return of inequality to the political stage is not entirely surprising, once we distinguish between the perception of differences in the mathematical and social domains. In a mathematical sense, any difference is an inequality. In the social domain, there are differences that are celebrated and those that are treated as inequalities. While we celebrate those who distinguish themselves from others academically, we tend to be morally less comfortable with extreme social inequalities.

Liberalisation shifted the focus from the disapproval of inequality in the garibi hatao years to celebrating individual economic successes as examples of what can be achieved. Manmohan Singh, as finance minister, ended his epoch-making 1991 budget speech with the statement that India as a major economic power was an idea whose time had come. Later governments may have made this claim more muscular than Singh's style, but the goal had already shifted from leading the developing world in its fight against global inequalities to becoming one of the beneficiaries of that inequality.

The shift from inequality to aspirations had a greater effect on domestic politics. Political rhetoric was transformed from helping the vulnerable to asserting the dominance of specific identity groups. Even as Hindutva asserted the dominance of the national majority, regional groups asserted their dominance through disdain for local minorities. The political terrain was redefined in terms of a battle between Hindutva and regional identities.

The celebration of dominance in the economic domain led to the view that poverty could only be removed through unequal economic growth. A part of the higher revenue generated through this growth was to be used for politically rewarding welfare schemes. This worldview meant not just ignoring income differences but using inequality as a tool to step up savings and hence growth. The goal of raising the rate of savings could have been realised either by increasing the savings of all sections of the population or simply by transferring income to those who save more. Since the rich are able to save more, increasing inequality would generate a higher overall rate of savings. Studies have shown that India used increased inequality to generate savings for its growth. There are, of course, limits to increasing inequality, especially in a democracy. Growing inequality reduces the share of large sections of the population in income and hence consumption. This steps up the demand for



welfare that the State and/or the political class is expected to provide. It does not help that the celebration of the rich raises these expectations even further. Thus, even as economists use a minimalist poverty line to point to a reduction in poverty, politicians don't have that luxury. At a time when the government has been claiming a massive reduction in poverty, it has been careful enough to ensure it provides free food to 800 million Indians, which is around 60% of the population.

Having created an aspirational ethos, merely providing free foodgrain is not enough. Politicians have been forced to change their attitudes to the generation of jobs. Nowhere is this clearer than in Bihar. At a time when inequality was ignored, Bihar's workers coped with regional inequality by seeking short-term assignments in distant metropolitan centres. Its politicians encouraged this process. Ram Vilas Paswan, Nitish Kumar, and Lalu Prasad used their stints as railway ministers to extend the railway network to more remote parts of the state, thus enabling workers to travel relatively quickly to distant worksites. This paid political dividends when caste-based worker networks used the wages and skills generated in the metropolitan centres to alter dominance patterns in their villages. But exposure to urban centres also raised aspirations that low-wage assignments in urban centres could not meet. The political value of encouraging short-term migration has begun to taper off. Tejashwi Yadav is leading the next political generation's move away from short-term migration by promising better-paying jobs in Bihar. Rahul Gandhi may be leading the campaign on inequality and jobs on the national stage, but Yadav is arguably doing the most intense groundwork for the cause.

The BJP's response to inequality getting a prominent place on the national

stage after more than three decades has been to double down on what it does best. It has put all its resources behind the politics of majoritarian dominance. The Prime Minister (PM) himself is leading the targeting of Muslims. And, the PM's economic advisory council has used old population data, including some convenient calculation errors, to raise fears of a Muslim population explosion. It states the share of the Sikh population has grown by 6.58% though the figures in the same sentence point to a growth of 49.19%, well above the growth rate of the share of the Muslim population. Beyond the personalities, the

political choice of 2024 has emerged as one between the politics of asserting dominance and that of easing the effects of inequality. In a political milieu where it is generally believed that direct ideological confrontations are a thing of the past, this is the sharpest difference that has been presented to the Indian electorate in a while. Whoever is first past the post on June 4 will take the result as an endorsement of their politics, thereby determining whether the next five years will see more of the politics of dominance or an effort to ease the extremes of inequality.

## Robotics expert suggests AI could combat human loneliness

New Delhi: Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology may be key to fighting loneliness among humans, which is known to seriously impair health, according to a robotics expert. Tony Prescott, from the University of Sheffield, UK, argues in his new book *The Psychology of Artificial Intelligence* that "relationships with AIs can support people" with forms of social interaction. When people feel lonely, they tend to become increasingly disconnected as their confidence plummets. AI may help "break the cycle" and give them a way to practise and improve their social skills, said Tony, a Professor of cognitive robotics.

While many people "describe their lives as lonely, there may be value in having AI companionship as a form of reciprocal social interaction that is stimulating and personalised," Tony said. An "AI companionship could help break this cycle by scaffolding feelings of self-worth and helping maintain or improve social skills. If so, relationships with AIs could support people to find companionship with both human and



In his new book, "The Psychology of Artificial Intelligence," Tony Prescott of the University of Sheffield, UK, suggests that "relationships with AIs can provide people with forms of social interaction."

artificial others," he added. In the book, the Professor explores the nature of the human mind and its cognitive processes and compares and contrasts this with the way AI is developing. He noted that the partnership of psychology and AI "can unlock further insights into both natural and artificial intelligence."

# MG India launches the New Gloster in STORM SERIES

MG (Morris Garages), a British automobile brand with a 100-year-old legacy, has introduced the new MG Gloster in DESERTSTORM and SNOWSTORM series in India. The new MG Gloster STORM series is meticulously designed and offers more luxurious and bold looks. The new MG Gloster DESERT STORM comes with a Deep Golden exterior inspired by the elements of BLACKSTORM, and the SNOWSTORM comes in a Dual-Tone Pearl White and Black exterior that will surely command attention wherever it goes.

The new Gloster DESERTSTORM comes in striking contrasts of a Deep Golden exterior punctuated by bold black highlights right from the commanding black grille to the black alloy wheels with red callipers. Dark-themed ORVMs, Red Isle LED Headlamps and Highlands Mist LED tail lamps add a touch of mystery, while the all-black door handles, DLO (Daylight Opening) garnish, roof rails, spoiler and fender garnish complete the ensemble, making every drive a statement of style and performance. The new Gloster DESERTSTORM's black-themed interior is intended to elevate driving experiences. From the upholstery to the trims, every element embodies a vibrant and premium ambient. In addition, the black steering wheel with white stitching adds a subtle yet distinctive touch to the appeal of the vehicle.

The new Gloster SNOWSTORM's sleek silhouette exudes a refined luxurious elegance and set the stage for adventure and exploration. The SNOWSTORM with a new exterior colour palette features a dual-tone Pearl White and Black exterior. Featuring headlamps with red inserts and front and rear bumpers highlighted in Pearl White with Red accents, this edition



has an air of rare sophistication. The front grille, alloys, and rear spoiler are finished with sleek black and add a touch of sportiness. While the exteriors are meticulously curated with a black finish, including the outer door handles, the outside rear-view mirror is in a black finish with a hint of red insert, window surround, fender garnish, and fog garnish with black touch. The tail-light boasts a smoked black effect, adding an aura of mystique to the vehicle's allure. The seats and steering wheel are adorned in a black theme with white stitching, creat-

ing a refined and inviting atmosphere. Commenting on the launch, Satinder Singh Bajwa, Chief Commercial Officer, MG Motor India, said, "The Gloster has enjoyed popularity among Indian SUV enthusiasts for its design, space, premium features with unmatched comfort and convenience. We received positive response from premium SUV buyers for Gloster BLACKSTORM launched last year. And, today, we're delighted to announce another milestone with the launch of the new Gloster DESERTSTORM and SNOWSTORM, both

of which underscore our pursuit of modernity and sophistication. The new Gloster STORM SERIES exemplifies our commitment to providing exceptional and distinctive experiences and offering high-tech features that maintain MG's legacy of being premium and bold." The Gloster driving experience can be further elevated with a range of dealer-fitted accessories including DESERTSTORM and SNOWSTORM badges, seat massagers, themed carpet mats, dashboard mats, premium JBL speakers for crystal clear sound quality.

## Real Madrid win the trophy they were destined to

Everyone knew how it would end; everyone has seen how it ends. The players knew it; the spectators at the Wembley and the millions watching on television knew it, perhaps the Yellow Wall of Borussia Dortmund and the team's biggest fan, the manager Edin Terzic, knew it too. It would end with the uncontrollable, unpreventable destiny of Real Madrid celebrating another Champions League final night; the muscle-memory in those trophy-bearing arms holding the giant ears of the trophy into the Wembley night sky, their opponents wandering aimlessly, their legs wilting as much as their hearts.

No pair in football exists quite like Real Madrid and Champions League. So in love with each other that they start to resemble each other, as when happy couples grow old. One is often the identity of the other, one and the same, inseparable and irresistible after all the years, content with their familiarity. The thought of Real Madrid, those famous names and iconic images roll out of your head, and they always have one hand on the big-eared trophy. No one

remembers them winning a league, even if it has been harder to achieve in the last 15 years than the premier European club competition. In the same span that they have won six Champions league titles, they have collected five league titles. Real Madrid, then, is the ultimate European trophy. It is their identity, its cause. It is, they feel, their trophy. So Dortmund was not just facing an elite team, or history, or heritage, but an identity and a cause. The more a breakthrough goal eluded them, the heavier the burden felt. You could sense the mood as early as half-time. When the whistle blew, Dortmund men looked forlornly into the ground, they could sense the earth beneath them falling apart. How they have spilled their chances, how gloriously had they squandered the fairytale ending to a fairytale season; they could sense the cloud of doom descending on them. Madrid's men, though, were ambling into the tunnel, captured by a vivaciously smiling Vinicius Junior, who had endured a shoddy first half.

Someone just tuning in could think

Dortmund were battered. On the contrary, they were the far superior side, moving upfield with pace and precision, pressing aggressively, controlling the tempo, getting runners pierce into the space behind the Madrid backline. Several times they came close. Karim Adeyemi, after a rapid run from the half-line had just Thibaut Courtois, playing in just his fifth game of the season, to beat. He could see the lights of history winking at him, then he just saw the spread-out frame of the Belgian goalkeeper, his halo and stature. The 22-year-old German froze, made a heavy touch and Dani Carvajal hoofed the ball to safety. Ian Maatsen soon sliced a pass through the centre of the defence and released Niclas Fullkrug, Dortmund's most prolific goalscorer this season. But the nerves swelling and pulsing in his head and feet, he lashed the ball across Courtois and onto the base of the right-hand post. Another night, another opponent, they could have been 2-0. But it was the Champions League night, and it was Real Madrid. It could not have gone any other way. The yellow army

buzzed, Madrid never really strummed into gears. The lively Adeyemi and industrious Marcel Sabitzer had shies at the goal blocked. Somehow, they survived the onslaught. That's what they often do, especially in the post Ronald-Bale era, becoming champions without exuding the authority of one, grinding out wins rather than demolishing opponents. That's perhaps more agonising for their opponents, for they give hope and then kill it. As the game swept past the hour-mark, you could see sparks flaring in the Madrid frontline. Vinicius, after a "bit of scolding" from Carlo Ancelotti, discovered his twinkling feet. A belief-defying nutmeg of Julian Ryerson was a cheeky warning of what was to come. Not a quick kill, but a slow, draining, draining death. Toni Kroos had a brace of curling free-kicks towards the Dortmund goal, repelled acrobatically by Gregor Kobel. By now even the romantics could sense the inescapable fate flapping its wings. Madrid would soon twist the knife. From an unlikely source, Dani Carvajal, who had a couple of tense moments on the right flank.

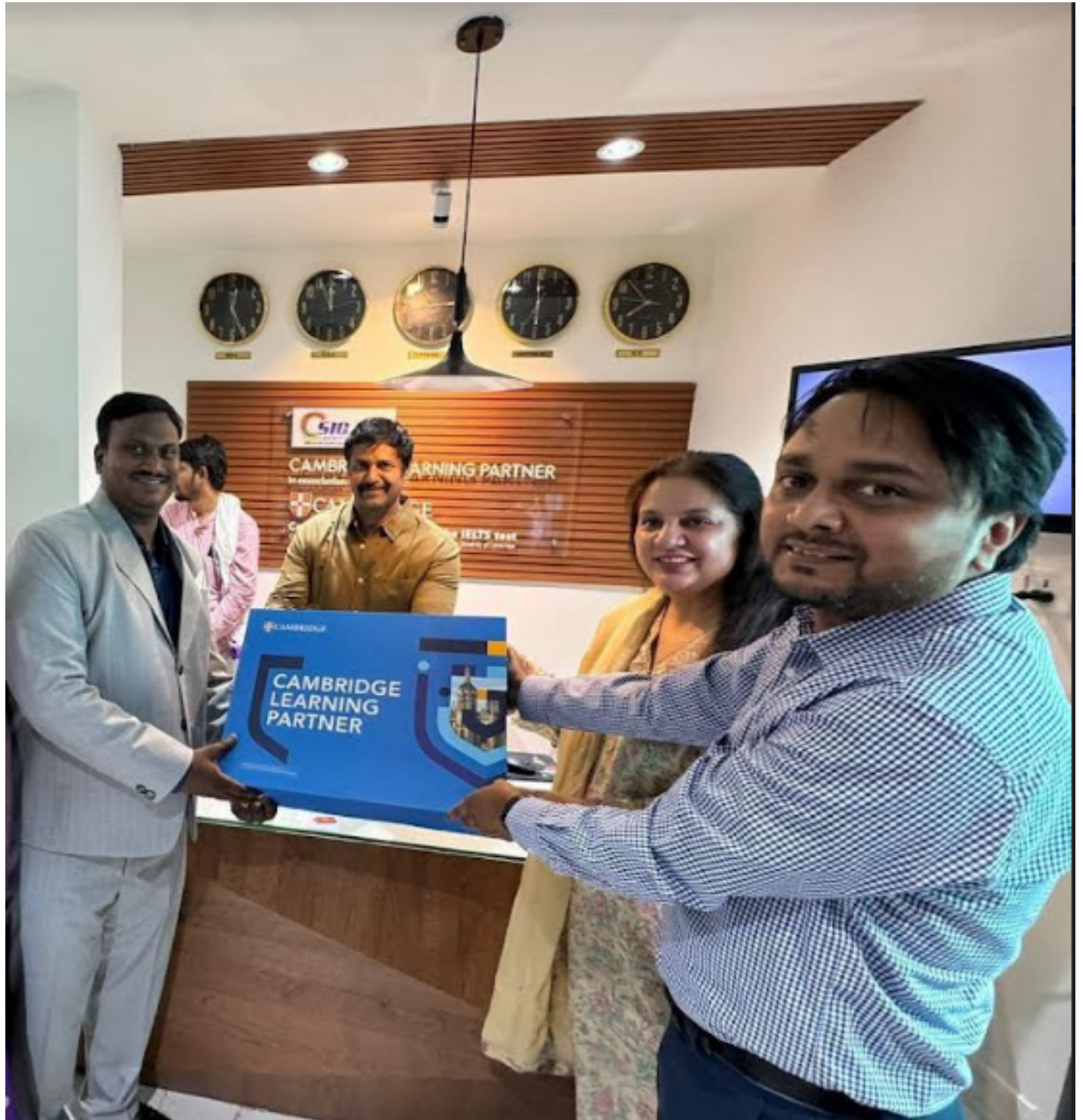
# Cambridge strengthens its foothold in Telangana; enlists its first ever Cambridge Learning Partner (CLP) in Karimnagar

Cambridge has enlisted its first Cambridge Learning Partner (CLP) in Karimnagar, Telangana, marking a significant milestone in IELTS coaching in the region. The 1800 sq ft centre in collaboration with AD Overseas, a renowned partner in the realm of IELTS coaching and student visa consultation will benefit 1000 learners in the region. Cambridge, leveraging its extensive global expertise in the IELTS realm, will offer a diverse array of internationally acclaimed content, bespoke educational programs, innovative teaching methodologies, advanced digital platforms, proficient trainers, and comprehensive training resources. The Cambridge Partner Learning Centres were conceived and established as a premier choice for students striving for superior-quality IELTS training services.

AD overseas is a team of qualified and professional education enthusiasts who provide guidance and resources to learners aspiring to move abroad. This partnership between Cambridge and AD Overseas will increase the learning and knowledge exposure of IELTS among both existing and prospective learners in the region.

Students can reap immense benefits from being a part of CLP Centres which enables them to unlock a lifetime of experiences. CLP Centres help individuals everywhere connect, communicate and come closer together. Cambridge's exceedingly skilled and seasoned IELTS faculties equip students with the necessary knowledge to acquire their desired band score, making their aspiration of studying abroad a reality. Simultaneously, their proficient counsellors are extremely capable of gauging students' potential and aligning them with the ideal country and course that perfectly match their profiles.

Commenting on the partnership, Arunachalam Thinnayam Krishnamurthy, Senior Vice President, English said, "Through collaboration with educators and partners, we are committed to guiding individuals on this enriching journey. Our vision is to tap into the potential of numerous learners across Telangana and to significantly contribute to the development of their language and future prospects. With our internationally recognized expertise, we can bring trustworthiness and credibility through systematic procedures and utilize our standing as the official creators of IELTS preparation content to establish rec-



ognized centers of excellence."

According to recent reports, the two Telugu states have the highest number of Indian students pursuing education in for-

eign universities – 12.5% of total pool. This partnership aims to further increase this number with a target of reaching 1000 of learner's in the city and opportunities for nearby towns learner's in the region of

Karimnagar. Marketing activities are yet to be planned to achieve this projected number. Cambridge currently has 31 CLP partners and in 31 cities catering to number of 15,000+ learners.

## Congress wrests Secunderabad Cantonment from BRS

Hyderabad: The ruling Congress wrested the Secunderabad Cantonment Assembly constituency from the BRS in the bypoll results announced on Tuesday. Congress candidate Sri Ganesh won the seat with a majority of 13,206 votes against his nearest rival and BJP candidate Dr TN Vamsha Tilak.

The BRS had won the Secunderabad Cantonment constituency, an SC reserved

constituency in the Assembly elections held in December last year. The party candidate G Lasya Nanditha, daughter of former MLA G Sayanna won the seat comfortably, with a majority of 17,169 votes against Sri Ganesh, who was then the BJP candidate. However, following Lasya Nanditha's untimely demise in a road mishap in February, the bypolls were held to the Assembly segment. Sri Ganesh in between shifted

from the BJP to the Congress and contested again.

As per the results declared by the Election Commission of India, Sri Ganesh secured 53,651 votes and gained majority over BJP candidate Vamsha Tilak who received 40,445 votes. BRS candidate G Niveditha, who was nominated to replace her sister Lasya Nanditha was confined to the third position with 34,462 votes.



# Are chin fillers or implants for you? Here's why young men are fuelling a boom in cosmetic procedures

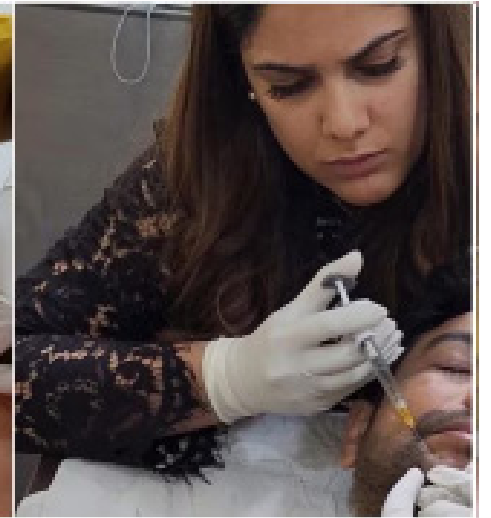
Actor Rajkumar Rao isn't the only man to have opted for correcting his weak chin with fillers and feel good and confident about his body language. Sivan Menon, a 31-year-old IT professional from Bengaluru, now makes his presentations without worrying about the chin that seemed to jut out beyond his nose tip whenever he looked down. A 49-year-old stroke survivor, whose cheek muscles had loosened and sagged his jawline, is now back to leading his marketing team. "I became very self-conscious and thought that everybody was gazing at my rather odd chin. Now I don't get distracted by the thought of how I am looking," says Sivan. Like him, many Indian men are opting for jawline correction and chin enhancement procedures for something that goes beyond just getting the best side profile on Instagram.

## WHY CHIN PROCEDURES ARE GOING UP?

"Our face is a crucial component of making a favourable first impression. I routinely get young people in their 20s and 30s, who want to look sharp and convincing. To them, a proportioned face is part of the X factor and social winnability," says Dr Sravya C Tipirneni, consultant dermatologist and cosmetologist at Manipal Hospitals, Bengaluru. She also dispels the idea that chin and jawline enhancement are always about aesthetics. "Sometimes facial asymmetry (because no two sides of our faces are the same) is pronounced; there may be a deeper indentation on one side that distorts your face. Patients of Bell's palsy (muscle weakness that causes one half of the face to droop) often need a correction to get the facial muscles back up. For patients of morphea, who lose face fat rapidly, fillers offer hope. Sometimes the collagen shrinks drastically in 50-plus

people, hollowing out their cheeks, giving a sunken, broken appearance. This needs some plumping up and contouring," says Dr Tipirneni. **SURGICAL OR NON SURGICAL?**

There are both non-surgical and surgical approaches. The non-surgical method involves injecting hyaluronic acid (a slippery substance that your body produces too and can hold water) and fat-burning fillers. "We inject them in differing concentrations. Sometimes we need to enhance volume to increase the chin's projection and in the process correct a receding chin. At other times, we have to align the chin that's protruding too much with the upper jawline," says Dr Tipirneni. The injections have a numbing agent mixed with them, so pain is minimal, with temporary swelling and inflammation at the injection site. But it's a day's procedure. So you can walk out in 50 minutes and take care to avoid infection at the prick site. Dr Tipirneni does a 3D imaging of the patient's face and then prepares a predictive model of the outcome on a computer. "There is a mathematical ratio involved. The ideal chin length is 1.6 times the length of the lower lip. There is another measure called the E-line, an imaginary line drawn from the tip of the nose to the chin. A perfect chin should become slightly longer than this line," she explains. Fillers are emerging as a safe option as they last up to 16 months. "Now we have needles tipped with straws. This reduces blood vessel injury and allows the dermatologist to place fillers in specific layers and consistencies for a more natural look. This avoids over-correction and allows you to mould the filler into a shape that would most suit the patient by gently massaging it, much like a play dough," adds Dr Tipirneni. However, the problem



with fillers is that they will need to be re-touched over the years. "Besides fillers cannot account for bone development disorders or structural defects from birth," says Dr Adhishwar Sharma, cosmetic and plastic surgeon, Fortis Memorial Research Institute (FMRI), Gurugram. He uses a 3D printer to make a replica of the chin and jawline, then takes at least four sets of measurements. "Bone gaps are sometimes thinner than human hair, so this meticulous process involves two months of pre-surgery assessment as well as six months of post-surgical follow-up. This is best for chins that jut out big and square like the wrestler Khali. Your upper and lower jaw are asymmetrical and the teeth don't sit easily on each other. As a result, they have to be realigned," he says. For recessed chins, he recommends an implant around a patient's existing chin bone to augment its size and shape. This is usually an outpatient procedure, performed using gen-

eral anesthesia. A small incision is made either underneath the chin or inside the mouth. Through this incision, the surgeon creates space for the chin implant, usually silicone, and fits it around the chin bone. "But for a permanent effect, I would cut the bone a bit, bring it forward and fix it with plates and screws," explains Dr Sharma. One has to weigh the costs as well. A single dose of hyaluronic acid filler — 1 ml — costs Rs 25,000. "For full enhancement, you would need around 4 to 6 ml, which would cost anywhere between Rs 1 lakh to Rs 3 lakh," says Dr Tipirneni. A surgery itself would cost around Rs 2.5 lakh. "Outpatient follow-up services do not cost that high. And although cosmetic procedures are not covered by insurance, reconstructive procedures that have to do with ease of body functioning are covered," adds Dr Sharma. However, people are looking at these procedures as returns on investment (ROI), the kind that guarantees them body confidence.

## What does a coalition government mean for economic reforms in India?

Regardless of which party leads India's Union government and who becomes the next Prime Minister, it is now certain that no single party will have the majority in the new Lok Sabha. That implies there will be a coalition government in the real sense of the word. In terms of economic governance, the one aspect that distinguished the past two Lok Sabhas was the fact that it was the first time since the start of economic reforms that a single party — the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — enjoyed a majority mandate. This was supposed to have a salutary effect on the trajectory of economic reforms in India. Since 1991, when India was forced to open up its economy and give up on the planned economy model, all governments were coalitions of the sort where even the lead party was quite far from the majority mark of 272. This obvious weakness of the leading party — be it the Congress or the BJP or the so-called third front — meant that India always had — to borrow the words of Montek Singh Ahluwalia (former Deputy Chairman of the erstwhile Planning Commission) — "a strong consensus for weak reforms". In other words, while everyone

agreed that economic reforms were required, the parties of the ruling coalition pulled in different directions when it came to deciding the exact nature of an economic reform.

One, the past decade under PM Narendra Modi was supposed to sort out that weakness and provide confidence to investors — both local and foreign — about policy stability, and a concerted push towards economic reforms. That did not happen as envisaged. While Modi's first two terms saw several reforms such as the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the creation of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, it was not exactly a smooth ride all through. For instance, the Modi government failed to bring about reform of land acquisition. Early in the first term an ordinance to this effect was taken back after the "suit boot ki sarkar" jibe by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi.

Similarly, during the second term, the Modi government could not convince farmers about the farm reforms and was forced to repeal them. Indeed, the announcement of the demonetisation with disastrous consequences injected a deep sense of un-

certainty among all economic agents. Two, if one looks back at India's economic history since 1991, it becomes clear that coalition governments have undertaken some of the boldest and most visionary reforms that laid the foundation for India's resurgence. What were the notable reforms brought by the previous coalition governments?

The biggest example is the whole host of reforms during the P V Narasimha Rao-led government, which was essentially a minority government. It discarded centralised planning and opened the Indian economy to global completion by removing the licence-permit raj. The country also became a member of the World Trade Organisation. Under the short-lived Deve Gowda government, then Finance Minister P Chidambaram came out with what is still referred to as the "dream budget". It placed faith in the Indian taxpayers and cut tax rates — both personal income tax, corporate taxes, and customs duties. Under the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, India framed the Fiscal Responsibility & Budget Management (FRBM) law for fiscal

rectitude, and limited the government's ability to borrow within prudential limits. The Vajpayee-led coalition further advanced the push towards disinvestment of loss-making Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), and focused on boosting rural infrastructure and connectivity through the PM Gram Sadak Yojana. The very first NDA also brought in the Information Technology Act, in 2000, that laid the foundation for the bustling e-commerce giant that India is today. Under the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) India built on the Vajpayee era Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to initiate the Right to Education Act. Singh's government brought in several reforms under the rights-based approach — far more robust than the personal guarantees of an individual leader.

These included the Right to Information Act, which boosted transparency in India's democracy, and the Right to Food, which ensured that no Indian should go hungry. In the same light, the UPA brought in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MG-NREGA), which provided minimum employment to the rural poor.

# Trump trial will change US politics, presidency

The first-ever trial of an American president in a civil or criminal court might conclude this week, following Memorial Day, a national holiday observed on the last Monday in May to honour fallen American military personnel. The prosecution is set to make its closing argument in "People v. Trump" on Tuesday, May 28, with jury deliberations likely to begin on Thursday. Whether Donald J Trump, the 45th president, will be convicted for falsifying business records related to hush money payments made to a porn star is a subject of considerable discussion around the country, which is in the middle of another close presidential race between former president Donald Trump as the Republican candidate and current president Joe Biden as the Democratic candidate. During the six-week trial in New York, the prosecution presented several key witnesses. They included Michael Cohen, Trump's former lawyer and "fixer" as the star witness; Stormy Daniels, who allegedly had a sexual encounter with Trump in 2006; and David Pecker, a former tabloid publisher who paid to "catch and kill" negative stories about Trump to prevent them from damaging his electoral prospects during the 2016 election.

Trump did not testify at his trial, despite his earlier statements that he would. This was not surprising, as many knowledgeable individuals believed the former president's penchant for talking too much and too long would have aided the prosecution more than advancing his own defence.

After the prosecution and defence have made their final arguments in the trial, it will be up to the 12 New Yorkers serving as jurors to either convict or acquit Trump. A third possibility of a hung jury is also very much on the table. Some legal analysts believe that a hung jury seems more likely, at this point than a conviction or an acquittal. For a guilty verdict on the felony charges, all the jurors must be convinced "beyond a reasonable doubt" that Trump falsified records with the intent to conceal another crime. In this case, that crime is violating election laws. If even one juror concludes that the charges against the former president have not been proven beyond a reasonable doubt, the result will be a hung jury. Although this does not equate to an acquittal, Trump and the legion of his supporters would undoubtedly consider it a victory. And, it is unlikely that the prosecution would attempt to retry the case.

If Trump is convicted, it will be up to the presiding judge, Judge Juan Merchan, to determine his sentence. Sentencing is likely to occur one to two months after the verdict. That means, the timing of the sentence could coincide with the Republican National Convention scheduled for July 15 to 18 in Milwaukee/Wisconsin, where Trump is expected to be nominated as the

party's candidate. If convicted, Trump could be sentenced to jail. Some experts believe that even if Trump is convicted, he might not serve any jail time since he would be a first-time offender. Regardless of whether he is sentenced to jail or not, Trump can still run for president and serve as president if elected.

The consequences of this trial extend far beyond what happens to Donald J Trump. Its more consequential and enduring aspect will be its impact on American politics and the presidency. In fact, the trial may have already changed America, especially in terms of how prosecutors at the federal and state levels view future presidents. With the Trump trial, the Rubicon of trying a president has been crossed. Now that the precedent of a president in a courtroom has been established, future prosecutors will probably be more willing to bring charges against a former president. The Trump trial signals a new era where the legal accountability of presidents becomes an ongoing reality. This could reshape the expectations and behaviours of future presidents, knowing that their actions could lead to legal scrutiny and potential trials long after their term in office has ended.

Even if Trump avoids conviction in New York, his legal troubles will not be over. He currently faces charges in three



other criminal cases with potential trials in each. That's the bad news for the former president. At this time, however, it does not appear likely that any of these trials can be convened and concluded before the presidential election date of November 5. That is the good news for Trump. If he is re-elected President on November 5, there is substantial conjecture among legal experts as to whether Trump could legally use the Office of President and the federal department of justice to evade the criminal charges against him. Trump has already claimed

that there should be presidential immunity and the United States (US) Supreme Court held a hearing on that claim on April 25 and will hand down its decision on this before it adjourns in late June or early July. In conclusion, according to the most recent political polls, Trump is running ahead of Biden and has a good chance of being re-elected president. Polls do not vote but people do. If the people decide that Trump should be the next president, it will not only be Trump who has been put on trial, it will be the country's political system and the US democracy.

## Organoids alternative to animal testing

Hyderabad: Ever heard of organs-on-chips? Yes, they are the next wave of cell-culture models, also known as organoids, with an ability to mimic biological activities of living organs on a chip! And, spearheading research in this rare and unique field are the researchers from Hyderabad-based Centre for Predictive Human Model Systems (CPHMS), who recently also released a database aimed at guiding researchers and students about organs-on-chips. To put it in simpler terms, organ-on-chips are devices that house miniaturised versions of human organs such as the liver, lungs or even a heart on a chip. The long-term aim is that organs-on-chips can be viable alternatives to traditional animal experimentation in laboratories which often raises questions about ethics and humane treatment of animals.

In a recent article on organs-on-chips, the Head of CPHMS, which is a joint venture between city-based Atal Incubation Centre (AIC) at Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB) and Humane Society International, India, Dr Kasturi

Mahadik said that organs-on-chips are miniature (micro) models that replicate the structure and function of human organs in controlled laboratory environments.

The Director in the article published by CCMB said that the recently released database about organs-on-chips will benefit many stakeholders. "The resource not only will benefit students and scientists but can also serve as a valuable tool for Indian funding and regulatory bodies. It will play a crucial role in making informed policy decisions effective funding allocation," Dr Kasturi was quoted.

CPHMS is at the forefront of promoting and developing organ-in-chips technology in India and is actively advocating for investment and research in human-based, non-animal methodologies (NAMs) within the life sciences sector. The facility also conducts workshops and training programs to equip researchers with the necessary expertise to utilise this revolutionary technology. Traditional drug development through animal testing can be expensive, time-consuming, and sometimes yield



To put it in simpler terms, organ-on-chips are devices that house miniaturised versions of human organs such as the liver, lungs or even a heart on a chip.

misleading results. Organs-on-chips, however, offer a promising alternative, as they house living human cells arranged in a way that mimics the structure and function of real organs. Using these applications, researchers can simulate blood flow and other physiological processes, creating a more realistic environment for testing potential drugs.

# The argument for expanding the open prison system in India

Recently, the Supreme Court directed that no attempts shall be made to reduce the area of open prisons in the country. A bench of justice BR Gavai and justice Sandeep Mehta noted it has been informed that there is a proposal to reduce the area at Sanganer open-air camp in Jaipur. "We thus direct that there shall be no attempt of reduction in the area of open-air camps/institutions/prisons, wherever they are functioning," the bench reportedly said. Open prisons are custodial institutions, where, unlike traditional prisons, there is lesser supervision and greater freedom of movement for the inmates. While the infrastructural and administrative definitions of open prisons may vary across Indian states, they are bound together by the principles of self-discipline for the inmates instead of control. Serving as a transitional phase between the closed environment of conventional prisons and the free world, open prisons are founded on the belief that a person cannot be prepared for freedom in conditions of captivity.

Over time, the objectives of the punishment of incarceration have expanded from primarily retribution to also looking at the reformation of the incarcerated person for broader social good. The journey of prison reforms has seen significant strides toward ensuring that punishment serves a broader societal purpose, rather than adhering to the individualistic concept of "an eye for an eye".

"These open camps can be considered as useful 'missing links' of correctional process, and in fact, serve the purpose of 'halfway homes' or 'transit homes' between the closed institutionalized treatment and the free society," noted the Rajasthan Prison Department in a statement. Inmates in open prisons can move out, earn a livelihood, meet family, learn skills, study, have community ties and then return to serving their sentence. It is not a regular institution for accommodating inmates; rather, it is an initiative to ensure prisoner's reintegration into wider society after long years of incarceration. Only select prisoners, primarily convicts, who have undergone a significant period in regular prisons and have shown potential for change and good behaviour, qualify for admission to an open prison. Utilising predetermined criteria, the objective is to evaluate which convicted individuals are appropriate for transition and then allocate them to a facility conducive to fostering their rehabilitation as they serve their sentence. The contours of the concept of open prisons are defined by meaningful reintegration, fostering responsibility and skill development. This approach enhances constructive inmate engagement and serves the ends of criminal justice effectively.

The open prison in India was built in the Bombay Presidency in 1905 on the premise of using prisoners as cheap, or rather unpaid labour in public works such as repairing or building infrastructure. However, the idea of open prisons, over the



years, has adapted and evolved in response to emerging contexts and shifting the focus of modern-day penology from deterrence to reformation. The first open prison of Independent India was an annexe to the Model Prison in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, in 1949. This initiative led to the creation of a full-fledged open prison in Uttar Pradesh in 1953, where inmates were engaged in the construction of the Chandraprabha dam, which recently made headlines for receiving a sanction of Rs. 12.58 crore for repairs. The shift in penology post-independence was significantly influenced by the Constitutional Courts, which, through their judgements in various cases, have repeatedly addressed inhumane prison conditions that have shaken the judicial conscience. In 1977, the Supreme Court directed that work assigned to prisoners must be congenial and that wages must be paid, restoring the human dignity that had been stripped away by unpaid labour. This was followed by the concerted efforts of several High Courts to declare unpaid work by prison inmates as unconstitutional. Courts in fact urged states to have a reasonable minimum wage and meet the objective of reform and rehabilitation. With a rights-based emphasis from the judiciary and the efforts of prison reformists, open prisons have gained traction as a reformatory approach to reintegrating hardened criminals into mainstream life. By 1982, 14 states had functioning open prisons. However, the progress since displays the lack of initiative by state authorities, with only 17 states having such prisons in 2022. The slow pace is despite a 2017 directive by the SC mandating the establishment of open prisons in each district across the country. Rajasthan leads the way with 41 open prisons, followed by Maharashtra with 19,

Madhya Pradesh with 7, and Gujarat and West Bengal with 4 each. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have established three open jails each. Meanwhile, 11 states and not one Union Territory, do not have any open prisons, falling far from compliance.

The problem lies not only in the lack of open prisons but also in the underutilization of existing infrastructure. Prisons and prisoners are mentioned in Entry No. 4 of List II (State List) of the 7th Schedule of the Constitution of India, making them a State subject. This has led to both desired and undesired diversity in prison policies across the country. One consequence of prisons being a State subject is that several States and Union Territories have yet to establish objective rules or guidelines for the administration of open prisons, eligibility of prisoners, remission, and wages. Despite having a total capacity of 6,000, open prisons housed only 2,178 prisoners in 2021, resulting in an occupancy rate of 36%. This commendable rate doubled to 74% in 2022. The sudden surge in the national occupancy rate of open prisons was primarily driven by two states: Maharashtra and West Bengal. Maharashtra increased its occupancy rate in open prisons from 9% in 2021 to 107% in 2022, while West Bengal increased from 10% in 2021 to 54% in 2022. However, this still contrasts sharply with the acute problem of overcrowding in regular prisons, where occupancy rates can reach as high as 300-400%. While states have the opportunity to transition more inmates to open prison facilities, the lack of will and effort by state authorities, continues to subject them to overcrowded prisons. India's penal system stands at a crossroads: The choice is between continuing with the dated, punitive and incapacitating ap-

proach or embracing a more humane, rehabilitative model. While more people are being incarcerated each year, current policies and lack of administrative will are failing to direct incarcerated persons towards rebuilding their lives. Instead, they continue to endure inhumane prison conditions, facing the irreversible consequences of incarceration, which keep them far from rehabilitation. In 1835, Macaulay, who drafted the now-repealed Indian Penal Code, condemned the prison conditions in India as "shocking to humanity." Nearly two centuries later, the Supreme Court is still addressing the issue of inhuman conditions in 1382 prisons. It points towards the long-standing problem in India's correctional system ensnared in a cycle of neglect towards prisoners. Despite a sustained series of judicial pronouncements, comprehensive expert reports, and legislative interventions, the promise of rehabilitation and humane treatment for prisoners remains largely unfulfilled. As India endeavours to address these concerns, the SC's directive to preserve open prison space has never been more urgent. The question of the establishment and functioning of open prisons is a small piece in the ongoing quest for prison reforms. The idea of punishment and whether rehabilitation is the goal is often confronted by practices that emphasize retribution and incapacitation. Years of state apathy towards individuals convicted of crimes or imprisoned solely based on judicial oversight cannot, by itself, lead to the ideal functioning of open prisons. To make second chances a reality in the criminal justice system, a synergy of policy reforms and proactive administrative measures must emanate from the commitments in our shared sense of humanity, before anything else.

# The ICC's threat to arrest Binyamin Netanyahu has shocked Israel

IT HAD been expected in Israel for weeks, but was still a shock when it came. On May 20th the prosecutor for the International Criminal Court (ICC), Karim Khan, announced that he was requesting arrest warrants for Binyamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant, Israel's prime minister and defence minister, as well as the leaders of Hamas, the Islamists who launched the deadly attack on Israel on October 7th last year, on charges of war crimes. The prospect of their leaders appearing in the dock along with the perpetrators of a massacre against them is unthinkable for Israelis. But it is a sign of the horror with which many have come to view their government's devastating war in Gaza. Mr Khan, a British lawyer, issued detailed and lengthy accusations against both sides. He opened with the allegations against the Hamas chiefs, Yahya Sinwar (pictured right), Mohammed Deif and Ismail Haniyeh, detailing the murder, sexual assault and kidnapping of Israeli citizens. But the charges against the Israeli ministers were no less pointed.

Mr Khan noted that Israel has the right to protect its citizens, but he accused it of having pursued "starvation as a method of war" in Gaza. Israel has denied this charge, pointing to the aid convoys that have been allowed through. But this has mainly happened in the past couple of months and under international pressure. There is ample evidence that Israel has closed routes into Gaza and disrupted the supply of aid. Earlier in the war Israeli ministers also made clear in public their intention to impose a "total siege" on Gaza. Mr Khan has chosen to focus on these war tactics, rather than the bombing of civilian areas. He has also chosen, at least for now, to target Israel's political leaders rather than its generals. Nor did the charge sheet include the allegation of genocide. Mr Khan may be sticking to crimes that are easier to prove. The judges in the ICC's pre-trial chamber must now decide whether there is enough evidence to issue the arrest warrants. Even if they do, Israel has not ratified the Rome statute setting up the ICC, so is under no legal obligation to hand over its leaders. Mr Sinwar and Mr Deif are hiding in Gaza and Mr Haniyeh rarely, if ever, travels to a country which is a party to the treaty. A trial in The Hague is unlikely.

But it is still devastating; far more so for Israel, a country with a democratically elected government and aspirations to be part of the Western world, than for Hamas, a terrorist group. Some Western leaders have already criticised the ICC for implying an equivalence between the leaders of Hamas and Israel. However, if the prosecutor's request is granted, they would be legally bound to arrest Mr Netanyahu if he travels to their countries. America, which like Israel is not a signatory, has a different dilemma. For months Joe Biden, the president, has both publicly and privately beseeched Mr Netanyahu to allow more aid through and to go to greater lengths to avoid civilian casualties. In recent weeks

he has delayed at least one shipment of arms that could be used in Israel's offensive on the city of Rafah. The ICC prosecutor's claims are in line with the American criticisms, but Mr Biden nonetheless called them "outrageous". America has a mixed relationship with the court. Donald Trump, Mr Biden's predecessor (and possible successor), issued sanctions against the ICC for investigating allegations of war crimes committed by American troops in Afghanistan. Mr Biden lifted those sanctions and worked with the court on issuing an arrest warrant last year for Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia. America's response this time, however, is shaped by the fact that Israel is one of its closest allies. At home, Mr Netanyahu got rare support from his political foes. "It is not possible to issue arrest warrants against Netanyahu, Sinwar and Deif," said Yair Lapid, an opposition leader who has told Mr Netanyahu to resign. "There is no such comparison. We cannot accept it and it is unforgivable." Benny Gantz, another rival of the prime minister also rallied around



him. But this will almost certainly be short-lived. Israeli security officials have been quietly warning politicians that withholding humanitarian aid early in the war would come back to haunt Israel. "It should have been clear they would have to walk back

the bombastic statements on besieging Gaza," said one army officer. "So why do it in the first place?" Sign up to the Middle East Dispatch, a weekly newsletter that keeps you in the loop on a fascinating, complex and consequential part of the world.

## Blinken in Beijing and the mirage of US-China detente

When the United States (US) secretary of state, Antony Blinken, travelled to China last month, his purpose was threefold: First, to assess the concrete steps taken in the bilateral relationship since Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping met in San Francisco in November 2023; second, to reposition the focal point of US-China relations within a rapidly shifting international landscape; and finally, to "de-risk" the bilateral relationship by ensuring that China maintains a favourable disposition towards Washington. To achieve that, Washington's approach has been a combination of incentives and deterrents.

During the visit, lines were once again drawn between the two sides, highlighting simmering disputes on issues such as trade, technology, and security. There is a keenness in Washington to prevent these cracks from widening further, particularly in light of the repercussions of ongoing conflicts in Europe and West Asia. Of particular concern is the burgeoning China-Russia relationship, with the US expressing worry that China may be providing vital technologies to the Russian defence industry, thereby bolstering the latter's capability to maintain battlefield advantages and undoing western support.

The Biden administration has consistently signalled a stance of cooperation alongside measures that have fuelled competition. On May 14, the US increased tariffs across strategic sectors such as steel and aluminium, semiconductors, electric vehicles, batteries, critical minerals, solar cells, ship-to-shore cranes, and medical

products to curb China's unfair trade practices in key sectors like tech transfer, innovation and intellectual property. Since the Anchorage summit in March 2021, when the bilateral relationship seemed to veer off course, the focus has been on "responsibly managing competition" from the US. Incidents such as former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 and the spy balloon incident in January 2023 have redrawn the boundaries of the US's competitive approach towards China. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has initiated a tech competition with China since the passage of the 2022 CHIPS and Sciences Act, prompting retaliatory measures from China.

The impact of these disruptions has been further compounded by instability in the world order. The past couple of years have been immensely destabilising for the international system, marked by the wars in Europe and West Asia and the systemic shocks arising from them. The US-China relationship has not been immune to these impacts.

Blame it on the age of globalisation and interconnectedness, but the US-China relationship is, in many ways, a uniquely significant great power dynamic. It stands out, particularly in how it has evolved distinctively from the competitive relationship between the US and the Soviet Union during the last century. Today, between its relations with China and Russia, it is primarily with China that the US can attempt moderation. Simultaneously, China remains deeply integrated with western

economies. These mutual dependencies have prevented a complete rupture in bilateral relations. Two successive high-profile visits within a month — Janet Yellen and Antony Blinken — suggest that Washington is intent on maintaining engagement with Beijing amidst the shifting sands in Ukraine and the blitz in Gaza.

Several cooperative steps between the two countries, such as joint efforts to combat synthetic drugs like fentanyl through the establishment of a joint Counternarcotics Working Group, collaboration on policymaking and law enforcement in this regard, and the resumption of military-to-military talks at various levels, along with the agreement to hold US-PRC talks on Artificial Intelligence in the coming weeks, underscore the shared compulsion to avert any regional or global crisis that might escalate into military conflict between the two powers. However, China perceives an opportune moment to assert itself distinctly against the US as the sole alternative power centre with comparable capacities, global heft, and influence to engage wayward countries beyond Washington's control, such as Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. Recent US intelligence suggesting potential collusion between Russia and China on the issue of Taiwan has prompted preparations for a new form of joint military readiness from the US and its regional allies. Blinken's visit may be another way of signalling to China that it shouldn't exploit any crisis to escalate new ones, at least until the US elections are over in November of this year.