THE EDITORIAL PAGE

JITTERY CONGRESS

A jittery Congress is trying to create a parallel universe wherein it works in absolute negation of the existence of the Parliament, laws of the land and doesn't care for peoples' verdict. This is clear the way party has asserted that it would sing the older version of the national anthem vande mataram in contravention of the law passed by Parliament about it. The law of the land makes singing the song that ignited passions during the freedom struggle in full and any show of disrespect to it an offence. This comes on the heels on controversial behaviour of party leader Sonia Gandhi on then Independence Day. She was apparently trying to stop singers from reciting the entire song during the flag hoisting ceremony. Interestingly, the party denied this and made some other story about Gandhi's gesticulating and shouting. Now the party claims it would follow the decisions taken by Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Pate on the national anthem. Congress party is the biggest failure today as it lags even regional parties in its strength in Parliament mainly because the main aim of the leadership is to bring the Nehru-Gandhi scion to the Prime Minister's seat. Sonia Gandhi genuinely believes it's her responsibility to make her son the Prime Minister; she owes it to her family. Politics doesn't work out like that. After losing three consecutive elections and seeing that there is no challenge to the BJP, Congress has resorted to farce and quixotic moves ranging from mimicking Prime Minster to calling the most towering leader of India names. The party has been disrupting parliament in the process and is trying to undermine the democratic verdict of the people of India. The Party has got mandate as one of the opposition parties and leaders must reconcile to it. Also the strategy has not paid since common people do not appreciate the disruption of Parliament and breaking of rules.

The Makkah triangle and the Iran test

Bhopinder Singh

The temptation to describe the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement as an "Islamic NATO" is understandable. Signed by Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan on August 7, 2026, the agreement declares that an armed attack against one member will be regarded as an attack against all. It brings together Saudi Arabia's financial and energy power, Türkiye's formidable conventional military and defence-industrial capabilities, and Pakistan's nuclear deterrent.

Yet the NATO analogy is premature. The greatest reason is Iran.

Iran represents the ultimate test of whether the Makkah Agreement can evolve from a strategically impressive partnership into a genuinely integrated collective-defence alliance. The problem is that the three members have fundamentally different relationships with Tehran.

For Saudi Arabia, Iran has traditionally been the principal regional strategic competitor. Riyadh remains concerned about Iranian missiles, drones, regional networks and the vulnerability of Gulf energy infrastructure. Türkiye's relationship with Iran is far more complicated. Ankara and Tehran compete for influence across Syria, Iraq, the Caucasus and the wider Middle East, but also maintain diplomatic and economic ties. Türkiye has generally preferred managed rivalry rather than permanent confrontation, preserving its strategic flexibility. Pakistan's position is more constrained still. It shares a border with Iran and has strong incentives to maintain workable relations with Tehran, given sectarian tensions (Pakistan hosts the second-largest Shia population in the world). Islamabad must consider its western frontier and the danger of creating another security problem alongside its longstanding confrontation with India.

This creates the fundamental question hanging over the Makkah Agreement: What happens if Iran attacks Saudi Arabia?

On paper, the answer appears straightforward. If an attack on one is an attack on all, an Iranian attack on Saudi Arabia should trigger collective defence. In practice, however, would Pakistan enter a direct war with Iran? Would Türkiye deploy combat forces? Or would the two instead provide intelligence, air-defence support, weapons and diplomatic backing? That distinction matters because the agreement establishes the principle of collective defence without yet possessing NATO's decades-old command structures, intelligence architecture, interoperability and military planning. History

Iran therefore exposes the difference between collective defence as a declaration and collective defence as an operational doctrine.

The problem becomes even greater if "Islamic NATO" is interpreted literally. NATO was built around a relatively clear strategic threat: the then Soviet Union. The Makkah grouping has no equivalent single adversary. Saudi Arabia is primarily concerned with Gulf security; Pakistan remains heavily focused on South Asia and India; Türkiye's strategic concerns extend across the Middle East, Black Sea, Caucasus, Eastern Mediterranean and NATO. Iran matters to all three, but not in the same way.

An explicitly anti-Iranian alliance could make the pact more militarily coherent but would create serious problems. Pakistan would face complications with its neighbour, Türkiye would lose strategic flexibility, and Saudi Arabia could become locked into permanent confrontation with Tehran. Yet avoiding an Iranian focus creates another problem - weaker credibility in precisely the scenario most likely to test the pact.

There is also a conceptual contradiction. Iran is itself a Muslim-majority country. Calling the arrangement an "Islamic NATO" therefore risks transforming a defensive partnership into the perception of a Saudi-Turkish-Pakistani bloc confronting Iran. The three governments have consequently been careful to describe the agreement as defensive rather than directed against any particular state.

The more the Makkah pact develops into a military bloc, however, the harder it becomes to maintain that ambiguity. Conversely, explicitly defining Iran as the threat would expose the very differences among the three members that the alliance is supposed to overcome.

There are also competing external alignments to consider. Türkiye is a NATO member; Pakistan maintains a particularly close strategic relationship with China; and Saudi Arabia retains deep defence ties with the United States. These relationships are not necessarily incompatible with the Makkah Agreement, but they demonstrate that the three states operate within different strategic ecosystems. A common defence framework must therefore coexist with, rather than replace, their existing alliances and partnerships.

The most realistic future may therefore be a flexible strategic-security framework rather than an Islamic NATO: deeper intelligence-sharing, joint exercises, missile and drone defence, maritime security, interoperability and defence-industrial cooperation, without requiring identical foreign policies. The pact does not need to become 'NATO' to be consequential. Its strength lies in combining three complementary forms of power: Saudi financial capacity, Turkish conventional and industrial capability, and Pakistani strategic deterrence. But Iran remains the unavoidable stress test. MultilateralOrganizations

If Tehran attacks one member and the other two respond decisively, the Makkah Agreement will gain credibility that no diplomatic declaration can provide. If the members instead revert to separate national calculations, the limitations of the "Islamic NATO" concept will become equally clear.

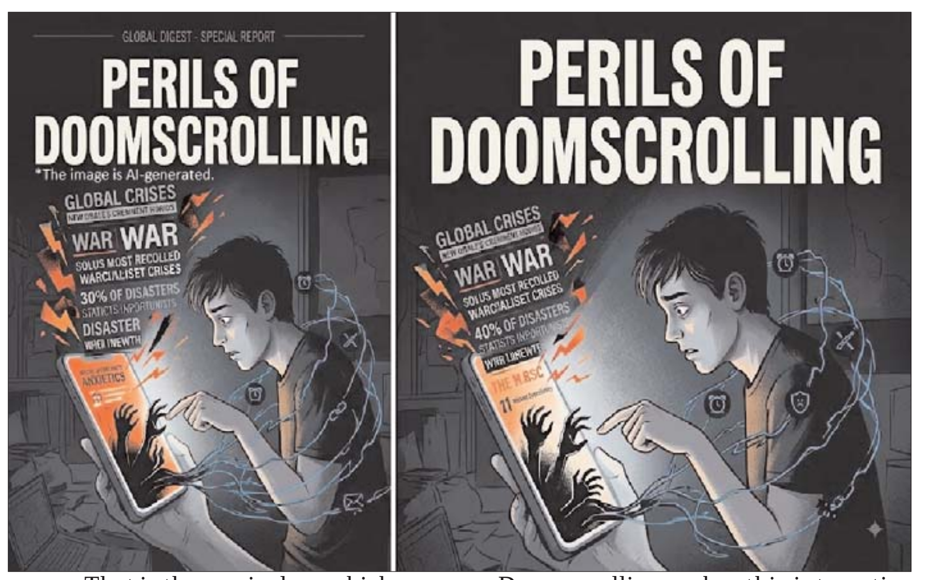
For now, therefore, the Makkah Agreement is best understood as an ambitious strategic triangle with enormous potential but incomplete strategic convergence. And Iran sits precisely where those interests collide. The ultimate test is therefore brutally simple:

If Iran attacks one, will the other two truly fight? Until that question has a credible answer, "Islamic NATO" describes the pact's potential and not its reality.

The writer is a former Lieutenant Governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry, and a military veteran; Views presented are personal.

PERILS OF DOOMSCROLLING

Sakshi Sethi



There was a time when boredom was simply part of existence. People waited at bus stops, stood in lineups, ate meals, travelled short distances and even sat alone without needing to be entertained every second. Today, screen time, attention spans, the death of reading - parents raise these issues at every meeting, and they are not wrong to worry. But the conversation almost always points in one direction, from adult to child, as though the problem were something children caught on their own, like a cold, and the adults were merely trying to cure it.

The truth is less comfortable. Children do not learn their relationship with the phone from the phone. They learn it from their parents. A child asked to put the device away at the dinner table, while a parent checks a message 'just once', receives two lessons at the same time and picks the one that is demonstrated rather than the one that is stated. Parents should understand that they are the first screen a child studies.

Long before they hold their own phone, they have watched, hundreds of times, what a face does when it hears a notification; how conversation pauses, how attention lifts and travels somewhere else, how the person in the room quietly becomes less important than the person on the screen. That is the curriculum which parents deliver every day without meaning to. Digital platforms are built around this precious commodity termed attention. Infinite scrolling makes no natural stopping point; autoplay removes the need to make another decision; continuous notifications pull users back, while likes, messages and new content offer small and unpredictable rewards. One may assume they are casually checking their phones, but the reality is that their attention is being competed for, seized and monetised.

Doomscrolling makes this interaction even more difficult. During stress, loneliness, anxiety or boredom, the phone offers immediate escape. We scroll hoping to feel better, informed or connected, yet often emerge more restless than before. Bad news sends us searching for more bad news.

Social media provides other people's lives as exciting, productive and happy, feeding the fear that something important is happening somewhere without us. Perhaps the most worrying consequence is not the number of hours spent online, but what those hours displace. Parents scroll while children seek their attention, and children copy what they see.

Friends sit beside each other, yet their minds are far away in other digital rooms. Many of us surrender our first waking moments and our final sleepy minutes to a mobile screen. Nostalgia is not the answer. The pre-digital world was not perfect and is not coming back. Technology has transformed education, employment, healthcare and communication in remarkable ways.

What one needs is not digital rejection but digital discipline. Small boundaries can restore surprising amounts of control. One does not have to check their phone right when they wake up. Meals can be eaten without looking at screens.

Reading a book, writing a list by hand or sipping a cup of coffee in peace can reclaim moments which these devices have gradually occupied. We often ask what smartphones are doing to children. Adults/parents must ask what their own habits are teaching them.

Digital behaviour is shaped as much by example as by instruction. Remember, technology was created to make life easier, not to become life itself. The real challenge of the digital age is no longer learning how to use technology; rather, it is learning when to stop and remember that real life still happens beyond the screen.

India's middle class needs opportunity more than subsidies

Ashok Kumar Mittal

In almost every Indian city, there is a family the country needs to talk about. The father pays his income tax in full, on time, every year. The mother has taken a loan for their daughter's engineering degree. There is an insurance premium due each March against an illness they hope never comes. This family asks the government for very little. It is the Indian middle class, and it has quietly

become the engine of the country's economy — and the government's own record over the past decade shows it understands that the next phase of reform must focus on this family.

Yet, few people realise just how powerful this engine has become. Speaking in France earlier this year, the finance minister pointed out that India's middle class has expanded by about 6.3 per cent every year since 1995 and now forms roughly 31 per cent of the population. The World Economic Forum estimates make this even clearer. Today, 4 out of every 5 rupees spent by Indian consumers come from middle-class and better-off families. By 2036, that is expected to increase to more than 9 out of every 10 rupees. By 2047, this group is projected to include over one billion Indians.

The growth of the middle class is also reflected in India's tax base. The number of income-tax payers has more than doubled, from 5.26 crore in 2013-14 to 12.13 crore in 2024-25, and Income Tax Return filings have doubled in the same period, from 4 crore in 2013-14 to 8.18 crore in 2023-24, according to the Press Information Bureau. That is what happens when a tax system is simplified rather than merely enforced.

Healthcare tells a similar story. As government spending on healthcare has increased, families are paying much less from their own pockets for medical treatment. Out-of-pocket healthcare expenses have fallen from 64.2 per cent in 2013-14 to 39.4 per cent today, while public spending on healthcare has steadily increased. And even as the economy has formalised at record pace, the labour market has held steady: the National Statistical Office's Periodic Labour Force Survey puts the overall unemployment rate at 3.1 per cent in 2025, among the lowest such figures India has ever recorded.

The government's next priority is to create more quality jobs that match people's education and skills, especially for graduates. With graduate unemployment at 11.2 per cent, the focus is now on better experiential learning and stronger links between education and industry.

So, what does such a family need from the government now? Not more help. Welfare matters, and India has extended it to the poor on a scale no country has attempted before. But the middle class stands somewhere else, and policy has increasingly recognised this. It has never asked to be carried. It asks only that the climb be made possible. A subsidy answers a shortage; opportunity answers an ambition — and the direction of recent policy suggests the government agrees.

Helping people through welfare and helping them create wealth are two different approaches. Welfare is measured by what the government distributes out. Wealth creation is measured by what people are able to earn. A family that has already escaped poverty needs the second far more than the first — and the government's recent reforms have leaned decisively toward the second.

That shift is well underway. Incomes of up to 12 lakh rupees a year are now free of income tax, GST has been rationalised into simpler slabs, and the Income Tax Act of 1961 has at last been replaced after decades of complexity. Each of these reforms allows middle-class families to keep more of what they earn, instead of paying it to the government first and receiving it as benefits later. More Indians are joining the formal economy and as a result the number of GST taxpayers has risen from 66.5 lakh in 2017 to 1.64 crore by April 2026 — nearly two and a half times in nine years, according to the Press Information Bureau.

Lower taxes help families keep more of their income. Better jobs help them increase that income. That is why the government's recent investments have focused on creating more employment opportunities. Twelve semiconductor projects have been cleared, carrying an investment of about 1.64 lakh crore rupees (roughly $19 billion). The IndiaAI Mission has built a shared national computing facility of more than 45,000 GPUs, the machines on which artificial intelligence model is trained. Electronics are now worth 13 lakh crore rupees (about $155 billion) and stand as India's third-largest export.

India already ranks among the world's largest producers of renewable power. Every solar park and battery plant creates opportunities for engineers, technicians and supervisors. To ensure these opportunities translate into prosperity, the government's focus is now on equipping Indians with the skills needed for these emerging industries. According to the India Skills Report 2026, only 56.35 per cent of graduates are currently considered employable. The government's skill development and apprenticeship programmes, including Skill India and the National Education Policy's focus on vocational education, are aimed at improving this figure. India has spent the past decade building industries such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence and renewable energy. The next challenge is to prepare more graduates for these sectors by improving skills and reducing graduate unemployment, which currently stands at 11.2 per cent.

Colleges must therefore keep teaching for jobs and not only for degrees. Employers should help write the syllabus and sit on examination panels. Students should gain hands-on industry experience as part of their degree, not after completing it. And learning must continue throughout one's career because the skills of 2026 will not be enough for the jobs of tomorrow.

Not every middle-class Indian wants a salary. Many want to build something, and the government schemes have already begun making that easier: streamlined MSME registration through Udyam, credit guarantees through CGTMSE, and invoice discounting through TReDS. However, there is still considerable scope to improve access to bank credit for small businesses. Encouragingly, the share of small enterprises receiving formal bank loans increased from 14 per cent in 2020 to 20 per cent in 2024, according to NITI Aayog. If this progress continues, many more entrepreneurs will be able to access the finance they need to grow.

Healthcare and education costs can also hold families back. When they must take loans for these essential needs, pursuing bigger dreams often becomes financially risky. The government's own record is its strongest case — reliable roads and power, dependable government hospitals, good government schools and honest digital services hand that money back to the family. And out-of-pocket health spending's fall from 64.2 per cent in 2013-14 to 39.4 per cent today shows the direction is already right.