



Secrecy hurts

Opacity in the time of an outbreak is sure to kill more people

From quick sequencing of the whole genome of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 that causes COVID-19 – after alerting WHO in December 2019 about a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown cause – to quickly developing viral diagnostic tests, China has done much to address the epidemic. As on Wednesday, mainland China had 74,185 cases and 2,004 deaths. Add to this the speed at which two new hospitals with 2,600 beds were built. Also, the many facilities that became temporary hospitals in the face of growing cases is testimony to China's ability to pull off the unimaginable in containing the epidemic. Whether the decision to shut down huge cities to halt the viral spread may have actually helped is debatable, but it is important to note that China has done a lot after the initial delay in reporting the disease. However, China, given its capabilities, could have contained the spread with very little effort and resources had it been transparent and acted on time. Apparently, China did not apply the lessons it learnt from the SARS outbreak despite strident global criticism. Downplaying and being secretive about public health issues, particularly novel virus outbreaks, as it found out during SARS, and then now, can be very counterproductive. This is in contrast to the way Kerala handled the Nipah virus outbreaks in 2018-19. Transparency and timely action helped the State contain the outbreaks within days, with few cases, deaths in 2018.

There is an eerie similarity between China's SARS outbreak response in 2002-03 and the current epidemic. If, during SARS, it initially withheld information and delayed by three months reporting it to WHO, in the case of COVID-19 it systematically downplayed its scale for nearly six weeks after pneumonia cases of unknown cause were first seen on December 8, 2019. Shockingly, even as it reported the case cluster to WHO on December 31, and the wet market, thought to be the outbreak hotspot, was closed on January 1, people were kept in the dark. In fact, eight doctors who sounded an early alarm were detained for "spreading rumours". Ironically, even as about 900 patients presented with symptoms each day by late December, as a daily reported, official numbers stayed the same. In fact, after initially reporting 44 cases to WHO, the numbers were reduced to 41 on January 11 and continued to remain the same till January 16, when the city and province's annual political congress ended. Even on January 16, WHO was informed of only "limited" human spread, thus putting more people at infection risk. The cases reported began rising slowly since January 17 to reach 121 on January 19 when a community dinner was held in Wuhan. It took a Chinese epidemiologist's revelation the next day about the outbreak's severity for Wuhan to start acting decisively. The lesson is that in the event of an outbreak, secrecy is a killer and transparency the saviour.

Infinite crisis

Afghanistan is no closer to peace after the declaration of Ashraf Ghani as the President

The Afghan Independent Election Commission's much-delayed announcement that President Ashraf Ghani is the winner of the September 28 Presidential election is expected to deepen the political crisis in the war-torn country. That it took almost five months to declare the official results – he secured a narrow victory with 50.64% of votes against his main opponent Abdullah Abdullah's 39.52% – itself points to the seriousness of the crisis. Mr. Abdullah has called the results fraudulent and vowed to form a parallel government. If he does so, it would undermine the already feeble Afghan administration whose writ does not stretch beyond the main urban centres. For the Afghan voter, this is a déjà vu moment. Five years ago, Mr. Ghani was declared winner of the election but Mr. Abdullah refused to accept the result. The then U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, brokered a power-sharing agreement, which allowed Mr. Ghani to take over the presidency and made Mr. Abdullah the government Chief Executive. And throughout the five years, they were at odds with each other, while the Taliban steadily expanded across the country's hinterlands and stepped up attacks on its city centres. Unsurprisingly, only less than a fourth of registered voters turned up in September, raising questions about faith in the whole exercise.

Worse, the infighting comes at a time when the U.S. is near a Taliban agreement. Initial reports suggest that U.S. President Trump has given the go-ahead to its signing if the insurgents reduce violence for a seven-day test period. The deal would see the U.S.'s Afghan troop pullback, winding down America's longest war and leaving the Taliban and the Afghan government to start direct talks for a final settlement. The problem, however, is that even with an American troops presence, the Afghan government had never been able to take control of the security situation. The U.S. excluded the government from its direct talks with the Taliban as the insurgents do not see the government as Afghanistan's legitimate rulers. U.S. withdrawal would invariably weaken the government, aiding the Taliban even before the talks start. The disputed poll results and chronic political infighting would weaken the administration further. How will the government defend the Constitution or any of the post-Taliban achievements if it is going to negotiate with a resurgent Taliban from a position of such weakness? All involved parties in the conflict seem to be missing the big picture. The U.S. just wants to get out of a lost war. Mr. Ghani wants to retain his presidency. Mr. Abdullah may want to make sure there is power sharing with the Opposition. What is lost in these narrow, self-interest-driven moves is the collective quest for defeating the extremists and rebuilding Afghanistan.

The missing piece in India's defence jigsaw puzzle

The country needs a clearly articulated white paper on its defence needs which sets out its strategic concerns



M.K. NARAYANAN

Undoubtedly, we are living through a moment of decisive change and turbulence. This geopolitical period is perhaps the most troubled since the final decades of the 20th century. Hence, there exists a vital need to adopt right strategic choices. According to 2018 data, India occupies the fourth place in military expenditure across the world, behind the U.S., China, and Saudi Arabia. This does not mean that India has no further need to increase its stock of state-of-the-art weapons. What is needed, nevertheless, is sober reflection and a cost-benefit analysis, to ensure that the amounts expended are in tune with our strategic requirements.

Defence deals in the pipeline

This is an opportune moment to undertake such a cost-benefit analysis. The first lot of Rafale fighter jets are expected shortly. The final deal on the 200 Kamov Ka-226 light utility helicopters from Russia is in advanced stages and expected to be signed soon. In October 2018, India and Russia had signed a \$5.4-billion mega deal for the S-400 Triumf Air Defence System. Under contemplation today are yet another set of high-value U.S. defence deals, including additional purchases of P-8I Maritime Reconnaissance Aircraft and Apache Attack Helicopters. According to estimates, the total worth of defence equipment purchased from the U.S. alone since 2007 is in the region of \$17-billion.

On the eve of U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to India, a further spurt in defence purchases is anticipated. Speculation is rife that India and the U.S. would sign

a deal for the National Advanced Surface to Air Missile System (NASAMS-II), intended as part of a multi-layered missile shield to protect Delhi. The U.S. side is also hoping for two more mega defence deals, worth \$3.5-billion to be signed for 24 MH-60 Romeo Multi Mission Helicopters for the Navy and an additional six AH-64E Apache Attack Helicopters for the Army. (India's Cabinet Committee on Security, on Wednesday, cleared the MH-60 helicopter deal.)

Given India's rising global profile, and with two major adversaries on its borders, India needs to be fully prepared. What is lacking in the defence jigsaw puzzle, however, is a well considered and clearly articulated white paper on India's defence needs, that sets out its strategic concerns, how it is positioning itself to meet these challenges, and the putative costs of meeting the country's defence needs.

Pakistan, China threats

Several nations undertake such exercises. In India, exercises of this kind are sometimes undertaken, but they suffer from a lack of clarity and are restricted in scope. They contain vague references to the threat posed by China and Pakistan, but there is clearly more to India's defence needs than exercises in military hagiography. What is required is a well formulated defence white paper, putting the different threats and dangers the nation faces in perspective, alongside steps taken to meet these challenges.

In the case of Pakistan, the threat motif is, no doubt, obvious. India's political and defence establishment are on record that India can easily defeat Pakistan, even if a "weaker" Pakistan possesses "nuclear teeth". Yet, while this makes for excellent copy, a great deal of effort is called for to explain to the public, the true nature of the threat posed by Pakistan, and why India is so confident of



PHOTO: AP

beating back the Pakistani challenge. Meeting the military, strategic and economic challenge from China is an entirely different matter. China is not Pakistan, and while China and Pakistan may have established an axis to keep India in check, explaining the nature of the threat posed by China to India is a complex task that needs to be undertaken with care and caution.

Understanding Beijing

To begin with, there are many experts who express doubts as to whether China intends today to pursue its 19th Century agenda, or revert to its belief in 'Tian Xia'. Undoubtedly under China's President Xi Jinping, China aims to be a great power and an assertive one at that. India's defence planners should, however, carefully assess whether there are degrees of "assertiveness" in China's behavioural patterns. There is little doubt that regarding its claim to areas falling within the 'nine-dash lines' (the first island chain), China is unwilling to make compromises. Whether this applies to other regions of Asia and the Indo-Pacific, calls for an in-depth study. It would be premature for India without undertaking such an analysis, to adhere to a common perception that China is intent on enforcing a Sino-centric world order in which India and other countries would necessarily have to play a secondary role.

If after undertaking such an "analysis", it appears that China does not pose a direct threat to India's existence, notwithstanding the fact that India is its main rival

in Asia, then India's political, strategic and military planners need to come up with a different set of alternatives. In recent years, unfortunately, much of India's strategic thinking regarding China's aggressive behaviour has been coloured by that of the U.S. and the West, though it is a proven fact that China has not used lethal military force abroad since the 1980s.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) does convey an impression that China seeks to put itself at the centre of the world. The speed with which many of the steps to progress the BRI are being taken, again conveys an impression that China is intent on shrinking the physical and psychological distance between Europe and East Asia. This does not, however, necessarily mean that China is preparing to confront individual countries in Asia, such as India, which do not subscribe to the BRI.

A defence white paper would provide a more definitive answer to such issues. A detailed exercise to assess whether China is indeed a threat, rather than a challenge, to India should prove invaluable. It is possible that a detailed study may indicate that China understands that there are limits to its strength and capabilities. Several instances of late, have shown the frailties in China's policies – Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even Xinjiang are instances that indicate that China has its own Achilles heel. Consequently, China may not be ready, for quite some time at least, to seek a direct confrontation with India.

A closer look at Beijing's policies, undertaken as part of a defence white paper, may also indicate that rather than a "conflict-prone" role, China is more intent on an "influence-peddling" one. This is important from India's point of view. Already there is one school of thought that believes that Beijing is better at converting its economic heft into strategic influence, rather than employing force beyond certain

prescribed areas.

If this view is espoused by a defence white paper then, despite the vexed border dispute between India and China, the two countries could try and arrive at a subliminal understanding about respective spheres of influence. Today, one of India's major concerns is that China is attempting to intrude into its sphere of influence in South Asia, and the first and second concentric circles of India's interest areas, such as Afghanistan and parts of West Asia. The defence white paper might well provide a strategic paradigm, in which India and China agree to peacefully co-exist in many areas, leaving aside conflict zones of critical importance to either, thus ensuring a more durable peace between them.

One other outcome that the defence white paper could attempt is: whether China views geo-economics as the primary arena of competition today. China has invested heavily in artificial intelligence, robotics and bio-technology, and perhaps, India needs to recognise that rather than black-listing Chinese technology Tech firms, (which could prove counter-productive) there exist avenues for cooperation, paving the way for better state-to-state relations.

A focus on domestic politics

A final word. The defence white paper needs to underscore that a country's domestic politics are an important pointer to a stable foreign policy. There could be different schools of thoughts within a nation, but equilibrium needs to be maintained if it is not to adversely impact a nation's foreign policy imperatives. An impression that the country is facing internal strains could encourage an adversary, to exploit our weaknesses. This is a critical point that the defence white paper needs to lay stress on.

M.K. Narayanan is a former National Security Adviser and a former Governor of West Bengal

A Trump India visit, in campaign mode

With a trade deal unlikely, New Delhi must calibrate the costs and benefits of the U.S. President's political tour



HARSH V. PANT & KASHISH PARPIANI

During U.S. President Donald Trump's maiden visit to India on February 24-25, the U.S. and India were initially expected to sign a limited trade deal. Over the past three years, U.S.-India trade tensions have been escalating despite America's trade deficit with India beginning to narrow and it being less than a tenth of the U.S.'s trade deficit with China.

As trade negotiations stalled, the Trump administration levied steel and aluminium tariffs on India, revoked India's benefits under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) programme, briefly contemplated limiting HI-B visas and raised the possibility of a Section 301 investigation into India's tariff/non-tariff barriers to coerce India to eliminate practices that impede U.S. exports.

Defence package

India has reportedly finalised a defence package worth \$3.5-billion for 24 MH-60R Seahawk maritime multi-role helicopters and six AH-64E Apache attack helicopters. In exchange, the expectation for India was the restoration of benefits under the GSP programme – under which, Indian exports

worth \$5.7-billion to the U.S. enjoyed duty-free status (2017).

However, a day after Mr. Trump's visit dates were announced, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) released a federal notice on eliminating a host of countries from its methodology for countervailing duty (CVD) investigations. India was removed from the list of developing countries that "are exempt from investigations into whether they harm American industry with unfairly subsidised exports". With this move, the U.S. essentially closed the door on reinstating India's benefits under the GSP, a preferential arrangement meant only for developing countries.

The timing of this move suggests Mr. Trump's motivations pertaining to his India visit have little to do with tempering bilateral frictions. Instead, political motivations seem to be writ large. New Delhi will have to carefully calibrate the costs and benefits of Mr. Trump's move.

'America first'

Earlier this month, the U.S. Senate voted to acquit Trump on two articles of impeachment – abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. It was an expected outcome, as polarisation in American politics has accentuated with the U.S. Congress being divided into two partisan strongholds – the Democrats are in-charge of the House of Representatives and Republicans hold the Senate. However, given the fact that the impeachment proceedings prolonged well into an election year, the American



electorate has not heard the last of it just yet. Mr. Trump was alleged to have sought a *quid pro quo* over U.S. military aid to Ukraine, in exchange for Ukraine's assistance in acquiring dirt on former U.S. Vice President and now Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden. In the upcoming elections, the allegation is expected to feature prominently in the Democrats' attempt to deride the Trump administration's values-bereft, transactional conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Concurrently, Mr. Trump has begun to hail his Senate acquittal as a matter of total exoneration. Moreover, in discrediting Democrats' criticism on Mr. Trump's conduct of American international relations in general, his re-election campaign is sure to outline the supposed gains of the "America First" world view.

It is here that a potential trade deal with "tariff king" India would be listed among other renewed partial/complete trade deals such as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA); renegotiated trade terms with South Korea, and Japan; and the "Phase One" deal with China, as instances of vindication. For instance, just days before the Democrats' caucus in Iowa, Mr. Trump held a rally in Des Moines, Iowa. Citing his renewed trade deals and the Demo-

crats' opposition to his approach of exacting them, Mr. Trump said, "We're going to win the great state of Iowa and it's going to be a historic landslide." He added, "And if we don't win, your farms are going to hell."

'Namaste, Trump'

Moreover, with the India visit, the U.S. President has expressed his exhilaration over "millions and millions of people" that are expected to attend the "Namaste, Trump" event in Ahmedabad. With its pomp and ceremony, it is expected to be the Indian iteration of the "Howdy, Modi!" rally held last year in Houston. Evidently, the same was an attempt to court the 270,000-strong Indian American community in the emerging battleground state of Texas. Similarly, the rally in Gujarat also holds relevance in terms of Mr. Trump's political arithmetic for 2020. In visiting Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home turf, one can see the American President's attempt to mobilise the Indian American community by showcasing his proximity to Mr. Modi's India.

Mr. Trump's political motivations notwithstanding, it would be prudent for India to not let the visit reflect as a partisan endorsement for his re-election. In recent years, American political polarisation has begun to erode the once-iron clad bipartisan consensus on U.S. foreign policy. In case of Congressional bipartisanship on India, that schism has emerged also due to the apparent partisan fervour of the "Howdy, Modi!" rally and

House Democrats' rising apprehensions on the communications lockdown in Kashmir.

Challenges for India could worsen in the coming years. If re-elected, Mr. Trump will possibly double-down on his will to seek renewed trade deals. At which point, remainder issues under U.S.-India trade ties could witness heightened tensions. Or, Congressional Democrats' apprehensions may assume heightened vigour. Even in their worst-case scenario in 2020 of not winning back the White House, they are expected to, at the very least, chip away at the Republicans' already slim majority in the Senate.

Moreover, working towards reinstating a certain sense of Indian neutrality on American polarisation would also make sense from the standpoint of the Senate entering an era of minimal majorities. The Republicans' slim majority of 53-47, has opened the door to defections by legislators who do not always identify with the Trump agenda or do not mind crossing the aisle on initiatives that constrain Mr. Trump's foreign policy decision-making.

Thus, with Mr. Trump's visit, New Delhi must ensure its projection as a net gain for the bilateral relationship at-large – and not merely an extension of the U.S. President's re-election campaign.

Harsh V. Pant is Director, Studies at Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi and Professor of International Relations at King's College London. Kashish Parpiani is Research Fellow at ORF, Mumbai

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

No entry
The recent actions of the government as far as diplomacy and foreign policy are concerned, suggest that it suffers from a low-esteem syndrome (Editorial, "Visa power", February 19). Disproportionate and amateurish reactions further buttress the view in the world's eyes that something is amiss. Rather than making intolerance its Achilles heel, the government needs to display more statesmanship and magnanimity towards dissenters. It needs to learn

to take criticism in its stride or else a likely bracketing with countries such as Saudi Arabia and North Korea may not be far away. DEEPAK SINGHAL, Chennai
Kashmir beckons
The number of initiatives being taken by the administration in Kashmir to improve the economy as well as to generate employment cannot be dismissed. But unending communication curbs since August 5 as far as the common man is concerned has slowed down growth. It

is not surprising that such moves have only attracted criticism from other countries. Without a shadow of a doubt, tourism revenue has gone down substantially. There is an inertness in the Valley especially as educational institutions and routine day-to-day life is far from normal. Unless systems are restored, efforts to attract investors will not even be tepid (Inside pages, "J&K woos investors with ample land", February 19). R. SRIDHARAN, Chennai

Vanishing birds
The findings of the study, "The State of India's Birds 2020", should push us into protecting our pristine ecology. Growing urbanisation and the resultant concrete jungles have enormously impacted the avian population today. We should also cultivate bird feeding activity as a hobby. The concept of urban forestry needs to be promoted with adequate concerns for bird shelters and their feeding. Students need to be sensitised. G. RAMASUBRAMANYAM, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

■ In Kerala, wetlands and indigenous flora are bird habitats. Quails, spotted doves, weaver birds and munias were abundant in villages till some years ago; wetland water hens and lapwings were also ubiquitous. Today, as 'development' destroys indigenous flora and wetlands, these birds are disappearing. Even after two

devastating floods that were directly caused by the environmental degradation caused by the development mania, Kerala is still not ready to retract from the path of 'development' at the cost of the environment. SUKUMARAN C.V., Palakkad, Kerala

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

The reference to "Gallipoli campaign of Second World War in the front-page story titled 'India ticks off Erdogan for his remarks on Kashmir' (Feb. 16, 2020) should be corrected to Gallipoli campaign of First World War.

The Reader's Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in