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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 13-8-2020

Biden-Harris combine unlikely to enthuse India

Biden is disappointed by the measures the Govt of India has taken — the implementation and aftermath of the NRC in Assam and the passage of the CAA into law. In that ‘covfefe’, it will be useful to recall, Kamala Harris weighed in sharply on Pramila Jayapal’s side against Jaishankar, not as two Tamilians ganging up against each other, but as two Americans speaking forthrightly for their country.

V Sudarshan

Journalist and Author

Soon after Senator Kamala Harris was declared as the Democratic presidential hopeful Joe Biden’s running mate, US President Donald Trump began calling her names. He called her ‘meanest’, ‘most horrible’ and threw in his somewhat more frequently used ‘nasty.’ These are epithets that the Indian foreign policy establishment would be almost tempted to use as well, with reference to the same development and its possible portents for India.

But diplomats, as we all know, always think twice before saying nothing. With barely 11 weeks and five days to go before the Election Day, the elections in America have become even more relevant for Indian policymakers. They realise well the importance of segueing from HowdyModi to BadhaihoBiden and exploring ways to smartly jettison that old slogan ‘Abki Bar Trump Sarkar’. For the most disconcertingly long time, as policymakers must have watched, Biden has held a clear lead over Trump. It has been the widest polling gap in decades. It can even be mischievously argued quite successfully that the trial of 4G connectivity in select districts in Jammu and Kashmir is a visible part of the process of trimming our domestic sails to prevailing electoral winds in the US. As is the appointment, quite coincidentally, of a politician-type Lieutenant Governor for one of our newest and most controversial union territories, J&K. As the Chinese and Pakistanis bilaterally work it out, which is more controversial — the Ladakh development or the Kashmir development — it remains a challenge and a bit of a puzzle how Lt Governor Manoj Sinha can open up political spaces as convincingly as 4G networks.

It is connected, in no small measure, to the significance of the Biden-Harris combine, should America back it on November 3. Consider the ‘covfefe’, that delightful Trump contribution to the English language, Dr S Jaishankar created when he chickened out — there is no other phrase for it, since it is his job, among other things, to explain his government’s policy — of meeting the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Congressman Eliot L Engel and the committee’s top Republican Michael McCaul and other members of the US Congress. He ducked that meeting after they refused to drop at New Delhi’s insistence, Representative Pramila Jayapal, from the team that was to meet him. This is what Jaishankar said, explaining his no-show: “I have an interest in meeting people who are objective and open to discussion but not the people who have already made up their minds.” The subtle reference here was to a resolution Jayapal had helped steer in the House of Representatives on Kashmir. This is

what the resolution-Res 745) had to say and it bears reiteration: “That the House of Representatives rejects arbitrary detention, use of excessive force against civilians, and suppression of peaceful expression of dissent as proportional responses to security challenges; urges the Government of India to ensure that any actions taken in pursuit of legitimate security priorities respect the human rights of all people and adhere to international human rights law; and urges the Government of India to lift the remaining restrictions on communication and to restore Internet access across all of Jammu and Kashmir as swiftly as possible; refrain from the use of threats and excessive force against detained people and peaceful protesters; swiftly release arbitrarily detained people in Jammu and Kashmir; refrain from conditioning the release of detained people on their willingness to sign bonds prohibiting any political activities and speeches; allow international human rights observers and journalists to access Jammu and Kashmir and operate freely throughout India, without threats; and condemn, at the highest levels, all religiously motivated violence, including that violence which targets against religious minorities.”

It is, as you can see, quite a mouthful of full-bodied epithets as well, very unambiguous, very clear, and some would say, albeit privately, mean, horrible, and nasty to boot.

It will also be quite appropriate, although at the risk of tedious repetition, to point out that Biden has already made his views clear, not only on CAA, but also J&K: “In Kashmir, the Indian government should take all necessary steps to restore the rights of all people of Kashmir; restrictions on dissent, such as preventing peaceful protests or shutting down the Internet, weaken democracy.” Biden is disappointed by the measures the Government of India has taken with the implementation and aftermath of the National Register of Citizens in Assam and the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act into law. “These measures are inconsistent with the country’s long tradition of secularism and with sustaining a multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy.”

In that covfefe, it will be useful to recall, Kamala Harris weighed in sharply and heavily on Pramila’s side against Jaishankar, not as two part Tamilians ganging up against one another — none of that diaspora nonsense — but as two Americans speaking forthrightly for their country. Again, for your reading pleasure, these are the remarks attributed to Harris’ Twitter handle: “It’s wrong for any foreign government to tell Congress what members are allowed in meetings on Capitol Hill.” She underlined that she stood with Pramila Jayapal, and added, “I’m glad her colleagues in the House did too.”

These words might come back to haunt our external affairs minister if there were to be a red carpet event, let’s say a dinner where the humble pie has been served, and where he should have the good fortune of running into Vice-President Kamala Harris standing beside Representative Pramila Jayapal at the Biden White House, and the after-dinner conversation, also turns to Kashmir, since you can never discuss too much of a good thing. And yes, the good thing about chicken is that it is better not to count them before they hatch. That must be the soundest bit of analysis coming out of South Block today.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 11-8-2020

Delhi must brace for a measure of unpredictability in America's external orientation

C. Raja Mohan writes: Unlike Beijing and Moscow, Delhi has no incentive to pick sides between Trump and Biden. It can deal productively with both. But Delhi is conscious of the current unprecedented churn in US domestic politics and the breakdown of the internal consensus on foreign and economic policies.

Written by **C. Raja Mohan**

China and Russia tend to agree on most international issues these days. Thanks to the deepening strategic partnership built over the last two decades in opposition to the US's dominance, Moscow and Beijing have had one of the most stable great power relationships of the 21st century. But Beijing and Moscow seem to disagree on one important issue — the US presidential elections set to take place in the first week of November. While China's preference seems to be in favour of the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party, Joe Biden, Russia would rather have US President Donald Trump retain the White House.

Given the global impact of US policies, everyone in the world has a preference in the American presidential race. With the nominating conventions of the two parties due in the next few days, picking the winner of the US elections is already a parlour game around the world.

For India too the stakes in the US relationship have dramatically risen amidst the huge downturn in its ties with China. With the Ladakh crisis showing no signs of a quick resolution, what happens between the US and China is of great policy relevance. New strains in the US-Russia relations and a Sino-US rapprochement under Biden will certainly complicate India's great power relations. For China and Russia, the preferred outcome is more than an academic exercise. Both their bilateral relations with the US are caught in American domestic political turbulence. Unlike most countries that simply learn to live with the outcome, Beijing and Moscow are accused of trying to influence it.

In a statement late last week on foreign interference in the American presidential elections, the US counter-intelligence chief, William Evanina, said that China was trying to undermine Donald Trump's re-election campaign and Russia was targeting his Democratic rival and former Vice President, Joe Biden. It is no secret that Beijing is outraged by the Trump administration's massive economic, political and ideological offensive against China in recent months. And Moscow has struggled to overcome the deeply-held conviction among the Democrats that Russian interference was instrumental in Trump's surprising victory in the 2016 elections.

The Democrats have never accepted the verdict of 2016 and have sought to oust Trump using allegations of his Russian connection. The Trump campaign argues that Biden is the very symbol of what it sees as America's disastrous engagement with China over the last four decades.

While the world is familiar with Trump's policies, the current global interest is focused on what Biden might do if he wins the White House in November. The prospects of Biden's victory appear high at the moment. The Democratic Party's election platform carefully navigates the minefield created by Trump's

full-blown attacks on China. Democrats say they don't want a "new Cold War" with China, but promise to be tough with Beijing on trade and human rights issues. At the same time, they also underline the importance of sustaining a productive engagement with China on global issues such as climate change. China, then, is right to calculate that a Biden victory might create political room to arrest the current escalation of bilateral tensions with the US and explore accommodation on the full range of contentious issues.

Russia has the opposite problem. Moscow has no reason to be happy with Trump, who has imposed quite a range of new sanctions on Russia; but they know Biden's win will make it even harder for the much-needed reset in bilateral relations. Democrats accuse Trump of treating Vladimir Putin as a "strategic partner" and "weakening" the Atlantic alliance with Europe. They promise to change that by joining "our European partners in standing up to a revanchist Russia". The party's platform does talk about engaging Russians on nuclear arms control, but the colour of its Russia brush is dark.

But, beneath the posturing of Trump and Biden, there are big issues in play. In both parties, there is a serious questioning of the many traditional principles of US foreign policy. On the Republican side, Trump himself has been the principal disruptor. He has trashed America's long-standing alliances, challenged the conventional wisdom on the virtues of economic globalisation, and underlined the futility of America's endless wars, especially in the Middle East.

While Democrats are united in their intense hatred for Trump, many of Trump's themes find resonance among Democrats. While the Democratic Party's foreign policy establishment would like to go back to the familiar internationalist activism, progressive factions in the party oppose Washington's appetite for costly interventionist wars. Radical sections of the Democrats want to cut US defence spending.

Many Democrats oppose free trade agreements that hurt American workers. They want tough labour and environmental standards in trade agreements. While Trump de-emphasised the importance of human rights in the conduct of American foreign policy, Democrats want to put them at the heart of America's international engagement. It would be reasonable to expect that a diverse range of groups associated with the Democratic Party will be mobilising Washington's power to bear upon targets around the world.

India has dealt with this American script as part of its expanding engagement with the US over the last three decades. Today, there is bipartisan support from the Republicans and Democrats for a strong partnership with India. There are many strands — economic, political and security — that provide stability to India-US relations.

Four years ago, there was no dearth of sceptics who insisted that India-US relations would nosedive under Trump. Delhi, however, found ways to elevate the US partnership to higher levels in the Trump years.

This does not mean, India can take a Biden administration for granted. To be sure, Delhi is familiar with Biden, who served as Vice President for eight years under Barack Obama, and many of his potential choices for top policy positions.

Unlike Beijing and Moscow, Delhi has no incentive to pick sides between Trump and Biden. It can deal productively with both. But

Delhi is conscious of the current unprecedented churn in US domestic politics and the breakdown of the internal consensus on foreign and economic policies. India should, therefore, be prepared for a measure of unpredictability in America's external orientation in the coming years.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 7-8-2020

Taking China head-on

India has prepared itself for the long haul

The Indian establishment seems to have finally come to terms with the Chinese designs. The Ministry of Defence document on the Chinese incursion in Ladakh uploaded on the MoD website on Tuesday (subsequently removed), terming it 'transgression', is a big step forward in accepting, analysing and responding to the imminent threat on the eastern front. Though China all along posed the biggest foreign policy challenge, Indian politicians continued to delude themselves into believing that the two countries could flourish together even in an unequal economic partnership. PM Narendra Modi's 18 meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping underscored the primacy of this relationship, which was structured in order to separate border disputes and economic cooperation into neat, watertight compartments.

The refusal to pull back from Pangong Tso and all other positions now held by the Indian Army is another strong indicator of a new direction in India's China policy. At the meeting of the army commanders on Sunday, the Chinese had asked the Indian side to vacate their positions to reciprocate the Chinese pullback. The old salami slicing trick was being played out once again and India was being asked to retreat from its own territory after China having shifted the Line of Actual Control further westwards. But India has decided to dig in for the long and cruel winter preparing for a Siachen redux.

Meanwhile, the Chinese again got rebuffed at the United Nations Security Council on Wednesday trying to raise the issue of J&K. After its failed attempt in January, China sought a discussion on J&K 'under other business'. But most members of the Security Council rejected the move by terming J&K a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. China is opening all fronts against India. Military and diplomatic attacks have been launched; trade and cyber ones ought to be on the anvil. This is no time for the nation to get distracted by politico-religious symbolism. Instead, this is the moment of truth about the eastern neighbour, and the Indian response on the LAC or at the UN has to be considered and holistic.

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 4-8-2020

The peninsular peace: India China relations

AK Vashishta

Introduction

Indian diplomacy and the military craft centre around Dharma, the ordained duty, enjoined by a strict code of conscience, known by descendance and understood by everyone by usage. Our texts on warfare and rules of engagement in combat have their roots in the great military genius and the law and customs of war. All battle tactics is, therefore, subject to superior logic at all times. Thanks to our vigilant media that the world has seen the unprincipled

incursions of the Chinese forces along the India China border in the recent past. These were backed and vainly justified by their State authorities. It was a sure testimony of their myopic appreciation of the political and military reality which is ordinarily unbecoming of any country considering herself ready and capable of dominating the canvass as large and diverse as the Asian Continent.

A world player must have sights set beyond himself?

For sharing the table as a world player, should you be only militarily strong and politically ruthless? No, that's not all! Fortunately, for the good of humanity, insidious ambitions of an establishment like this how much ever large, have a latent flaw. Those are steeped in toxicity from nascence and although show an outwardly ascendance initially, corrode the originator from within. This must be known to those who are the architects of campaigns. The vain attempts to intimidate India, the largest democracy in the world, by growls is a clear misadventure by the Dragon and a result of avoidable overconfidence. It, in fact, stirred the lion, looking far and beyond in all four directions, resting on the Altar and lectern of truth – *satyameva jayate*, truth alone is victorious.

It's not a child's play to be messing with the Indian establishment, this should have been known to the architects of the confused campaigns holding the reins of power in Beijing. A world player must set his sights at the horizon with an objective of what the great Indian visionary JRD Tata called the leadership by consensus. Our neighbour across the great Himalayas has failed miserably on this count. It's our turn now. We have and we shall lead not only men in battle but also nations desirous of living and progressing together.

It may sound weird that it is the circumstances which have created the irretrievable situations between India and China, it cannot, however, be forgotten that circumstances do create situations of massive proportions and if not controlled by a strong and superior will, would result into far-reaching and sometimes disastrous consequences. We are endowed with the requisite superior will and capability.

Naturally Belligerent China – a distorted psyche where peace should rule

The latest belligerence seen in the Chinese behaviour, conspicuous by flagrant violations of rules of the armistice, costing precious human lives, revealed a trait contrary to the progeny of the Zhous, Hans and many others of the pride. It is definitely not congenital or prenatal but certainly an acquired attribute, repugnant to the fundamental aims and objectives on which the civilized States in the world have been conceptualized. With a background of ruthless repression of legitimate representations of its own citizens and the motivated indoctrinations, to the extent of being barbaric, it has followed a policy of extreme intolerance and usurpation.

A bioscopic view from the time of its evolution took the writer through a land of myriad dynasties, simple and contended people and profound scholars in pursuit of new realms of knowledge. The second half of the twentieth century saw the resurgence of new political ideologies in China until she settled finally with the cultural revolution of Mao-Tse-Tung in 1966 to 1976 and his leap forward.

This introduced China to the new political order, the Communist Party of China and the People's Republic – enforcing a new social and economic order in the country. Though its foundations had faults as it brought in the wake extreme repression justified on the ground that novelty brings resistance and resistance needs to be curbed by a ruthless State force – an inflexible proletarian thought which soon bloated into a Capitalistic form eventually, moderated by Deng, the reformist except her expansionistic outlook!

History reveals that China derives its name from the pristine Sanskrit scriptures with pride in her rich history and culture. However, its latest advocacy of unrelenting violence against India that gave to the world as well as to China, the religions of peace and the idols of compassion and peaceful resolutions, coupled with a bellicose demeanour on the world stage has placed it on the wrong side of humanity!

Benevolent India- A superior benefactor

As for the ambition of geographical accessions, despite a resolute and determined disposition, of our Nation, the author does not find this desire of usurpation anywhere in its policy towards its neighbours. The panchsheel, the principles of peaceful co-existence flow in our veins. Speak of the unassuming Indian, his pride is original, enriched by the incredible kaleidoscopic cultures of India.

In the environment rich in benevolence, it actually puzzles the author to see how a country like China, with such profound history, could degenerate into a state of unrequited commiseration adopting a devouring trait as an integral part of its policy of expansionism! Definitely, there has to be a long consistent cause and a fixed mindset at the levels of the destiny makers of that nation. With a marked aversion to peaceful co-existence, it is, in fact, a malaise in a democratic world!

The good customs and usage- the roots in morality

The high proprieties of war were followed in battles by India. In, in some cases, the customs took the shape of statues, a majority of them remained unwritten but were followed even in the most adverse situations. Our troops have shown this to the world while tackling the Chinese incursions recently. We can't be faulted in chivalry!

The underlying cause and its effect

The underlying cause is the insatiable ambition of dominance in the region inherently averse to the idea of the world being an enlarged family where the human race and its preservation on the planet is the central motto! Why the National People's Congress (NPC), the seat of Chinese polity is indulging into this kind of political and military behaviour, is difficult to understand, more importantly, when it has been one of the founding and permanent members of the United Nations! In fact, this conduct of China is portraying its ancestors and history, in poor light, if that is of any concern to those in power in Beijing!

When we the people of India, i.e., Bharat, stand in comparison with China, we emerge as reckonable world leader. It needs no emphasis that leadership is, our trait. It's the natural inclination of a suave Indian that he respects others more than himself but we breathe in and out the popular mantra, sarve bhavantu sukhina, sarve santu niramaya, or let everyone be happy, let everyone be free from disease.

How do we respond to these belligerent forces?

The experience has led us to believe that dragon respects power and exploits timidity and thrives by spreading distress in the neighbourhood. Events of the recent past reveal that they can disregard human life on planet Earth to any extent. The pupils of Lao Tse are either silenced or have become irrelevant in the midst of the clatter of confusion. They must wake up and realise that we live in times when the walls are falling. In the wake of the recent development on the Sino-Indian border, it is not hard to visualize that India China relationship is not as simple as it appears. Going back to the times of Faxi-han and Huen-zang, who visited India and carried out a comparative study of Buddhism in India and Buddhism in China. These Bhikkhus became the apostles of peace from and for the nation which is propagating war as a solution to all issues in the present times. The present-day state of affairs would belie any sensible belief in these backgrounds – Unfortunate for the people of the country of these Buddhist scholars! Our pride, on the contrary, is our belief that the whole world is a family- Vasudhaiv kutumbakam! This makes us fundamentally sagacious and patient. Exhibiting remarkable vision and fortitude, we find ourselves guided by the pristine adage, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

About Indian sense and sensibility: our forces in combat

The forces in combat are required to be seen as highly obedient well-groomed and loyal, committed to the defence of the nation. Talking about the recent so-called gains and losses at the border and the Galwan Valley in particular, to understand where we stand, it will be relevant to trace which way the rest of the world is heading. We in India who moved on trust and great human values, accepted China as a good neighbour presupposing that she has the Will to make amends for the past mistakes. With what China is practising with its military and politics with respect to its benevolent neighbour India, is eroding the mutual trust which nations can build amongst themselves and layout a better future for themselves. They are oblivious of the fact that as for the countries around China, at any stage, even if China attempts a truce with them, they shall all revert to their own national ethics and military traditions as the volatile nature of China's priorities, is detrimental to any good relationship.

The Walls are falling – trust our teachings in morality

With losing ground rapidly on the moral plane, China needs to step back and make way for India as the leader in the world. It doesn't need to be reiterated that our cultural superiority is an admitted fact. Let it be known, **We have arrived!** We shall make the desired difference on the world scene. We are ready! Peace, tranquillity, respect, safety and security of human lives will now follow as the sure concomitant!

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI 6-8-2020

Dragon uses third countries for cartographic aggression against India

SD Pradhan

It is no coincidence that China, Nepal and Pakistan almost simultaneously indulged in cartographic aggression. This comes in backdrop of a report by Ronald Jacquard that Dragon is using corrupt leaders in economically weaker countries with the aim of not only supporting the Chinese companies to do business but also to penetrate surreptitiously the nation's polity for long term

influence. Pakistan is already the Chinese vassal state. Broadly, Dragon is following the objectives of its debt trap diplomacy to bring such countries under its control: its expansionist approach is now based on directly controlling foreign countries using its economic power.

Credible inputs are available indicating that the cartographic aggression by Nepal and Pakistan were undertaken on the instructions from China. Nepal under Oli is fast moving closer to China which is also helping him to remain in power. Secret meetings of Nepali leaders and the Chinese ambassador in Nepal have taken place. The timing of the Nepali cartographic aggression also reflects the Chinese hand. Soon after the Defence Minister inaugurated through the video conference a road to Lipulekh Pass to facilitate the pilgrims going to Kailash and Manasarovar through a shorter route. On 20 May 2020, the Nepal government launched its own map showing Kalapani, present in eastern corner of Uttarakhand state of India as part of Nepal's territory. On 10 June 2020, the Nepali parliament moved to approve a new map which included territory in India's Uttarakhand. Lipulekh Pass connects India with Tibet near the tri-junction. For China any Indian road around its occupied Tibet is unacceptable. Nepal is going to send this map to UN according to its Minister Padma Aryal. Following the line of China, Nepal is also going to publish a book to publicise its fabricated 'claims'.

Pakistan too, has been pushed by Dragon to intensify in cartographic aggression against India. As such Pakistan never misses any opportunity to internationalise the Kashmir issue. While one could expect such a move on the anniversary of the abrogation of Article 370 to 'cry' and display its anti-India approach to shore up the image of the Pak PM, who is increasingly seen as an incompetent leader, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi statement reveals that this cartographic offensive is a part of a larger game plan and not just Pakistan's routine move. He stated, "The new map shows Kashmir shares a clear border with China." This clearly reflected the Chinese sinister move to achieve strategic contiguity with Pakistan and push India back to ensure that there would be no obstacle in controlling the Karakoram Pass and strategic route to the Indian Ocean. Several meetings have been reported between the Chinese and Pakistani officials in Gilgit and Baltistan- a region of utmost strategic significance for China.

Pakistan is getting more and more in the Chinese debt trap. The Main Line Railway project costing \$ 6.8 bn in Pakistan would be mainly financed by China. It has been decided that China would provide with a loan amounting \$ 6.2 bn and the loan would be taken both on the books of federal government and Pakistan Railways because of the latter's weak economic condition. Pakistan's own economy is in doldrums. It would be difficult to repay loans to China and finally it would be leasing important projects and areas to China. This is a well-calculated ulterior motive of China. A few Chinese are reported to have stated that while earlier they were buying Pakistani leaders but now, they are buying Pakistan.

Dragon has been indulging in the cartographic aggression in all its periphery- East China Sea, South China Sea, Indo Tibetan border and against Tajikistan-a country with which Dragon had settled the boundary dispute in 2011. It perceives that through this step, it can finally change the perception of the world community in its

favour. Its first step is to project that the region is under dispute and then surreptitiously change the ground facts in its favour by taking baby steps and finally claim the region or agree to settle after keeping the strategically important region.

However, Dragon's plans do not end with the cartographic aggression. It is aligning its PLA's moves with Pakistani strengthened deployment. Pakistan is reported to have moved about 20,000 soldiers near the LAC to match the Chinese forward move in Ladakh. This is a well-calculated Chinese machination to keep India under pressure. Pakistan as such is using terrorists and the possibility of increased terrorist attacks in the scenario cannot be ruled out. Reports of Al Badar and JeM outfits being activated exist.

India has to formulate its responses carefully. A greater pressure both from Pakistan and China would have to be countered. The security grid would have to be suitably strengthened to neutralise the Pak soldiers and its unofficial soldiers i.e. terrorists. At the same time, we need to support the groups diplomatically and morally which are demanding separation from Pakistan and China and assist them to place their problems at the international platforms. The Balochs have aligned with Sindhi groups to demand independence from Pakistan. Tibetan are demanding self-rule which is justified on the grounds of historical facts. Uyghurs are in miserable conditions and deserve support from the world community.

Besides, we need to take urgent steps to start the political process in Kashmir. The situation in Kashmir has improved with youth joining the higher education institutes and taking jobs all over the country. The appointment of a political person as the Lt Governor of J&K is the right move. He can revive the political process in phases. The relatively peaceful areas may be given preference and later other areas may be covered. Pakistan may try to create problems, which can be dealt with firmness.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 3-8-2020

Signalling belligerence

China is making it clear it won't budge. Respond accordingly

Events over the last week have made it clear that the situation in eastern Ladakh remains grim. There is a clear disjunct between China's, entirely erroneous, description of the disengagement process as almost complete and India's, factual, understanding of the ground reality regarding the deployment of People's Liberation Army troops. Military and diplomatic-level talks between the two sides have made little progress. The Chinese ambassador to India, late last week, reiterated the Chinese position and stuck to Beijing's narrative of the Galwan incident, blaming India.

All of this points to a clear signal from the Chinese. Talks or no talks, Beijing is telling New Delhi that it will not budge. The chutzpah here is staggering. China wants the Indian side to pull back from what is Indian territory; it wants patrolling powers curtailed; it wants to convert the new facts on the ground it has created by violating past pacts into the new reality; it wants India to give up on its own territorial claims in the region; and all this while, it also expects Delhi to be held responsible for the stand-off in the first place.

There is little doubt that events over the past three months have shown China is India's most dangerous strategic adversary. In the

immediate context, Delhi has to focus on retaining and boosting its military strength at the Line of Actual Control. It should also come up with creative ways to exert military pressure on China, perhaps in other geographies where Beijing is more vulnerable, to force it to step back — while factoring in the risks of escalation carefully. It must continue to tell China that Beijing's fond hope of retaining the economic benefits of the relationship while posing a security threat will not be entertained. It must cement international partnerships, and actively participate in the global narrative against China's belligerence, for hedging is no longer a viable option. It must prepare for not just a long winter in Ladakh, but a difficult decade ahead where India's territorial integrity and sovereignty will be challenged from two fronts. And it must focus on the domestic front to ensure political stability, social harmony, and most importantly, economic growth and national unity to be able to take on China. Beijing's signals leave India with no choice but to respond accordingly.

THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 13-8-2020

Hoping for a new dawn in India-Lanka ties

In terms of respect for civil liberties and human rights, the regimes of the elder and younger brothers are two sides of the same coin. But one thing is for certain — that the centralisation of authority under the Rajapaksa brothers, and the weakened checks and balances on their power that are bound to follow the much-awaited constitutional reforms, will come down heavily on voices of dissent.

SY quraishi

Former Chief Election Commissioner of India

With Mahinda Rajapaksa's oath-taking ceremony for the prime ministerial post complete, the reign of the Rajapaksas has fortified and how. The ceremony was a foregone conclusion of the parliamentary election results declared on August 6.

Held on August 5 after a series of delays owing to the coronavirus pandemic, the parliamentary elections recorded a voter turnout of 71 per cent, lower than the 77 per cent turnout in the elections of 2015.

From the beginning, the General Election seemed heavily skewed towards the Mahinda Rajapaksa-led Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), which single-handedly won a thumping majority of 145 seats in the 225-seat national legislature. Casting 59% of the total votes to the SLPP, the Sri Lankan public has wholeheartedly given the nod to the two strongmen and brothers — Gotabaya Rajapaksa as the President and Mahinda Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister.

The breakdown of political opposition was signalled by the landslide victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the presidential elections last November. The first nail in the coffin was the resignation of Ranil Wickremesinghe from the prime ministerial post due to the humbling defeat of the joint opposition candidate, Sajitha Premadasa, as soon as the younger Rajapaksa won. The shattering loss brought to the fore the tussle between Wickremesinghe and Premadasa, tall-standing leaders of the United National Party (UNP), which culminated with the latter breaking away from the parent organisation to form his new venture, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). The decision bore fruit as the SJB rose as a distant second with 54 seats in the recently concluded elections, whereas the UNP was reduced to just one

seat, prompting the resignation of Wickremesinghe, the UNP chief. The fractured Opposition paved the way for the Rajapaksa brothers to pursue their ethno-nationalist political campaign uninhibited.

Before contesting in the General Election, Mahinda Rajapaksa served as the interim caretaker Prime Minister, appointed by his President brother soon after Wickremesinghe left the post. Under the duo's synchronised governance style, the country was able to defeat the Covid-19 pandemic. This aggressive flaunt of unity, be it in the administration or photo-ops, also intended to serve the campaign promise of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to promulgate constitutional reforms and possibly a new Constitution. His vow to consolidate power under an executive presidency has gained momentum as Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance, wherein the SLPP is the main political party, has a total of 145 seats in parliament, forming a nearly two-thirds majority needed to pass constitutional amendments in the national legislative body.

The first step in fulfilling the President's long-standing stance would be to repeal the 19th Constitutional Amendment. The amendment was brought in to undo the changes done by the 18th Amendment of 2010. The latter was promulgated when Mahinda Rajapaksa was elected as the country's President a second time after putting an end to the 26-year-long dreaded civil war. With the sole objective of centralising power under him and consolidating his control over the administration, the amendment removed the two-year term bar on running for presidency and made President the sole authority in appointing members of independent commissions (like the Election Commission), Chief Justice and judges of the Supreme Court, amongst others.

The electoral laws were also not spared under this amendment as it disabled the Election Commission from holding public and private media accountable for its election coverage, and restricted its role to merely conducting elections. It allowed the President to visit parliament once in three months and also enabled him to enjoy all privileges, except for the voting right that a Member of Parliament enjoys. However, the journey from parliamentary democracy to a presidential one was short-lived as Mahinda Rajapaksa was ousted in 2015, paving the way for the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. Re-instating the Constitutional Council, it made the Council's advice binding on the President regarding appointments to the independent commissions, depoliticising their nature. Additionally, the President was barred from re-contesting after the completion of two elected five-year terms.

Who would have thought that the 19th Amendment would meet the same fate as its predecessor? The irony is uncanny — the public that threw the elder Rajapaksa out of power for passing the 18th Amendment, voted the younger Rajapaksa to victory to bring back the same amendment.

In terms of respect for civil liberties and human rights, the regimes of the elder and younger brothers are two sides of the same coin. While the former regime witnessed discrimination against the Tamil minority and rise of Sinhalese nationalism, the latter has been in the news for its undeterred Islamophobia and unregulated arrests of human rights activists and lawyers. One thing is for certain — that the centralisation of authority under the Rajapaksa brothers, and the weakened checks and balances on their power

that are bound to follow the much-anticipated constitutional reforms, will come down heavily on voices of dissent.

Though Sri Lanka and its immediate neighbour India are following similar patterns of a majoritarian government, the relationship between the two countries is of suspicion. The memories of Mahinda Rajapaksa's second-term proximity to China at the cost of India still haunt the latter. It may be recalled that in 2015, he had publicly attributed his defeat to the Indian intelligence agencies. The author met him at his residence in November 2019. When asked whether he still expects any 'foreign' interference, he replied with a wink that "hope it won't happen again".

Let's hope the exchange of Twitter greetings between PM Modi and Mahinda Rajapaksa would be a good start for cordial relations.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 8-8-2020

After the landslide

Sri Lanka's new government is likely to wear majoritarianism on its sleeve, use Beijing as counterweight to Delhi

The near two-thirds victory for the SLPP has re-concretised the Rajapaksa family grip on Sri Lanka.

The results of the Sri Lankan parliamentary elections were foretold from the time of the February 2018 local election sweep by Mahinda Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna. Voters, who had decided in 2015 to throw out an authoritarian Rajapaksa regime and opted for a seemingly bold challenger in Maithripala Sirisena, had by then already tired of the dysfunctional relationship between him and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. Early in his term, Wickremesinghe was seen as shielding corrupt friends. Sirisena was seen as being so mortally afraid of Rajapaksa's return to power that he had stopped communicating with his prime minister.

But the last straw was the failure of this duo to prevent the 2019 Easter Sunday carnage despite credible, real time intelligence from India. The near two-thirds victory for the SLPP has re-concretised the Rajapaksa family grip on Sri Lanka, while two dynastic political parties that shaped the destiny of Sri Lanka through the last century, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the United National Party, may have breathed their last. The old Colombo ruling elites have been all but buried, and a new dynasty has risen in Sajith Premadasa, the son of former President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was elected last year on a majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist plank built around his reputation as the architect of the 2009 military victory over the LTTE, is a recent politician, and more powerful than the PM under the Constitution. But his flamboyant brother, Mahinda, who has been the PM since Wickremesinghe stepped down last year soon after Gotabaya's election, has been a career politician for nearly 50 years. With his popularity reinforced, he will be no retiring number 2. Mahinda

continues to nurse the ambition of becoming president once again. Brother willing, his parliamentary sweep — just five short of the two-thirds mark in the 225-member House — could help him reverse the biggest achievement of the previous government, which was to restore a two-term bar on running for the presidency, and trim the powers of the Executive President.

The Gotabaya-Mahinda government has already shown that it will wear its majoritarianism on its sleeve. Displays of muscular Sinhala Buddhism in the wake of last year's Easter killings carried out by a group of Islamist radicals may have overshadowed the long-standing Tamil question, but it remains an unhealed wound. Earlier this year, Sri Lanka withdrew from Resolution 30/1 of the UN Human Rights Council, under which it had committed to fix accountability for war crimes and provide justice and reparations to the Tamil minority. The Tamil National Alliance has shrunk in this election. Mahinda paid no heed to India's entreaties after the civil war ended to devolve more powers to Tamil areas. The brothers Rajapaksa are even less likely to pay attention now. Sri Lanka's new ruling clan is sharply aware of India's own majoritarian turn, as well as its troubles with China on the LAC and in the region. That the Rajapaksas will continue using Beijing as a counter-weight to Delhi is a reality that cannot be wished away.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 12-8-2020

In six years, India's ties with other South Asian countries have frayed, providing China with an opening

We need to explore innovative long-term efficacious and durable initiatives to mend fences in the neighbourhood and provide them with the comfort to look beyond the sphere of Chinese influence.

Written by Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury

So, did China transgress into our territory? The Ministry of Defence first tells us it did, puts it on record with specific dates and details, then pulls the information down from its website the next day. Either the MoD got the facts wrong or was told to pull it down, especially after the prime minister told an all-party meeting that no one had either come in or is on Indian territory. As we wait for an explanation that may never come, one thing is clear: There is confusion in our diplomacy with China, which remains determined to push its boundaries.

We are caught in what strategic experts call the "Thucydides Trap" — the condition that war is likely if a new power feels threatened by the rise of another. That term, from ancient Greece for the tension between Athens and Sparta, as enunciated by Thucydides, is commonly used for US-China relations but can be easily transposed to India versus China.

For, there is a disconnect between what Beijing says and what it does. It kept calling the situation "stable and controllable" as 20 of our soldiers were martyred. Our PM and defence minister

visited Ladakh and addressed the nation from there but we haven't heard one word from Chinese President Xi Jinping. He has left it to his Foreign office spokespersons to respond.

Diplomacy with Beijing, as many countries have realised, is as credible as dry water or wooden iron. So it won't be a surprise if the Chinese withdrawal from Galwan and other points of friction is accompanied by permanent occupation in Depsang and Pangong Tso.

Therein lies the crux of the problem — it is about much more than China. China isn't interested in nibbling away some land along the Line of Actual Control, it wants its footprints in the entire region.

It's more than an accident of geography that India shares her borders with all other South Asian nations. No other South Asian countries, except Afghanistan and Pakistan, share a border with any other South Asian nation.

This is our asset and the value of this asset is determined by our neighbours and our investment in the relationship with them. In May 2014, amid pomp and grandeur, hype and hoopla, newly-elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited the heads of all the SAARC countries for his swearing-in ceremony. Look where we are now, merely six years down the road. That sense of camaraderie has evaporated. What was presented as a strong signal of regional solidarity is faint and flickering.

China is an overwhelming presence in each of our neighbouring countries. When the prime minister warned against expansionism, the irony wasn't lost on many — China's expansionism in the region is directly proportional to the deterioration of our relationship with our neighbours. Our neighbours, including Nepal, are all young emerging democracies developing new institutions but they find a growing appeal in the authoritarian paradigm of Beijing than India's democratic one.

It was the late Indira Gandhi who said: "The nations of our region can prosper only by treating one another as sovereign equals." She said that friendship does not mean identical views but a basic framework of respect based on equality and trust in which there is sympathy for each other's difficulties. This was behind former Prime Minister I K Gujral's doctrine, too, in which India made unilateral concessions to neighbouring countries with regard to trade and travel without expecting reciprocal treatment. Over decades, even by cleaving through the wall of our adversities, we have been accumulating trust and goodwill among our neighbours. That is now being frittered away.

Almost all our neighbours now nurse grudges.

Never in our contemporary history has Nepal gone down such an acrimonious path. With our only neighbouring Hindu country, the spiritual link is frayed over a dispute related to 400 sq km of Indian territory at Kala Pani. So much so that Nepal is even asking for a review of the 1947 agreement on Gurkhas.

The flashpoint came on May 8, the day the 80-km road was inaugurated by the defence minister. But the New Delhi-Kathmandu chill set in since the blockade of 2015, when China

saw an opportunity and rushed in. Since May 8, we have seen a sudden upsurge of hostility with Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli openly adversarial; Nepal border guards firing upon Indian residents; Kathmandu staying away from the multilateral BIMSTEC counterterrorism exercise; refusing to accept the US-sponsored Millennium Challenge Cooperation Grant which was supposed to upgrade Nepal's electricity transmission system and connect it to the Indian power grid. We all know that the Chinese envoy in Kathmandu is proactive, intervening to resolve the internal bickering of the ruling Communist party to bring stability.

Take Bangladesh, a country that called the bluff of Jinnah's two-nation theory, its war of liberation fought by both Hindus and Muslims for a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. That revolution, led by Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman, had the full support of the Indian people. I know what that history means, I am an MP from Murshidabad. My district has 71 lakh people, 66 per cent of whom are Muslims and 33 per cent Hindus. In absolute terms, it has the largest Muslim concentration in the country. I insisted and was successful in persuading my colleague Pranab Mukherjee to contest the Lok Sabha election from my district. Pranab da was dithering but the people overwhelmingly voted for him in the 2004 general election and he won. It is a fact that despite fervent calls by M A Jinnah, the Muslim population of the district never desired to move to Pakistan and no communal riots occurred here during Partition.

This same Muslim population is now fearful of the new citizenship law, the NRC and the NPR — this trinity puts their existence at stake, that is the refrain. Where do they go if they can't pass the test? This concern reverberates in Bangladesh. No less a person than the Union Home Minister said that illegal migrants will be picked up like termites and thrown away. Where? India has assured Bangladesh that the NRC is an internal issue but the tone of domestic politics — where Bangladeshi Muslims are painted as arch enemies eroding India — have set off deep disquiet in Dhaka.

We should not forget that since 2009, when Sheikh Hasina assumed power in Bangladesh, she has waged a zero-tolerance campaign against terrorist outfits inimical to India. Bangladesh is burdened with more than 10 lakh Rohingya refugees and yet there is simmering discontent about its relations with India. The foreign minister of Bangladesh cancelled his visit. PM Modi was invited to the inaugural ceremony of "Mujib Borso" (Mujibur Rahman's centennial birth anniversary) but that was cancelled in the wake of the corona pandemic. The purported visit was vehemently opposed by various organisations in Bangladesh, much to the discomfiture of India. Certainly, these aren't good signs and there is a fear that China is waiting to rush in.

Opinion | Anxiety in China stems from the CPC's insecurity

We need to explore innovative long-term efficacious and durable initiatives to mend fences in the neighbourhood and provide them with the comfort to look beyond the sphere of Chinese influence.

Some of the low-hanging fruit that can be plucked: BBIN (Bangla, Bhutan, India, Nepal) signed a motor vehicles agreement which should be speedily implemented; the India-Myanmar-Thailand

trilateral highway needs a renewed push; medical tourism, education, arts and culture — the entire thrust of soft power — can be used to generate and renew connections between the aspirational youth of all the countries.

From Indira Gandhi to Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Manmohan Singh, all prime ministers have stressed that the more stable and cordial our relationship with our neighbours, the more sustained will be our progress. At a time when the pandemic has forced us to retreat behind walls, we need to look back and take lessons from history so that we can forge a more peaceful future for the young generation in not only our country but the entire region.

This article first appeared in the print edition on August 12 under the title “Mending Fences with Neighbors”. Chowdhury is leader of the Congress in Lok Sabha and chairperson, Public Accounts Committee

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 6-8-2020

Qureshi asks OIC to stop dragging feet on Kashmir meeting

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi in an unusually sharp warning asked Saudi Arabia-led Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on Wednesday to stop dilly-dallying on the convening of a meeting of its Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) on Kashmir.

Appearing in a talk show on *ARY News*, the foreign minister said: “I am once again respectfully telling OIC that a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers is our expectation. If you cannot convene it, then I’ll be compelled to ask Prime Minister Imran Khan to call a meeting of the Islamic countries that are ready to stand with us on the issue of Kashmir and support the oppressed Kashmiris.”

Mr Qureshi said that if OIC fails to summon the CFM meeting, Pakistan would be ready to go for a session outside OIC. In response to another question, he said Pakistan could not wait any further.

Pakistan has been pushing for the foreign ministers’ meeting of the 57-member bloc of Muslim countries, which is the second largest intergovernmental body after the UN, since India annexed occupied Kashmir last August.

Says Pakistan skipped Kuala Lumpur summit on Saudi request and now Pakistanis are demanding Riyadh ‘show leadership on the issue’

Mr Qureshi had at an earlier presser explained the importance of CFM for Pakistan. He had then said that it was needed to send a clear message from Ummah on the Kashmir issue.

Although there has been a meeting of the contact group on Kashmir on the sidelines of UN General Assembly session in New York since last August and OIC’s Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission has made statements on the rights abuses in

the occupied valley, but no progress could be made towards the CFM meeting.

A major reason behind the failure to call the foreign ministers’ meeting has been Saudi Arabia’s reluctance to accept Pakistan’s request for one specifically on Kashmir. Riyadh’s support is crucial for any move at the OIC, which is dominated by Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries.

Mr Qureshi said Pakistan skipped Kuala Lumpur Summit last December on Saudi request and now Pakistani Muslims are demanding of Riyadh to “show leadership on the issue”.

“We have our own sensitivities. You have to realise this. Gulf countries should understand this,” the foreign minister said, adding that he could no more indulge in diplomatic niceties.

Mr Qureshi made it clear that he was not being emotional and fully understood the implications of his statement. “It’s right, I’m taking a position despite our good ties with Saudi Arabia,” he said.

“We cannot stay silent anymore on the sufferings of the Kashmiris,” he said.

Frustration in Islamabad over OIC’s inaction on Kashmir has been growing for months. Prime Minister Khan voiced his concern while speaking at a think-tank during his visit to Malaysia in February.

“The reason is that we have no voice and there is a total division amongst [us]. We can’t even come together as a whole on the OIC meeting on Kashmir,” Mr Khan had said.

It should be recalled that Turkey, Malaysia and Iran had unequivocally rejected India’s annexation of Kashmir and voiced serious concerns on atrocities committed by Indian security forces on Kashmiris in the occupied valley.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 9-8-2020

OIC criticism

IT is rare for high officials in Pakistan to publicly criticise ‘friendly’ and ‘brotherly’ countries over foreign policy differences. However, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi’s recent blunt criticism of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation — in fact a thinly veiled critique of Saudi Arabia — has raised eyebrows.

Speaking to a TV channel recently, Mr Qureshi expressed his frustration with the multinational bloc of Muslim states, which is headquartered in and largely controlled by Saudi Arabia. He “respectfully” told the OIC to convene a Council of Foreign Ministers over the burning Kashmir issue, or else Pakistan would “call a meeting of the Islamic countries that are ready to stand with us on ... Kashmir”. The foreign minister added that Pakistan pulled out of December’s Kuala Lumpur Summit on a Saudi “request” but now it expected Riyadh to “show leadership on this issue”.

The fact that this reflects state policy and not just the foreign minister’s personal feelings was reiterated by the Foreign Office

on Thursday. The FO spokesperson said Pakistan expected “forward movement” from the OIC on the Kashmir issue, though she also highlighted the “fraternal relations” between Islamabad and Riyadh.

It is a fact that no past government in this country has ever criticised the Saudis in this manner. The long-standing economic, political and military ties between the two countries go back decades, even though the relationship has been tilted in Riyadh’s favour. However, it appears that the Saudis’ lack of interest in resolving the Kashmir dispute has touched a raw nerve in ruling circles, and the government expects our Arab brothers to do more to help end the suffering of the India-held region.

This paper has long pointed out that the OIC has become an antiquated talk shop, which does little of substance to address the key issues of the Muslim world, though the state has always contested this view. Now it appears the ruling elite has come round to the fact that playing second fiddle to Riyadh won’t do; Pakistan must explain its priorities — “our own sensitivities” as Mr Qureshi quaintly put it— in a clear and frank fashion.

While this country has always spoken up for Palestine and Kashmir, many of our Arab friends have scrambled to improve or establish ties with India and Israel.

Perhaps the prime minister needs to explain in detail the road map that Pakistan now intends to follow. As it is, there are several geostrategic blocs in the Muslim world; the Gulf Arabs and Egypt are aligned with the US; Qatar and Turkey are charting their own course, while Iran, Syria and the Hezbollah in Lebanon form yet another axis.

Does Pakistan intend to ally with any of these formations, or does it aim to create a new bloc with like-minded states? Foreign policy goals must be clear and must ensure that Pakistan takes a moral stand, while not annoying our friends and benefactors.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 9-8-2020

The wrong battlefield

Fahd Husain

WE are fighting on the cheap and expecting to win. Someone somewhere is not thinking right on Kashmir.

A year after India’s reoccupation of occupied Kashmir, Pakistan is expressing resolve by flexing its vocal chords. Fine. It is also calling the Indian prime minister nasty names. Fine, I guess. To top it all, it has launched an aggressive campaign to raise awareness about the issue — and the campaign is resonating inside Pakistan. Preaching to the converted?

If Pakistan’s Kashmir policy is struggling to achieve quantifiable objectives, one of the key reasons is this: a failure (or refusal) to recognise the location of the battle to be fought. In today’s world, this battle for Kashmir has to be fought on seven places. Pakistan is not among them.

The seven battlefields: Washington D.C., New York, London, Moscow, Paris, New Delhi and Srinagar. Here’s why:

The situation on the ground in occupied Kashmir has worsened in the last one year. India may claim normalcy in the region but the reality — as acknowledged by independent voices (the few that are left in India) — is that repression is on the up, as is defiance by the people. Pakistan’s core objective is to ensure the world knows the reality of the situation. But the world, in this context, is really just the members of the United Nations Security Council. These countries, the so-called P5, wield power to make a difference in Kashmir. Among these five — United States, United Kingdom, China, Russia and France — China is already engaged in the Kashmir issue and hardly needs any convincing. The New York battlefield refers to the United Nations headquarters.

Our battle for India-held Kashmir, for now, has to be fought through diplomacy and strategic communication

If we want to be smart with our policy, we need to focus an overwhelming effort on this target audience. The opinion of the people and governments of these four countries is the only thing that should matter to us. Add to this the obvious emphasis on New Delhi and Srinagar and we have ourselves six Kashmir battlefields.

Every battle needs warriors, weapons and an accurate mapping of the terrain. Our battle for Kashmir, for now, has to be fought through diplomacy and strategic communication. These seven battlefields will therefore require strategies that are tailored for respective terrains.

Contrast this with what we are actually doing.

On Aug 5, 2020, the battlefield for Kashmir was Pakistan. All our official and individual energies were employed in doing things that have negligible impact — if that — on the Kashmir situation. What difference does it make to the Kashmir cause if leaders make speeches, rename highways, wear black armbands and march a few hundred yards for the cameras? What difference does it make if our cities are adorned with banners, slogans and billboards on Kashmir?

Imagine the money spent on all this activity; imagine the time and energy put into these events by the state machinery; imagine the official brainpower expended in putting together such haphazard plans and dressing them up as policy. Now imagine the alternative.

Imagine the millions of rupees (perhaps more) allocated for these events were utilised for strategic communication done smartly; imagine the hundreds (perhaps more) man-hours spent on planning these activities were spent by officials focused only on the seven battlefields; and imagine the tens of hours (maybe more) spent by leaders doing symbolic things were spent by them persuading the target international audience of the righteousness of the Kashmir cause. Imagine if all the money, time and energy spent this last week on activities were focused like a laser beam on the battlefields that actually matter.

But preaching to the converted is easy. It is also lazy. No one has to do anything out of the ordinary and no one has to think anew.

The state machinery has these events stored in its muscle memory. Banners, placards, walks, armbands, speeches, programmes, seminars and a few glitzy productions (in Urdu), this is standard operating procedure. Routine stuff, routine results.

Our governments have to decide what is it that they really want: winning Kashmir or winning the next elections by promising to win Kashmir?

While these two may not be directly connected, the larger point stands: focusing on the domestic Pakistani audience means nothing except burnishing nationalistic credentials of leaders for political reasons. This is perhaps why an increasing number of officials are today heard asking what more they can do on Kashmir than what they have done. Well plenty, actually. To start off, they have to recognise the futility of fighting for Kashmir on the wrong battlefield.

The next phase is planning and executing the diplomatic and communications war simultaneously on all seven battlefields. While diplomacy has a well-entrenched system in place, the strategic communications arena requires special attention. With occupied Kashmir being Ground Zero, a brief outline of a strategic communications plan would include the following steps:

- 1) Facilitate and equip Kashmiris to capture raw video and audio content on devices; 2) Create a way to have this content relayed to Pakistan; 3) Establish a Kashmir strategic communications organisation that can process this content into various formats for all types of formal, informal and social media platforms as well as for official presentations; 4) Translate all content into the languages of the six battlefields; 5) Dissect and tailor content into two categories: for governments and for people; 6) Create a system for distribution of this content on broadcast, print and digital platforms that make it reach the target audience; 7) Construct a system to monitor and measure the reach and impact of the content in terms of viewership and readership including demographic analysis of the audience reached; 8) Create and train the official manpower needed to manage this strategic communications infrastructure; 9) Institutionalise and budget a permanent financial pipeline for Kashmir strategic communications; and 10) Aim to shape opinion through this content in a way that it translates into pressure on official policy.

This is the mere tip of the iceberg. So much is doable. But first, let's stop fighting on the wrong battlefield.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 8-8-2020

WB says cannot mediate in Pakistan-India water dispute

Khaleeq Kiani

ISLAMABAD: The World Bank has expressed its inability to take an independent decision on appointment of a neutral expert or court of arbitration for settlement of a long outstanding water dispute between Pakistan and India, saying the two countries will have to bilaterally choose one option.

“Both India and Pakistan should come together as to which option to take forward,” said Patchamuthu Illangovan, the World Bank’s former Country Director of Pakistan, on completion of his five-year term in Islamabad.

Talking to *Dawn*, Mr Illango said Pakistan had made a request for appointment of a Court of Arbitration (COA) while India had sought a neutral expert to resolve their dispute on two hydroelectric projects. Because of two conflicting positions under the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty, the World Bank was facilitating the two governments to find ways in resolving differences and move forward.

“There is no provision in the treaty for the World Bank to take an independent decision,” he said when asked if the bank was shying away from its role even though it was part of the 1960 treaty and had been sitting on Pakistan’s request for a COA for almost four years now.

Responding to a question that the World Bank had promised to be part of the development works on the Indus basin and yet it had declined funding the Diamer-Basha Dam, Mr Illango said that while the bank was supporting other projects on the Indus River like Dasu-1 & Dasu-II, India had raised objections over the Diamer-Basha’s location in a disputed area and that it was not the WB policy to finance disputed projects.

Islamabad seeks a court of arbitration while Delhi wants a neutral expert

Pakistan has been reminding the World Bank since then to recognise its responsibility under the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 to address its concerns over two disputed projects — 330MW Kishanganga and 850MW Ratle Hydropower projects — and play its role to ensure that India abide by the provisions of the 1960 treaty while building the projects.

India had completed the 330MW Kishanganga project during the period the World Bank “paused” the process for constitution of a Court of Arbitration (COA) as requested by Pakistan in early 2016. The Pakistani request was countered by India by calling for a neutral expert.

Pakistan had called for resolution of disputes over Kishanganga project on the Neelum river and 850MW Ratle hydropower project on the Chenab.

In December 2016, the bank had announced that it had “paused” the process for either appointing a COA or a neutral expert and started mediation between the two countries on how to advance and develop consensus in the light of the treaty on the mechanism for resolution of faulty designs of the two projects.

The last round of bank-facilitated and secretary-level talks between India and Pakistan were held in Washington in September 2015 that ended in disappointment for the latter. Pakistan had raised a number of objections over the design of the two projects at the level of Permanent Indus Waters Commission almost a decade ago followed by secretary-level talks and then requests for arbitration through the World Bank.

Under the treaty, in case the parties fail to resolve disputes through bilateral means the aggrieved party has the option to invoke the jurisdiction of the International Court of Arbitration or the neutral expert under the auspices of the World Bank.

The jurisdiction of the court could be invoked either jointly by the two parties or by any party as envisaged under Article IX (5), (b) or (c) of the treaty for constitution of a seven-member arbitration panel.

Responding to a question, the WB official said that the Washington-based lending agency was actively supporting Pakistan's plans for least cost of power generation through long-term integrated plan because Pakistan's generation cost was about 25 per cent higher than other regional countries.

He said Pakistan's power sector had become unsustainable due to untargeted subsidies, inefficient distribution companies and low recoveries and Pakistan needed to improve in all these areas and take full advantage of the clean and renewable resources to ensure affordable energy. He said the renewable policy would go a long way in replacing imported fuels by 2030.

Mr Illango agreed that the WB's 2018 projections for Pakistan to be an upper middle income country by 2047 through its Pakistan@100 programme had been affected by Covid-19, locust attack and resultant impact on underlying reform programme.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 8-8-2020

FM, Pompeo discuss peace process as jirga meets in Kabul

Anwar Iqbal

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discussed Pakistan's role in promoting peace in Afghanistan with Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi on Thursday as a Loya Jirga met in Kabul to push forward the Afghan peace process.

"Productive call with Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi today about continued cooperation on Afghan peace and the importance of supporting regional stability," Secretary Pompeo said in a tweet released after the call. "I look forward to advancing our shared goals and increasing partnership."

In a separate statement issued in Washington, his office said that the two discussed a range of issues, including "the importance of US-Pakistan cooperation on the Afghan peace process and the importance of efforts to support regional stability".

In another statement, Pompeo urged the attendees of the Loya Jirga to take advantage of this historic opportunity for peace as it would benefit all Afghans and would contribute to regional stability and global security.

The top US diplomat welcomed the move to expeditiously release the remaining Taliban prisoners, which he said was the last obstacle to begin the intra-Afghan negotiations.

The grand assembly of Afghan elders began its proceedings in Kabul earlier Thursday to consider an agenda that includes releasing final 400 Taliban prisoners and opening peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani opened the Jirga.

In Washington, Pompeo noted that after 40 years of war, bloodshed and destruction, the parties were ready to embark on a political process to reach a negotiated settlement.

"We acknowledge that the release of these prisoners is unpopular. But this difficult action will lead to an important result long sought by Afghans and Afghanistan's friends," he said. It would lead to "reduction of violence and direct talks resulting in a peace agreement and an end to the war," he added.

Pompeo said that the Trump administration remained committed to a partnership with Afghanistan and would continue

to back a sovereign, unified and democratic Afghanistan that was at peace with itself and its neighbours.

"At the same time, we are committed to reducing the burden on the US taxpayer and the risk to the US troops," he said, adding that even after a military pullout, the US would continue to provide substantial security assistance to Afghanistan. Pompeo said that the US would also support projects that seek to connect Central Asia with South Asia through Afghanistan.

"Promoting joint infrastructure projects is a key element of improved connectivity," he said. "We are prepared to support these projects through such US agencies as the Development Finance Corporation (DFC), which is also considering investment in agriculture and extractive industries, among other sectors."

In Islamabad, the Foreign Office quoted Mr Qureshi as stressing the importance of the Pakistan-US relationship. He said the leadership of both countries was committed to further strengthen it. He said Pakistan would be a partner for peace with the US.

The foreign minister apprised Secretary Pompeo of India's continuing regressive policies in India-held Kashmir manifested with massive violation of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The foreign minister thanked Pompeo for the US participation in the debate in the UN Security Council on Aug 5 on the completion of one year of India's unilateral and illegal actions. He said the UN Security Council's deliberations, once again, reaffirmed the disputed status of Jammu and Kashmir.

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THE TRIBUNE, CHANDIGARH 15-8-2020

Direct tax reforms

More steps needed to check rampant evasion

ON the face of it, faceless assessment and appeals under direct tax reforms are a major step forward towards bringing transparency in the taxation system and empowering honest taxpayers. The fact that barely one per cent of India's population — predominantly the salaried class — pays taxes shows that corrupt or negligent officials have largely failed to check tax evasion.

A Covid-hit country striving to rebuild its economy needs confidence-building measures that can drastically raise tax compliance and plug leakages. It has to be ensured that the honest are not harassed and the dishonest are not spared, and not the other way round, as is often the case now. A taxpayers' charter has the potential to reduce the trust deficit between the government and the taxpayer. Why should people who have nothing to hide live in mortal fear of the taxman? The onus will be on the tax officials to act reasonably and avoid overreach. It is also imperative to widen the tax net and catch the big fish in particular. The number of individual taxpayers in the country who have disclosed annual income above Rs 50 lakh is as low as around 3 lakh (in case of income above Rs 5 crore, the figure is even less than 10,000). Last month, the Central Board of Direct Taxes signed an MoU with the Securities and Exchange Board of India for data exchange between the two organisations. More such steps can help in effectively zeroing in on the evaders.

Speedy resolution of tax disputes is another key factor. The funds locked in litigation serve no purpose; these can be released and put to use only if cases are disposed of without delay. A common grouse among Indian taxpayers is that they do their duty but are still deprived of quality services and facilities, including affordable healthcare, good roads and round-the-clock power supply, as the hard-earned money they part with is misused or not optimally utilised. It's up to the government to ensure that valuable tax revenue does not go down the drain.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 2-8-2020

The economic situation is grim

The financial sector, in particular, is vulnerable

On Saturday, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that the government was extending its credit facility, originally announced for medium and small enterprises to private professionals such as doctors and chartered accountants. This, the minister said, was being done after stakeholder consultations. The decision is an indicator of the stress faced by professionals such as doctors and accountants, as economic activity is far from normal and new Covid-19 cases continue to rise in most parts of the country. But this is not the only indicator of a troubled economy. The Goods and Services Tax (GST) collection in the month of July dropped to Rs 87,422 crore from Rs 90,917 crore in June. In July 2019, this number was Rs 1.02 lakh crore. Most analysts have been warning that economic revival has started plateauing in July after showing a brief spike due to lockdown induced pent-up demand in June. Ms Sitharaman herself said that the "government is cautious about overstating the green shoots of a recovery visible in the economy".

As Covid-19 cases continue to climb and large parts of the country experience intermittent lockdowns, the pandemic's economic challenge will only get more difficult. Supply chains remain disrupted; demand continues to be low; unemployment is still high; and the Centre's budgetary numbers may not quite hold because of both revenue shortages and new expenditure commitments. Among the most complex challenges will be loan-default related difficulties in the financial sector, especially once the ongoing moratorium comes to an end. Any large crisis on this front will necessitate a bailout and impose an additional strain on the government's already stretched fiscal resources. A sudden withdrawal of credit relief can make firms unviable, and trigger an inflationary shock as productive capacity suffers.

These questions will hopefully be discussed at the Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting this week. Signalling on this front will matter more than any decision on policy rates, which many private forecasters believe will see a pause. It will also be interesting to see whether the MPC makes a GDP forecast for this year and whether there has been any revival in consumer confidence after lockdown restrictions have been eased.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 3-8-2020

Stress and strain

Gradual pick-up and signs of plateauing of economic activity underscore difficulty of fiscal management. It's a long haul ahead

The first-quarter data on central government accounts, released by the Controller General of Accounts, underlines the stress in government finances stemming from the curtailment of economic activities during this period. Four broad trends emerge. First, at the aggregate level, the Centre's gross tax revenues have contracted by almost a third as compared to the same period last year, highlighting the extent of the economic shock. However, as the lockdown restrictions were eased, and economic activity picked up, the pace of contraction in government revenues did ease. Second, with consumption picking up, the recovery in indirect taxes during the first quarter has been far swifter as compared to that in direct taxes. Third, despite this shortfall in tax revenues, central government expenditure has grown in line with what was projected in the Union budget 2020-21. Fourth, and more crucially, the government's capital expenditure has grown at a much faster pace as compared to its revenue expenditure.

At the aggregate level, the Centre's gross tax revenues contracted by a staggering 32.6 per cent in the April-June quarter of the current financial year. However, a closer look reveals that the pace of contraction eased with each passing month. Tax revenues contracted by 44.3 per cent in April — the first full month of the lockdown — easing thereafter to 22.7 per cent in June. The disaggregated data shows that while direct and indirect taxes contracted by 30.6 per cent and 34.1 per cent respectively, the pace of contraction in indirect taxes has eased considerably. In fact, indirect taxes in June were almost at the same level as last year, driven in part by rising excise collections owing to the steep hike in duties on fuel products. On the direct tax side, the contraction in income taxes by more than a third in the April-June quarter underlines the extent to which the slowdown in activities has

impacted individual incomes. Similarly, the 46 per cent contraction in corporate tax revenues in June — the month of advance tax collections — highlights the grim situation for India Inc. On the other hand, despite the subdued revenues, the Centre has maintained its expenditure, especially capital expenditure, which was up 40 per cent in the first quarter, over the same period last year. In large part, this spurt was driven by higher spending by the department of food and public distribution and road transport and highways. Government spending on rural development also saw a surge, much of which is likely to be on account of the relief measures to address the fallout of the crisis. The first-quarter data on government finances broadly affirms the trend of a gradual pick up in the economy from the lows observed in April. However, with economic activity now beginning to show some signs of plateauing, at lower levels, it underscores the difficulty of fiscal management. Reaching back to pre-COVID levels will depend in large part on the success in containing the virus, and on how economic activity shapes up, especially with the reimposition of the lockdown in several parts of the country.

THE ECONOMIC TIMES, NEW DELHI 3-8-2020
Invest, Government, Economy Stalling

Economic recovery appears to be plateauing. The Manufacturing PMI for July has slid to 46, down from 47.2 in June, amidst local lockdowns and messy unlocking nationally. The government surely needs to change policy gears and induce capital formation, directly or indirectly, which would clearly be distinct from using fiscal resources for relief, civil supplies and public distribution. It is true that some economic indicators have improved somewhat in July. Goods transport, rail freight, car sales and exports have rebounded, but the entire retail segment remains sluggish and credit growth is actually negative over this fiscal. Hence the policy imperative for the Centre to step in and do the heavy lifting to shore up investments, which, in turn, would spur overall growth. The latest figures show that the Centre's capital expenditure has shot up by a credible 40%. The sharp fall in the rural employment guarantee programme for July is good augury indeed. Agricultural labour demand has shot up. The way forward now is to pitchfork investments and speedily coagulate funds. The Centre has called upon central public sector enterprises to fast-forward capital expenditure, for which about Rs 1,60,000 crore has been budgeted this fiscal.

The relevant projects need expediting. The watchword needs to be focused policy attention for big-ticket investments. Reports say that 80 coal blocks have been identified for commercial mining. Fast conduct of auctions for at least a dozen large coal blocks, along with parallel investments for evacuation and coal beneficiation would generate diverse demand with forward and backward linkages. With our large reserves, there is no earthly reason to import over 1 lakh crore of steam coal annually.

A national programme for rental housing would make eminent sense. The proposed Credit Guarantee Enhancement Corporation (CGEC) has its work cut out to make corporate bonds of infrastructure projects attractive. It can free up lending of up to Rs 3.5 lakh crore by banks. A package of investment measures is required. The sooner, the better.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 10-8-2020
While global recovery could lift economy in 2021, domestic drivers for growth are still unclear

India's policy rate easing, in fact, remains comparable with the "average" conventional monetary policy support we have seen across emerging and advanced economies.

Written by **Prachi Mishra**

India's economy was weak in 2019, but appeared to be near a trough. Just as the economy was starting to look up at the beginning of this year, the rising tide gave way to the COVID-19 shock. The global economy is facing the most unprecedented shock in post-war history. The shock is truly different this time around. One key difference vis-à-vis the earlier episodes is that the fear and scare factor among citizens was not prevalent during any of the previous recessions. The COVID-19 shock also has this unique feature which is the response to the shock itself, that is, the virus control and social distancing measures represent a physical constraint on economic activity, making it unparalleled.

When the constraint is physical, sharp contractions in economic activity are bound to happen. We project global GDP to contract by 3.5 per cent in 2020. This is almost certainly the deepest recession since at least the Second World War.

The good news is that global recovery has already begun, and global GDP is rising. The key risk to the global sequential recovery, however, is the fact that the virus has not been brought under control in the US, and across several emerging economies. Compared to rest of Asia, the situation is strikingly worse in India too, where new cases have accelerated — especially since the reopening began — and now stand at approximately 50,000 per day. This compares with less than 2,000 new daily additions on average in the rest of the region. The situation in India and the US, along with localised outbreaks in several parts of the world, raises the risk of a rise in infections as economies open up further, which might trigger renewed government restrictions or voluntary changes in behaviour that could weigh on growth.

The lockdowns and rising public anxiety about the virus led to a sharp deterioration in economic activity in India. After a deep contraction in the April-June quarter, we expect the economy to rebound mechanically. Going forward, we expect a step-down to a more normal, and lower sequential growth pace. Different parts of the economy are likely to recover from the hit at different speeds. Industrial activity could possibly normalise, especially in manufacturing where controlling the virus might be easier. In contrast, industries in which it is harder — travel or entertainment for example — will still be in a gradual normalisation process, and probably won't rebound completely until a vaccine is available. Our quarterly estimates imply that real GDP would contract by 4.4 per cent in FY21; this would be the deepest recession India has witnessed since 1980.

Several high frequency economic indicators are displaying sequential improvement, which has likely set in a sense of complacency amongst market participants. What we are currently witnessing appears to be a tug-of-war between improving economic data, and the still escalating virus situation. It is important to note, however, that what we are witnessing is just the

normalisation of activity from extremely low levels; this may not be evidence of marked improvements in domestic macroeconomic fundamentals. Overall activity still remains weak. For example, Eway bills — tax applications filed for movement of goods are 25 per cent lower as compared to the same time last year; vehicle registrations are tracking a 45 per cent year-on-year decline; and both Google and Apple mobility trackers reported contraction of 40 per cent compared to normal levels.

The key question that markets are confronted with is — what will be the key macroeconomic drivers of Indian growth going forward?

Discretionary fiscal policy support, defined as targeted support to households and businesses, the kind of policy support that can revive any economy quickly in times of an unprecedented shock like we have seen, is tepid in our view. Indeed, credit rating agencies appear to be less worried about the worsening of fiscal and debt positions in the short-term — in fact, it is the reverse. They appear to be more concerned about the fact that India may not have the administrative and fiscal capacity to implement large fiscal support, and that would be a headwind to growth. What would reassure markets and avoid further credit rating downgrades is not lower fiscal spending in the short-run as many perceive, but most importantly a strategy to revive growth, combined with a credible fiscal plan for the medium term.

Market participants also wonder why India has not seen more aggressive fiscal policy support, not only compared with advanced economies but with other emerging economies too, and given the nature and scale of the shock. One possible explanation — an underlying implication of Viral Acharya's recent book *Quest to Restoring Financial Stability in India* — is that fiscal dominance during normal times, which basically allowed the sovereign to run about 10 per cent deficits, implies that the government's ability to apply countercyclical policy is severely curtailed during a crisis. In the short term, the economy has to pay a price. The price of not saving and investing in an umbrella when there is sunshine is that we have to bear the costs when it is raining.

Monetary policy and the central bank have been the main “game in town”; the RBI has reduced policy rates by 115 bp since the crisis hit, combined with tools to inject liquidity, and regulatory measures. India's policy rate easing, in fact, remains comparable with the “average” conventional monetary policy support we have seen across emerging and advanced economies. We expect the MPC to reduce interest rates further, even though it decided to pause at its August meeting. It appears that it took a “wait and watch approach” given that inflationary pressures have started to show up in the data; and with the intention to save firepower for the future. Our view is that there is clearly a need to do more, conditional on the evolution of the economy so far, and our forecasts for the rest of the year, and the fact that the support from fiscal policy has been muted so far.

Finally, the exchange rate has remained remarkably stable in this crisis. The RBI's real effective exchange rate has actually strengthened by 4 per cent since pre-COVID, and would actually be a drag on growth. Therefore, while pent up demand, favourable base effects, and massive policy support in advanced economies driving the global recovery could lift India's economy in 2021, we

struggle to see any domestic fundamental forces to drive India's growth ahead.

The writer is chief India economist, Goldman Sachs, India

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 10-8-2020

An uneven recovery

Services are seeing a greater fall, with job losses, localised lockdowns holding back demand and sharpening the challenge.

From the lows observed in April, economic activity in India has gradually climbed up in the weeks and months thereafter. While uncertainty looms over the pace of the recovery — some indicators suggest that economic activities have levelled off at lower levels — the picture that emerges is of an uneven, two-paced recovery. The recovery in the manufacturing sector, especially in some segments, appears to be far greater as compared to the pick-up in the services sector. This trend is observed in the purchasing managers index (PMI) for the two sectors. After plummeting to a record low of 27.4 in April, the PMI manufacturing rose to 47.3 in June, dipping marginally thereafter to 46 in July. In comparison, the PMI services, which plunged to a low of 5.4 in April, has limped thereon, touching 34.2 in July. It is unlikely that the gap between the two will narrow significantly in the near term.

Faced with grim income prospects, households have curbed their discretionary spending. Services, non-essentials in particular, have suffered disproportionately from this fall in demand. Adding to that is the fear of moving in crowded places which is also constraining consumption of services such as restaurants and hospitality, travel and tourism and others despite the easing of lockdown restrictions. There are several indications to this effect. For instance, reports in this paper reveal that despite restaurants and eateries being allowed to reopen, more than 60 per cent of licensed eateries in prominent areas of Delhi continue to remain shut and are yet to renew their trade/health licences. The effects of this collapse in demand for services, and non-essential manufacturing, on jobs and incomes are quite visible. As reported in this paper, 40 of the BSE 100 companies that have announced their results for the first quarter of the current financial year have seen a decline in their aggregate employee expenditure — indicative of a fall in both employees and employee costs. Some indication of the extent of the losses incurred during this period will reflect in the quarterly GDP estimates (to be released at the end of this month) in the “trade, hotels, transport, communication and services related to broadcasting”, and the “financial, real estate and professional services” category.

The near term prospects don't appear promising. With income and job losses, self-imposed restrictions on movement, and localised lockdowns to deal with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to influence consumption patterns, demand for services is likely to remain muted. In such a scenario, both individuals and businesses are likely to continue to be risk averse. Much will depend on the success in containing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE ECONOMIC TIMES, NEW DELHI 10-8-2020

Welcome boost to value-added farming

The Rs 1 lakh crore Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF) to develop marketing infrastructure, comprising climate controlled storage, processing and logistics, is welcome.

This is what farmers need, to prevent loss due to spoilage and to harvest a part of the value that is added to their produce before it reaches the consumer. The success of the project depends on availability of reliable power supply in rural areas, which is hard to come by, given the widespread political culture of patronising theft and giveaways, state electricity boards' opacity on their accounts and their inability to pay power generators for the power supplied.

Higher investment in food processing, particularly close to the areas of production, and food processing technology to develop ways to preserve perishables (such as onions) will have the desired impact on agri-value chains. Primary processing entails simple agri-practices such as cleaning, sizing and packing; post-harvest secondary processing involves basic processing, packaging and branding; while high-end processing involves complex processing technologies, machinery and finances.

Rightly, the policy focus to create the marketing infrastructure will help farmers and farmer producer companies/cooperatives to move up the value chain, giving farmers better incomes and the incentive to produce more. The AIF scheme, announced as a part of the economic stimulus package, will provide medium- to long-term debt financing for investment in viable projects for post-harvest management infrastructure and community farming assets through interest subvention and credit guarantee.

Creating market linkages where these do not exist, making power supply available and establishing a vast network of regulated warehouses, whose receipts are negotiable instruments, are the basic tasks. The challenge is to replicate for plant crops what the National Dairy Development Board and Amul did for the dairy sector. In tandem, the government needs to institute a predictable external trade policy for farm produce and functional forward markets for farm produce.

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI 12-8-2020

How government policies are harming the IT sector

India's antiquated regulations have eroded the global competitiveness of the sector. Fix it urgently

Rahul Matthan

It has often been said that the only reason why the Indian information technology (IT) industry scaled the heights it did was because the government never quite understood how it worked, and, so, did not impose on it the sort of regulatory burdens that it did on other sectors. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case. Thanks to a series of misplaced policy choices, the government has systematically eroded the permitted operations of the Indian outsourcing industry to the point where it is no longer globally competitive.

Foremost among these are the telecom regulations imposed on a category of companies broadly known as Other Service Providers (OSPs). Anyone who provides "application services" is an OSP and the term "application services" is defined to mean "tele-

banking, telemedicine, tele-education, tele-trading, e-commerce, call centres, network operation centres and other IT-enabled services". When it was first introduced, these regulations were supposed to apply to the traditional outsourcing industry, focusing primarily on call centre operations. However, it has, over the years been interpreted far more widely than originally intended.

While OSPs do not require a license to operate, they do have to comply with a number of telecom restrictions. The central regulatory philosophy behind these restrictions is the government's insistence that voice calls terminated in an OSP facility over the regular Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) must be kept from intermingling with those carried over the data network. To that end, OSPs are required to design their networks so that they can demonstrate a separation between voice and data calls.

While these restrictions may have made sense a decade ago, when data wasn't as ubiquitous as it is now, the insistence on maintaining such arbitrary distinctions between different types of calls in today's world seems daft. Everyone I know prefers to call me over WhatsApp, Skype or any one of a number of data-based call services because the regular voice network cannot be trusted. To require IT companies that operate on the cutting-edge of technology to maintain this distinction when, just outside their gleaming campuses, the average man on the street can choose whichever service suits him, is incomprehensible.

Central to the enforcement of these regulations is the Electronic Private Automatic Branch Exchange (EPABX), a piece of telecom equipment that was once the central junction box through which all telecom connections into and out of an office flowed. The utility of an EPABX has dwindled in a world where the vast majority of telephone conversations happen over the mobile network, but, in OSPs, it remains a central fixture. In the early days, OSPs were required to maintain separate EPABXs for voice and data ensuring that the data network was kept physically separate from the voice network. These restrictions have since been relaxed and OSPs can now have a central EPABX through which voice and data calls flow so long as the EPABX maintains a logical separation between voice and data.

But even this is anachronistic. All global businesses today manage their call and data networks centrally using a single global EPABX located in any one country in which they have operations. This allows them to deliver the sort of converged user experience that customers have come to expect with modern service offerings. In addition, having data centrally managed allows businesses far greater control over their sales and customer conversion rates than is otherwise possible. However, since Indian regulations require OSPs to have an EPABX physically located in India, global businesses with operations in India are forced to re-engineer their networks to specially account for these restrictions.

For companies already operating in India, this is often treated as an additional cost of continuing to do business in here, even though clients I have spoken with have confirmed that we are the only country they have operations in that imposes these restrictions. For companies that are evaluating whether or not to use India as a base for new operations, this is, more often than not, viewed as an unreasonably onerous restriction that imposes an unacceptably high level of constraints on the way in which they can structure their operations. As a result, this is often the single

biggest reason why they end up choosing some other less restrictive jurisdiction in which to establish their operations.

It is not clear to me why India continues to persist with this regulatory model. There was a time when the government had a legitimate concern that if they allowed voice and data networks to intermingle with each other, the resulting toll bypass would have meant a significant reduction in licence revenues. Given that today ordinary citizens regularly switch between voice and data on their mobile phones depending on the reliability of the available network, this is surely no longer the case. Why India continues to implement these antiquated regulations even after it has become evident that these restrictions are affecting its global competitiveness is simply beyond me.

The IT industry accounts for close to 8% of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It is the metaphorical goose that lays golden eggs. Let's try not to kill it.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS, NEW DELHI 4-8-2020

Education Policy does not adequately tackle issue of inequity arising out of medium of instruction

An exposure to basic English from a very young age in bhasha schools — through rhymes, simple sentences — could make learning the language later much easier.

The medium of instruction has been a way of perpetuating class and caste structures in India. Accepting this reality will help us make sense of the language policy since Independence as well as the New Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020). NEP 2020 has many positives, including not making Hindi compulsory in South Indian states. But on the pedagogically relevant and politically sensitive issue of the medium of instruction, the policy seems to follow the well-trodden path.

It says that the mother-tongue or the regional language would be the “preferred” mode of instruction till Class 5, possibly Class 8. It also states that, “wherever possible” these languages will be used in public and private schools. Given the ground realities what does all this entail?

Before Independence, and possibly 20-25 years after Independence, most school-going children attended bhasha-medium schools, even if their parents belonged to the well-off sections of society. Only the elite sent their children to expensive English-medium schools. If one makes a list of retired top civil servants, academicians and officials of private and public sector enterprises above the age of 60, it's very likely that most of them studied in a bhasha school. Studying in a bhasha school did not hamper their progress in life. There are two reasons for this. First, these schools were excellent in those times. Even the standard of English taught in those schools was very good. So, students coped easily in colleges and universities. Second, most students belonged to the upper castes and had a tradition of education in their families.

Over the years, while school enrollment has increased, the quality of education in bhasha schools — invariably government schools — has deteriorated. At the same time, most students from the well-off sections have opted out of them. This shift from bhasha schools to English-medium schools first happened in the metros, then in middle-level cities and has reached the villages now. The bhasha schools have begun drawing children from the Bahun Samaj. These children suffer from two handicaps. First, the extremely poor quality of education in most bhasha schools — with exceptions in states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Second, such children rarely have a tradition of education in their families and find it very difficult to compete with their peers who have a much better financial background, better education and proficiency in English. But the benefit of expanding education is that such children, who would not ask for a better deal earlier, are now making their demands clear. One remembers the agitation in 2014 when the Hindi-speaking students were arguing that the higher education system is loaded against the bhasha medium students, especially at the UPSC level.

There is a conflict between what the educationists say — one understands the subject best in the mother-tongue, we as a nation should not lose such a multitude of languages, studying in the English-medium leads to gaps in the understanding of one's own society — and what the parents think is necessary for the economic survival of their children. So, parents send their kids to English-medium schools as soon as they can afford it. The bhasha medium students do not get the coveted jobs and the disparity between the two widens.

NEP 2020 does not tackle the issue of inequity that arises out of the medium of instruction. The document pays lip-service to the promotion of bhashas, but the policy will end up reinforcing the status quo. The English-medium schools will continue as they are, rather more of them will sprout. But the agitation of 2014 could be a harbinger of the possible political unacceptability of this “manner of doing things”.

One could let all students study English from an earlier age. Admittedly, this goes against the basic principles of education, and the non-elite will face more problems in studying English. But an exposure to basic English from a very young age in bhasha schools — through rhymes, simple sentences — could make learning the language later much easier. Making special funds available for English-teaching at panchayat or zila parishad level schools could also help. These could be some steps in making school education somewhat more egalitarian.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 7-8-2020

Economic recovery?

IT is hard to weigh the signs of ‘early economic recovery’ seen in July against the significant loss of business confidence as computed by a business organisation on the basis of a half-yearly survey, and come up with an answer to the question: are we moving in the right direction? The Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry informs us that the overall business sentiment has worsened because of the “huge scare caused by the

coronavirus pandemic". Even before the virus had reached Pakistan, business confidence was already declining owing to a combination of factors including massive currency devaluation, high interest rates, steep inflation and the IMF-mandated economic stabilisation policies. The Covid-19 lockdowns and uncertainty had only compounded economic woes with businesses seeing sales slump and profits shrink as domestic and foreign demand crashed, throwing tens of thousands of people out of work.

The forecasts of a slower and painful recovery notwithstanding, July — the first month of the fiscal year — saw a substantial surge in domestic demand, especially in the construction and rural sectors. Cement sales have gone up sharply underscoring a recovery in the construction business. Tractors, motorcycles and farm inputs too are in greater demand indicating improved rural income levels. Carmakers expect their sales to recover over the next six to 12 months. Imports are rising. FBR tax collection has far surpassed the target for the month. Even exports have increased, though only marginally. The stock market is bouncing back. And so on. Based on this data, many are predicting a much quicker recovery going forward than what was previously forecast. But the question remains: is this recovery sustainable given the fact that much of it is caused by fiscal and monetary incentives given to mitigate the virus impact on businesses and reboot construction activity? With infections apparently declining much faster than expected, the government wants to completely reopen the economy in the next few weeks. That will have a salutary impact on the economic activity and create consumption-led growth in demand over the short term. Yet long-term economic recovery requires sustained growth momentum. That largely depends on how the government deals with the structural impediments to new investments in the manufacturing sector to boost exports, and if it still has the appetite to implement policy reforms, including, but not limited to, reorganisation of its tax system and energy sector, to improve the poor business environment.

DAWN, ISLAMABAD 5-8-2020

Exports rebound after four months of decline

Mubarak Zeb Khan

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's exports bounced back in July following a steep fall for four consecutive months since March when the government imposed lockdowns to contain the spread of coronavirus.

The new fiscal year started with a positive note as export proceeds grew 5.8 per cent to \$1.998 billion in July, from \$1.889bn in the corresponding month of last year, data released by the Ministry of Commerce (MoC) showed on Tuesday.

In rupee terms, the export proceeds jumped 11.3pc year-on-year in July.

Visible improvement was observed in export orders from international buyers, mainly in the textile and clothing sectors since May. The decline had widened in April with a plunge of

54pc, which relatively improved but still came in at 35pc contraction in May and 6pc in June.

In FY20, exports fell by 6.83pc or \$1.57bn to \$21.4bn, compared to \$22.97bn the previous year.

Imports fall 4.2pc in first month of FY21

The continuous decline in imports is also providing some breathing space for the government to manage external account despite a downward trend in exports the last four months.

In July, the import bill decreased by 4.2pc to \$3.54bn, as against \$3.696bn over the corresponding month of last year.

During 2019-20, the import bill witnessed a steep decline of \$10.29bn or 18.78pc to \$44.509bn compared to \$54.799bn last year.

The country's trade deficit also came dipped by 14.7pc in July from a year ago, mainly due to a fall in imports and paltry growth in export proceeds. However, imports are also expected to bounce back in the coming months following abolishing of regulatory duty on imports of raw materials and semi-finished products.

In absolute terms, the trade gap narrowed to \$1.542bn in July, as compared to \$1.808bn over the corresponding month of last year. During FY20, it narrowed to \$23.099bn, from \$31.820bn.

Data breakdown shows that export of 10 products posted impressive growth during the month under review: worn clothing and clothing accessories surged by 2,078pc, followed by food preparation 344pc, made-up clothing accessories, knitted or crocheted 313pc, tarpaulins, awnings and sunblinds 154pc, tracksuits 135pc, gloves, mittens and mitts 83pc.

Similarly, export of fish and fish products soared by 50pc, jerseys, pullovers, cardigans, waistcoats and similar articles 44pc, women's garments 34pc, leather apparel 28pc, made-up articles of textile materials 27pc, home textiles 24pc, copper and articles thereof 19pc, and men's garments 10pc.

The export proceeds of some important products posted a decline during the month under review including wheat, wheat flour, cotton, synthetic filament yarn, raw leather, ethyl alcohol, cotton yarn, plastic products, tanning, dyeing extracts, rice and cement.

Meanwhile, top 10 importing products which increased in July were: soya beans up by 616pc, petroleum coke 192pc, palm oil 190pc, rubber 36pc, fruits and vegetables 24pc, pharmaceuticals products 17pc, inorganic chemicals 14pc, iron and steel 12pc, tea 11pc, plastic products 8pc, electrical and electronic equipment 5pc.

On the other hand, items that saw a decline in imports included rape seeds, cotton yarn, motor cars, footwear, parts and accessories for tractors, petroleum gas, petroleum oils, coal, machinery, fertilizers, organic chemicals, petroleum oils excluding crude and paper and paperboard.

Commerce Adviser Abdul Razak Dawood underlined that the MoC will be evaluating its geographical diversification in order to realign the focus towards new opportunities. He also advised the ministry officers to extend all kind of necessary support to exporters in order to achieve the targets, not only in terms of numbers but also with regards to intended policy outcomes.