



Political tango

Shiv Sena and BJP have shown they can have a relationship even if they can't have an alliance

The only surprise in the Shiv Sena's decision to go it alone in future elections is the timing. With parliamentary elections more than a year away and in the absence of any political compulsion to reveal its hand now, it is not clear what led the Sena to make the announcement. It is public knowledge that the BJP and the Sena, to understate the point, are not on the best of terms – even in the Assembly election of 2014, the Sena fought without its erstwhile ally. The truth is that both parties are at a stage in their political life when one can grow in Maharashtra only at the expense of the other. This is no ideological rift. The Sena, even from the reign of its founder Bal Thackeray, had sought to expand beyond Marathi chauvinism by embracing headline Hindutva. The differences between the two parties were entirely over sharing of seats for the Assembly election, a result of the BJP seeking a larger share than before on the basis of its better performance in the Lok Sabha polls, held just months earlier. If the seat negotiations sowed the seeds of the rift, the results of the elections effectively ended any chance of a revival of a pre-poll alliance. The Sena, used to being the senior partner in the alliance, finished way behind the BJP in the election, and had to join the Maharashtra government with several bruises to its political ego. As things stand, if the Sena wants an alliance with the BJP in 2019, it can only be as a junior partner. This is unthinkable for Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray, who is under some pressure to erase the impression that he is not politically as tough as his father, Bal.

All signals from the Sena's national executive indicate that it sees the BJP more as a rival than as an ally. Mr. Thackeray seems unable to reconcile himself to the changed political equations in Maharashtra, as he has vowed to compete with the BJP for Hindutva votes in other States. The unstated purpose appears to be to hurt the BJP wherever he can, in retaliation for encroaching upon the Sena's space in Maharashtra. But for all the belligerence of the Sena, the BJP is unmoved. The national party looks as if it is treating its regional ally as an errand child. The BJP does not need the Sena's support at the Centre; in Maharashtra, where it is short of a majority, it is not asking its partner to leave the government. The BJP tries to wear the attitude of an indulgent senior partner, one that is reluctant to act in anger or haste. As for the Sena, it has chosen to refrain from attempting to pull down the Devendra Fadnavis government in Maharashtra and to stay on in the Narendra Modi government at the Centre. In short, the two parties have signalled they can still be in a relationship, if not an alliance. They may fight elections separately, but they can still rule together.

More fire

Turkey's offensive against Kurdish militants on the Syrian border could spin out of control

Turkey's military intervention in the Syrian border town of Afrin against Kurdish militants is a grim reminder of the complexities of the seven-year-long Syrian civil war. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) played a crucial role in the battle against the Islamic State, ousting it from eastern Syria late last year. In the war, the U.S. provided air cover to YPG-led troops, while the Syrian army and Russia avoided directly clashing with them. But once the IS threat receded, the old geopolitical calculations returned, with Turkey, facing Kurdish militancy at home, turning against Syrian Kurds. Ankara has been warning against empowering Kurdish militants. It sees the Syrian YPG as a vassal of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the main insurgent group battling government troops in southeast Turkey. Now that the fight against the IS is virtually over, or at least for now, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is concerned that the YPG, with renewed battleground experience and weapons supplied by the West, could offer support to the PKK. When the U.S. announced plans to create a 30,000-strong Kurdish border force, an alarmed Turkey announced the offensive in Afrin. The plan is to oust YPG guerrillas from the town and hand it over to Turkish proxies. From Afrin, they could move to other cities now held by the YPG.

Mr. Erdoğan would like to create a buffer between Turkey and Syrian Kurdistan. There is a convergence of interest among Russia, Syria, Iran and Turkey in the Afrin assault. Mr. Erdoğan sent troops into Afrin only after getting Russian assent. For Russia, which is at present bombing rebel/jihadist positions in Syria's Idlib, Turkish cooperation is needed to continue the mission and it will turn a blind eye to the Afrin attack. For Syria and Iran, which see Kurdish militants as separatists and potential threats, the assault is a blessing in disguise. Yet, despite the tacit regional support Turkey now enjoys, the attack could prove counterproductive. First, the U.S. has been completely sidelined in the operation. If the rift between the U.S. and Turkey, both NATO allies, keeps widening over Syria, the proxy battles in the country could acquire their own momentum. Second, the YPG has proved its worth in the ground battles against the IS since 2015. It is not a fragile militia group that can be pushed over easily with a ground offensive. Besides, the YPG has enormous local support in Kurdish towns along the border. Third, even if Turkey ousts the YPG from Afrin, it won't ease tensions on the border. Rather, it would drag Turkey deeper into the Syrian conflict. This means that Syria's border region, which is among the hardest-hit by the civil war, is likely to see more bloodshed and destruction in the coming months, if not years, unless all countries involved in the conflict change course from war to talks.

Afghanistan, on a slow fuse

Erosion in the international consensus on rebuilding the country must be reversed before it's too late



RAKESH SOOD

The attack by the Taliban gunmen at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul last weekend was a grim reminder of the deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan. The siege at the hotel lasted more than 12 hours and claimed 22 victims, including 14 foreigners, before the gunmen were neutralised.

Days earlier, in an interview with CBS, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani had said that Afghanistan is "under siege", with "21 international terrorist groups operating in this country" and "factories producing suicide bombers". He acknowledged that without U.S. support, the Afghan national army would not "last more than six months" and the government would collapse. This is a bleak assessment indeed coming from an insider who has seen the situation unravelling.

Deteriorating situation

Over the last 16 years, civilian casualties have mounted to 31,000, increasing progressively to over 4,000 a year. The Afghan security forces are losing nearly 7,000 men a year, an attrition rate difficult to sustain and twice the number of casualties that the international coalition forces suffered from 2001 till 2014 when they ceased combat operations and embarked on Operation Resolute Support to "advise, train and assist" the Afghan forces.

The U.S. has contributed significant blood and treasure, spending over a trillion dollars (considerably more if long-term veterans' care is included) and losing more than 2,400 lives in pursuing the longest war in its history. Of this amount, about \$120 billion has been spent on reconstruction and development, more than the inflation-adjusted expenditure under the Marshall Plan for rebuilding



Western Europe after World War II. The rest of the international community has also contributed. India is a significant partner, having spent over \$2 billion on humanitarian assistance, infrastructure building and human resource development, with an additional billion dollars committed.

U.S. President Donald Trump is determined to bring about a change in American policy and while authorising a limited increase in U.S. troop presence by 4,000 soldiers, has also been critical of Pakistan. On January 1 he tweeted: "The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!" The tweet has been followed by a suspension of all military assistance to Pakistan. This has resulted in resentment in Pakistan but whether this will bring about a change in its army's behaviour remains to be seen.

Eroding legitimacy

Meanwhile, the legitimacy of the National Unity Government (NUG) consisting of Mr. Ghani as President and Abdullah Abdullah as Chief Executive (a newly created position) is increasingly under question. Cobbled together after the disputed 2014 election with political backing from the Obama-Kerry team, the Chief Executive's position was to be legitimised through a constitutional amendment creating the post of Prime Minister, which has not happened. Without a clear division of power

security situation will not permit elections to be held in nearly 45% of the territory of Afghanistan. This is enough to raise doubts about the legitimacy of any electoral outcome. It is true that the Taliban cannot secure a military victory as long as the U.S. is present, but it is equally true that their ability to disrupt peace, prevent reconstruction and hamper elections continues to grow.

Emergence of warlords

In December, Mr. Ghani announced that he had accepted the resignation of Balkh Governor Atta Mohammad Noor. Mr. Atta issued a denial, refused to step down and declared that he would arrest the new appointee Engineer Dawood if he entered the province. Mr. Atta is an influential leader of the Jamiat-i-Islami and had been in his current position for 13 years, emerging as the regional strong man. In earlier times, he had backed Dr. Abdullah but now he calls him 'a snake'. When Kabul announced that his signatures were invalid and no provincial payments including salaries to officials would be forthcoming, Mr. Atta coolly declared that he would take control of the customs revenues from the Hairatan land port on the Uzbek border. He has been addressing public rallies questioning the authority of the government in Kabul.

The message has not been lost on other regional strong men. Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek leader, in Turkey since last May, has supported Mr. Atta. Mr. Dostum was forced into voluntary exile amid investigations into allegations that he had arranged for the kidnapping of a political opponent who had then been raped and tortured by him and his guards. Further west, Ismail Khan, a former minister in the Karzai cabinet and governor of Herat, can take charge of the lucrative trade route with Iran. In Kandahar, police chief Abdul Razik, who has been in his position since 2011, has resisted attempts to shift him. To his credit, he has delivered a measure of security in Kandahar, in

sharp contrast to neighbouring Helmand. He also controls the Spin Boldak crossing into Balochistan. In doing so, he relies as much on his loyal Achakzai militia as on the official police.

The global imperative

The last two years have witnessed a significant shift in Russia's position. While it has denied U.S. reports of having supplied weapons to the Taliban, Russia acknowledges that it has opened up communication channels and is prepared to both provide a venue and facilitate peace talks. At the recently concluded Raisina Dialogue in Delhi, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Igor Morgulov described the Islamic State as the principal threat to Afghanistan and the region. He questioned as to how its fighters had been brought into northern Afghanistan in unmarked helicopters when the airspace is under U.S. control. The U.S. flatly rejects such insinuations and questioned Russian and Iranian motives in weakening the Kabul government by giving recognition to the Taliban.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, there was an international consensus on rebuilding Afghanistan and ensuring that it should not become a source of regional and global instability. That consensus has eroded over the last 16 years. Further, the Afghans who had returned in large numbers determined to reclaim their country and rebuild it are frustrated at the steady decline in both security and governance. The newly created Afghan institutions are unable to address the challenges without significant international support, both financial and material. However, with a breakdown in the international consensus, it may not be long before the slow fuse reaches ignition point. And 2019 may well become the critical year.

Rakesh Sood is a former Ambassador to Afghanistan and currently Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation. E-mail: rakeshsood2001@yahoo.com

The arc to Southeast Asia

India and ASEAN must draw up a functional road map to enhance ties



HARSH V. PANT

This week India will host heads of state or government of all 10 nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for the Republic Day celebrations in a dramatic declaration of intent by New Delhi to boost India's ties with Southeast Asia. The year 2017 was an important landmark as India and the ASEAN commemorated 25 years of their partnership, 15 years of summit-level interaction, and five years of strategic partnership. The challenge now is to map out next steps in the India-ASEAN partnership at this time of unprecedented geopolitical flux in the wider Indo-Pacific.

Overcoming disillusionment

There has been a sense of disillusionment on both sides about the present state of play in the relationship. While the ASEAN member states have been disappointed that India continues to punch below its weight in the region, New Delhi's expectations regarding a more robust support for its region-

al outreach too have not been met. India's capacity to provide development assistance, market access and security guarantees remains limited and ASEAN's inclination to harness New Delhi for regional stability remains circumscribed by its sensitivities to other powers. The interests and expectations of the two sides remain far from aligned, preventing them from having candid conversations and realistic assessments.

Though the Modi government's 'Act East' policy is aimed at enhancing India's strategic profile in East and Southeast Asia, New Delhi's main focus remains on South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. There has been a shift in emphasis, of course, with India moving away from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and asserting its centrality in the evolving geography of the Indo-Pacific. But it is no match for China's regional profile which is largely about viewing Southeast Asia as its backyard. India's economic focus too is not in tune with other regional powers which view ASEAN as an important market for exports and investments. India's export sector remains weak and the government's focus has shifted



to boosting manufacturing domestically.

India's interest in ASEAN as a multilateral forum remains lacklustre as it continues to privilege bilateral partnerships to further its own interests. As New Delhi's gaze shifts to the Bay of Bengal, Myanmar and Thailand have emerged as key players in its southeastern outreach. The hope is to use these nations as a bridge to ASEAN. The temptation to prioritise these countries over others in ASEAN may also prevent others from looking at India as a regional stakeholder. New Delhi is signalling, perhaps inadvertently, that it is more interested in becoming a member of various regional organisations because of global power credentials even when its substantive engagement with such platforms remains limited.

It is important for India and ASEAN to chart out a more operational, though modest, agenda for

future cooperation. The three Cs of commerce, connectivity and culture have been highlighted but a more granular perspective is needed in terms of a forging a forward-looking approach. There is no getting away from enhancing trade and economic linkages between India and ASEAN. They also need to focus on areas such as digital technologies. India, as a fast emerging major player, has significant comparative advantages. As Chinese giants begin to dominate the digital space in Southeast Asia and concerns rise about their ability to own data, the Indian IT sector may take some advantage of the seeming reluctance of ASEAN states to put all their eggs in the Chinese basket. India as a facilitator of the ASEAN-wide digital economy would not only challenge China but also emerge as an economic guarantor of its own.

Focus on projects

Instead of talking about ASEAN-wide connectivity projects, New Delhi now needs to focus on more effective delivery of projects it is already committed to. In this context, prompt completion of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which will run from Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar, is key. The plan is to extend this highway to Cam-

odia, Laos and Vietnam in an attempt to project India's role in the emerging transportation architecture. With China having three times more commercial flights than India to Southeast Asia, improving air connectivity between India and ASEAN countries should also be high on the agenda. Besides, the Bay of Bengal can be used as an exploratory ground for the development of an India-ASEAN maritime framework.

Finally, the cultural connect between the two needs strengthening. While India offers scholarships to students from ASEAN states to study at Nalanda University, this initiative should be extended to the IITs and the IIMs. Tourism too can be further encouraged between India and the ASEAN with some creative branding by the two sides.

While India and the ASEAN have been very ambitious in articulating the potential of their partnership, they have been much less effective in operationalising their ideas. The need now is to focus on functional cooperation and make the idea of an India-ASEAN partnership more exciting.

Harsh V. Pant is Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi and Professor at King's College London

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

Trade barriers

In saying that protectionism is as dangerous as terrorism, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made clear his intentions to make his "Make in India" policy a successful one and expect a tide of foreign investment inflows into the country ("PM calls protectionism as dangerous as terrorism", January 24). But, at the same time, it must be remembered that foreign governments too will only think from the angle of increasing their capital. Nations across the world will and do follow economic policies best suited to them. Let India not be overambitious in achieving its economic objectives. It must follow

the theory of comparative cost and frame economic policies accordingly.
S. RAMAKRISHNASAYEE,
Chennai

Practically every country has resorted to some measure or other against free trade by imposing taxes on imported goods. Slapping taxes on products is resorted to by almost every leader. "Make in India" and "Buy American" are signs that local products are preferred. Supporting no barriers in trade and commerce while balancing them by taking care of the interests of the local industry and agriculture is a delicate balance.
D.B.N. MURTHY,
Bengaluru

Reel, real and verdict

The Supreme Court's strong stand that the *Padmaavat* order will not be recalled is praiseworthy ("*Padmaavat* order will not be recalled, declares SC", January 24). The top court's stand reiterates that the judiciary is bound to maintain secularism in India. When those associated with the film have said that there have been artistic interpretations, the demands to ban the film do not have basis. State Governments should execute the court order. This should also be seen as a new beginning and a rap on the knuckles of those who seek a ban on films, plays or books citing so-called sensitivities.
B. PRABHA,
Varkala, Kerala

The Supreme Court's order is further assurance of the judiciary's role as the protector of the constitutional rights of citizens. But the events around the episode as a whole are worrying. The primary duty to protect one's liberties rests with the executive. Approaching the judiciary should only be the last resort; a rarity rather than the normal. The sad fact is that in the current climate, and with governments taking no action and, at times, even colluding with the fringe to black out unpopular or dissecting voices, citizens are often forced to approach the courts.
For someone such as Sanjay Leela Bhansali, given the resources at his disposal,

doing this may not be much of a hardship. But for an ordinary citizen or even a small-time film-maker or a budding writer, approaching the judiciary and getting involved in lengthy and expensive legal proceedings is not an option. If such a trend is allowed to continue, it will severely restrict voices of dissent. But more importantly, it will reduce our constitutionally guaranteed rights to a luxury enjoyed only by the privileged few who have the money, time and patience to fight for their rights.
BIPIN THAIWALAPILL,
Payanur, Kerala

from a different angle ("Making our roads safe", January 25). Electronic monitoring and centralised driver licensing system, in themselves, will not make much of a difference. Steadfast adherence to road rules and regulations alone can work effectively. Everyone on the road, from pedestrians to motorists, should be made aware of the worth of a life. The blatant abuse of road rules as seen across many parts of India is cause for concern. High speed vehicles in poor road conditions are another emerging threat.
V. LAKSHMANAN,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

Safer roads

The whole issue of road safety needs to be addressed

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