



## Merkel's world

Her re-election as Chancellor comes with huge challenges domestically and globally

Angela Merkel's return for a fourth consecutive term as Chancellor, with a much-reduced mandate for her Christian Democratic Union, marks a watershed moment in Germany's post-War history. For the first time since 1949, a far-right nationalist party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), is in the Bundestag, posing a potentially bracing challenge to Berlin's predominant political creed of consensus and compromise. With her natural instinct for caution and pragmatism, Ms. Merkel embodied such a stance, one that was seen as a national trait assiduously cultivated to definitively turn the page on the country's Nazi past. There is ample evidence of these qualities at work in Ms. Merkel's remarkably long tenure, which led her to embrace Social Democratic Party policies on minimum wages, at times to the chagrin of her ally in the grand coalition. To be sure, this seemingly anodyne approach came under sharp attack for its ideological ambiguity, but it was a tactic that Ms. Merkel deftly deployed to blunt the opposition. It is, however, nearly impossible to accuse the Chancellor of pandering to the extreme right, so characteristic of the centre-right leadership in several European states in the face of the populist surge against the expansion of the EU and globalisation. The 8-plus percentage point plunge in support for the incumbent CDU and its Bavarian ally over 2013, combined with the all-time low returns for the Social Democratic Party, is a measure of the erosion of the middle ground.

This shift in fortunes is all the more telling given the widespread perception that Germans have never had it so good in terms of economic well-being and political stability. A possible explanation of the nature of the verdict is also that the grand coalition between the arch-rivals, the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, pushed voters in search of an alternative at the extreme. A mocking reference of the blurred ideological divisions within the alliance was that there were two SDPs in Germany. Nonetheless, the fact that there has been a steady decline in support for the two major mainstream forces – from about 90% in the 1970s to about 50% – reflects the steady fragmentation of the polity. Conversely, the gains for the AfD follow its capture of the vote in more than 10 states in regional elections. The implication of the verdict is a possible 'Jamaica coalition' among the CDU, the Greens and the liberal Free Democrats, given the Social Democrats' likely choice to serve as an opposition. There has been speculation that Ms. Merkel, who has defied the recent record of Europe's politicians even in terms of sheer longevity in office, would look to consolidating her legacy. Revitalising the rules-based post-War liberal world order, one that she committed to as a counter to President Donald Trump's 'America first' agenda, could not be more urgent. Even a year ago, she may have little imagined that her victory would come as such a relief, domestically and globally.

## Worrying downgrade

Removing the snow leopard from the Red List must not affect conservation efforts

The elusive and charismatic snow leopard has lost its endangered status in the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, causing genuine worry among wildlife biologists, who believe this sends out the wrong signal to those working to protect it. If the argument for a downgrade to vulnerable status from endangered is that conservation actions have reduced the threat to the cat, there is an equally persuasive response on how little scientists know about its population health, given its remote habitat in the alpine zones of the Himalayas and trans-Himalayas. As a major range country, India has worked to protect these animals, and even launched a programme on the lines of Project Tiger for its conservation, covering 128,757 sq. km of habitat in Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. There is also an upcoming international collaborative effort, the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program, involving the countries that make up the range of this graceful animal. It is vital that this momentum should not be lost merely on account of the technicality that the estimated numbers have crossed the threshold for an 'endangered' classification, which is 2,500. If anything, studies on its vulnerability have to be intensified, and the task of monitoring its entire habitat of high mountains speeded up.

It would be a disservice to conservation if governments shift their focus away from the big challenges to the snow leopard's future: trafficking in live animals in Central Asia, and hostility from communities because of its attacks on livestock. India handled the problem of the cat preying on goats, sheep, donkeys and other animals by roping in communities in conservation, and compensating them for any losses. An insurance programme in which residents of a part of Spiti Valley in Himachal Pradesh participated also worked well. New research indicates that even when wild prey is available, the attacks on livestock by snow leopards have cumulatively been on the rise. The response to this finding must be to insulate the owners from losses and encourage them to move away from traditional pastoral grazing. A more fundamental worry is over the likely loss of habitat owing to changing climate patterns. Fortunately, research models indicate that there are considerable stretches of steppes in High Asia that could withstand climate-related changes in the greater Himalayan region, creating refuge lands for snow leopards. Today, the factors that pose a threat to the species remain unchanged, and the IUCN down-listing, which changes the classification since 1986, should not be misread by policymakers. If conservation has protected the cat, it must be strengthened by enlarging protected areas in all the range countries, and keeping out incompatible activities such as mining and human interference.

# Diary of a very long year

A year after the surgical strikes across the Line of Control, India must recover its role as a regional stabiliser



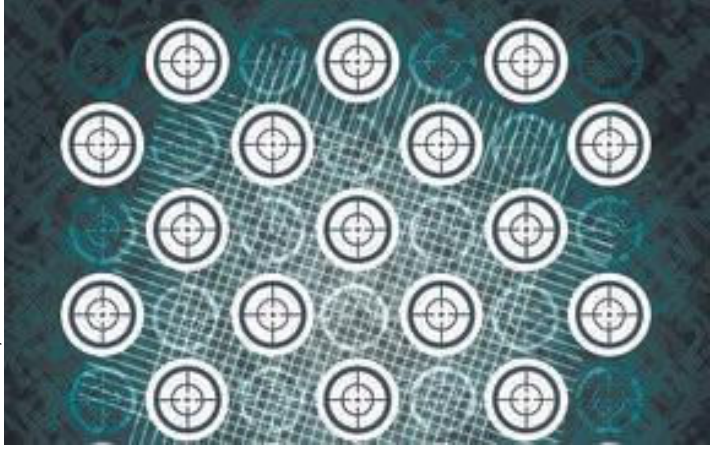
HAPPYMON JACOB

“The surgical strike was a point we wanted to drive home, that the Line of Control is not a line that cannot be breached. When we want to, we will be able to breach it, go across and strike when we need. This was the message we wanted to convey and we did,” Lt. Gen. Devraj Anbu, the Northern Army Commander, stated in a recent press conference at his headquarters in Udhamapur.

### The big picture

It has been one year since the special forces of the Indian Army carried out surgical strikes to destroy terror launchpads in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir on September 29, 2016. It is important to take stock at this point on how India-Pakistan bilateral relations and the regional security situation have evolved over the past year since the strikes. Showing no appetite for a bilateral rapprochement, the two acrimonious neighbours have limited their interactions to firing across the borders in Jammu and Kashmir and calling each other names in global forums. At the United Nations General Assembly a few days ago, for instance, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj termed Pakistan a “pre-eminent exporter of terror” – to which Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the UN, Maleeha Lodhi, responded: “India is the mother of terrorism” in South Asia.

The future direction of the foremost regional forum, the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), remains unclear after India dropped out of the 2016 Islamabad summit in the wake of the Uri terror attack. (The summit was eventually postponed.) The regional security situation remains embattled, thanks to



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confused American policies in South Asia, continuing turmoil in Afghanistan, heightening India-China rivalry, and the India-Pakistan hostility.

### Regional stability

From a regional stability point of view, the surgical strikes do not seem to have had much of an adverse impact. The fact that Pakistan neither acknowledged the attacks nor responded in kind shows that the general deterrence between the South Asian nuclear rivals remains intact. It is easy to talk about nuclear use and threaten nuclear retaliation, as Pakistan has been doing for long. It is, however, not easy to translate such talk into action. In that sense, the surgical strikes have called Pakistan's nuclear bluff. And that certainly is good news for regional stability.

But such higher-level stability seems to have come with heightened lower-level instability – and that is the bad news. There are two sets of challenges that are more apparent today, one year after the surgical strikes. One, the India-Pakistan escalation ladder has become far more precarious today it has ever been in the past one and a half decades, i.e. since the ceasefire was agreed to in 2003. The recurrent, and almost daily, occurrence of border battles between the two militaries in Jammu and Kashmir today have a

worrying potential for escalation to higher levels. The border stand-offs often lead to, as is evident from the data from the past 15 years, military, political and diplomatic escalation as well as contribute to escalating an ongoing crisis.

While this was common even prior to the surgical strikes, the September 2016 operation has made ceasefire violations more worrisome in at least two ways: first, Pakistan has been retaliating ever since the surgical strikes by increasing the pressure on the frontlines; and second, surgical strikes have reduced the critical distance between ceasefire violations and conventional escalation. While stealthy surgical strikes may not, strictly speaking, qualify as conventional escalation, they certainly reduce the psychological distance between sub-conventional violence and conventional escalation in the classical sense. That sure is bad news for regional stability.

The second challenge is more practical than theoretical. Conventional escalation as discussed in the academic/policy literature tends to put too much emphasis on pre-conceived and war-gamed escalation scenarios. However, surgical strikes could easily offset the logic behind such familiar and analytically elegant scenarios. The perils of preventive strikes, in other words, are unpredictable. Preventive strikes are pregnant

with immense potential to lead up to a ‘competition in risk-taking’, a tendency already prevalent on the frontlines of the India-Pakistan border in J&K. Put differently, preventive strikes in hyper-nationalist bilateral settings could defy our expectations and go out of control, with disastrous implications.

### Deteriorating environment

Have the surgical strikes helped the country's overall national security environment? The Central government argues that surgical strikes have been a spectacular success. Notwithstanding the more conceptual challenges I have explained above, let's try and break down this claim to see if indeed surgical strikes have improved our national security in plain practical terms. The first obvious question to ask is whether the strategy of punishment has worked *vis-à-vis* Pakistan.

There are two reasons why the strategy of punishment may not have worked. For one, a strategy of punishment requires consistency and commitment. The momentum achieved by the surgical strikes was not followed up (despite several attacks thereafter), nor was the government committed to its declared determination to respond firmly to terror strikes, thereby lacking in both consistency and commitment. Second, and more importantly, Pakistan's responses thereafter of supporting insurgency in Kashmir, aiding infiltration across the border, and allegedly supporting attacks on the Indian army convoys and bases continued without much reaction from New Delhi. This has led to a visible lack of credibility on New Delhi's part which makes one wonder whether, bereft of domestic political uses, there was any strategic planning behind the September operation.

By all accounts, India's national security environment is fraught today. Terror attacks in Kashmir continue to break the calm. Consider Gen. Anbu remarks: “Large number of terrorist camps and

launch pads exist across south and north of Pir Panjal, they have not decreased... Launch pads and terrorist camps have increased since last year.”

Let's also look at some figures from J&K. Credible media reports show that 110 militants, and 38 army personnel were killed between January and September 2016 (i.e. prior to the surgical strikes). However, since the surgical strikes, at least 178 militants and 69 Army personnel have been killed. Forty-four army personnel were killed between January and September this year, compared to 38 last year between January and September (including those killed in the Uri Army base attack). One might argue that the terrorist casualties have also gone up. While that is true, more militants killed can be a barometer of the level of militancy too.

Surgical strikes, then, may have been a tactical victory for New Delhi, but its strategic value is far from settled.

### The big picture

With two hostile neighbours on either side, terror attacks against India on the rise, and the South Asian neighbourhood unsure of India's leadership any more, New Delhi has a lot to be concerned about the continuation of its pivotal position in the region and the nature of its future engagement with it. The events since September last year have further contributed to South Asia's regional ‘insecurity complex’. For a country that has traditionally been the regional stabiliser, New Delhi seems to be quickly embracing the virtues of geopolitical revisionism. The costs of aggression, self-imposed regional exclusion and an absence of strategic altruism are bound to become starker sooner or later.

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# Waiting for a signal

The Railway Minister must put a safety upgrade above plans for punctuality and new trains



SARABJIT ARJAN SINGH

Every time there is a change of guard in the Railway Ministry, expectations are raised that the new minister will cut the Gordian knot by focussing on issues that will enable the Indian Railways to recoup from past excesses. This also holds true for the new Railway Minister, Piyush Goyal. It is not as if the problems cannot be addressed, but those who have to address them tend to focus on issues that may be important in themselves but are not necessarily the ones that will enhance the performance of the Railways. Is this out of ignorance? Or are these issues ‘insignificant’? Or are they a political hot potato? It is anybody's guess.

For decades the lack of consistent political direction has affected the Railways. The country lacks civilian expertise on railway matters and only a few politicians are interested in the railways. Railway officers are professional and have the expertise. However, results are de-

termined by the Ministry-Railway Board relationship and how much the Minister is willing to follow professional advice, especially when it does not gel with the political compulsions of pandering to constituencies. The results are a haphazard introduction of trains, subsidising passenger fares by overcharging freight, investment in unwanted new facilities, and modernisation and induction of new technologies without a plan. The fallout of all this is a balkanisation of the organisation on departmental lines, with each following its own narrow interests. Decision-making revolves around pursuing immediate goals that can show the department in a good light.

### Safety concerns

That this state of affairs has led to a breakdown of systems is exemplified in the case of the Puri-Haridwar Utkal Express derailment in Uttar Pradesh in August, where over 20 passengers lost their lives and scores were injured. Safety is not something that can be separated from the normal functioning of the Railways and is a window that reveals the underlying health of the system. The accident shows that the numbers of trains have now reached a level where field staff are unable to carry out main-



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tenance without cutting corners. In this case, track maintenance staff had decided to replace a defective glued joint even though the section control staff had refused to block trains from entering the section that was to be repaired. Repair work involved cutting out the defective joint and welding in a new one. Trying to carry this out without stopping trains was an invitation for disaster. If this was an isolated case, then the case could have been closed by punishing the guilty. But it appears that the practice of repairing tracks without blocking trains is quite widespread, which is cause for concern. The situation is the outcome of

pursuing three inconsistent goals at the organisational level. These are: moving more people by continuously adding trains even when sections are saturated; focussing on increasing speed and punctuality; and diverting freight earnings to subsidise passenger fares. These are incompatible with the declared objective of safety, especially when there is a shortage of capacity to run existing services. Unless the numbers of trains can be brought down to what the system can handle without cutting corners in track, signalling and rolling stock maintenance, there is really no way to make the system both safe and punctual. The problem is further exacerbated by a lack of money to replace old assets or purchase spares. The Utkal train accident is a distressing example of how incompatible organisational goals connect to unsafe behaviour at the field level.

### It can be done

The task before Mr. Goyal may be politically challenging but is doable technically. He has to make difficult political decisions such as cutting back on trains on saturated sections and putting punctuality on the back burner, at least until the system can recoup its capacities. He has to accept that time has

to be allotted for maintenance systems to stabilise even at the cost of delaying trains. His aim must be to restore the strong culture that underpinned every decision in the field – that no unsafe condition would be allowed to exist and be addressed even at the cost of delaying or slowing down trains. For this, the judgment of the supervisory staff must be respected. There is also a need to restore the well-established practice of field inspections at all levels to grasp what is happening in the field. The energies of field officers should not be sapped by meaningless drives and responding to social media as it diverts their attention from their main job of oversight and correction of divergences from standard procedures. He needs to ensure money for maintenance and replacement of aged assets. This should be done by freeing freight from subsidising passenger fares through a subvention from the general Budget. Which path will Mr. Goyal choose? Will he give the Railways the space to recoup or will he follow the beaten path of pushing goals that are incompatible with enhancing safety?

Sarabjit Arjan Singh is a former General Manager, Indian Railways and Member of the Central Administrative Tribunal

## 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.

### Lodhi's gaffe

One has only deep scorn for Pakistan's efforts to embarrass India at the United Nations General Assembly by trying to pass off a picture of a woman from Gaza as a pellet gun victim from Kashmir (“Pak. envoy commits gaffe”, September 25). The goof-up shows that Pakistan will not hesitate to stoop to any level to defame India. With its credibility in tatters, Islamabad would do well to refrain from indulging in needless slander and levelling accusations against New Delhi lest it becomes the laughing stock in the eyes of the international community.

N.J. RAVI CHANDER,  
Bengaluru

■ It is unfortunate that a global platform is being used to present baseless and fake statements instead of discussing what can be done to maintain peace in the world. Now that the Pakistan envoy has been

shown in a bad light, will the UN take action against her and in turn Pakistan for making false statements? In this content, India should also seek an apology from Islamabad.

P.S.V. PRASAD BABU,  
Bhadrachalam, Telangana

### In private hands

The report on the “readiness” of the Central government to sell off railway lines to the private sector is disturbing (“Private players may run railway lines”, September 25). Politicians are already playing havoc by dividing us. The one factor that has ensured our oneness, and still is, is the Indian Railways. Now comes the threat of its disintegration. Instead of improving the viability of this great institution by boldly raising the fare structure and ensuring accountability and efficiency, the Railway Ministry is trying wash its hands of this by resorting to privatisation.

The factor holding back the Railways is the inadequate upward revision of fares. In the face of such yawning disparity and inequality, how can the Indian Railways function profitably? One only sees this as an attempt to break the railway unions whose demand for wage revision appears unacceptable. Another nail in the Railways' coffin has been the merger of the Railway Budget with the general Budget.

M.R. ANAND,  
Chennai

■ The proposal is a subject that must be approached with great caution. Railway operations are not just a matter of selling tickets and earning money but also one that involves operational safety. When even well-trained staff with decades of experience make mistakes leading to accidents, it would be a risky exercise to allow private players to try their hand in this field. The proposal may work

extremely well if confined to areas such as sanitation and catering, and which do not directly involve operations and safety.

J. EDEN ALEXANDER,  
Thanjavur

### Past and present

In my opinion, three main factors have led to the present and abysmal state of Bangalore (“The idea that used to be Bangalore”, September 25). They are mindless, limitless materialism, rampant, suffocating commercialism, and political degradation and parochialism. A society evolves only when care and consideration is extended towards each other which makes life creative, cosmopolitan, harmonious and balanced. It was exactly this kind of an atmosphere that was prevalent in Bangalore earlier. But now the life and charm of the city has been reduced and its mounting problems further compounded by serious

infrastructural problems. Civic issues too need to be sorted out.

R. RAMANATHAN,  
Coimbatore

■ Shiv Visvanathan must be thanked for a fair presentation of Bangalore now and then. It is saddening to witness a slow degeneration of this magnificent city with its fabled cosmopolitan tolerance. Jarring incidents such as molestation of women, a racist attitude towards Indians from the North-east and the hounding of journalists and activists are on the rise.

BUDDHA DEB CHATTOPADHYAY,  
Mumbai

■ The writer's assertion, at one point, of the transgression of IT into every sphere of public life may be more evident in Bangalore, but is now common in many parts of India. The influx of IT-based firms into Bangalore is what has made it an expensive

city to live in. Finally, research in the basic sciences is a must for any country to progress and prosper. There has to be a balance as IT is no one-stop solution for a nation's growth and development.

DR. K.A.R. REDDY,  
Hyderabad

### A game-changer

There need not be any doubts about the all-around abilities of Hardik Pandya, the rising and bright star on the Indian cricket horizon, who deservedly won the man of the match award in the Indore ODI, and who also played a major role in enabling an unassailable 3-0 lead for India against Australia. If Pandya effectively utilises the opportunities that come his way, the day is not far off when he will become another Kapil Dev – a legendary all-rounder.

S. VAITHIANATHAN,  
Madurai

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