



## Data theft

The UIDAI exposé is another reminder of the need for a robust data protection law

Undercover investigations or so-called sting operations occupy a complex and problematical ethical space in journalism, but it is impossible to fault *The Tribune's* exposé, published after accessing Aadhaar's database of names, numbers and addresses. To begin with, the public interest – which lay in showing how easily the database could be breached and drawing attention to the existence of an organised racket to facilitate this – far outweighed, or more than compensated for, the act of unauthorised access, in this case secured on payment of a few hundred rupees. The investigation was written up in the best journalistic tradition – it focussed on how the data were being mined for money, it did not leak any Aadhaar numbers or other details to establish this, and it sought and received a response from shocked officials of the Unique Identification Authority of India before going to print. So it would have been a travesty of justice if *The Tribune* and the reporter who broke the story were treated as accused in the case where the charges include cheating under impersonation. It would have amounted to more than shooting the messenger. It would have constituted a direct attack on free public-spirited journalism and dissuaded attempts to hold public authorities and institutions accountable for shortcomings and promises.

As for the FIR filed against the journalist, the UIDAI has clarified it needed to provide the full details of the incident to the police and that this did not mean “everyone mentioned in the FIR is a culprit...” In response to widespread disapproval of the prospect of a case being registered against the journalist, the Delhi police have belatedly clarified that they would focus on tracing those who sold the passwords to enable access to the information. Given the noisy hubbub and the misinformation about what was breached, it is perhaps important to stress that the encrypted Aadhaar biometric database has not been compromised. The UIDAI is correct in stating that mere information such as phone numbers and addresses (much of which is already available to telemarketers and others from other databases) cannot be misused without biometric data. The suggestion that the entire Aadhaar project has been compromised is therefore richly embroidered. But even so, it is obligatory for those who collect such information – whether it is the government or a private player such as a mobile company – ought to see that it is secure and not used for purposes other than that for which it was collected. In this digital age, a growing pool of personal information that can be easily shared has become available to government and private entities. India does not have a legal definition of what constitutes personal information and lacks a robust and comprehensive data protection law. We need to have both quickly in place if the Supreme Court's judgment according privacy the status of a fundamental right is to have any meaning.

## Theatre of the absurd

Donald Trump's response to a new book strengthens concern about his temperament

The office of the President of the United States took on the air of a Shakespearean farce as *Fire and Fury*, a tell-all, insider account of dysfunction, bitterness and chaos within the White House, was shot-gunned across the Internet. Although the book was released on Friday, its author, Michael Wolff, and publishers, Henry Holt & Co., were perhaps taking no chances in disseminating it thus, given that Donald Trump had reacted furiously on Twitter to its impending release, and his lawyers reportedly sent them a cease-and-desist notice. Mr. Trump's anger was evident when he earlier said that former White House strategist Steve Bannon, who allegedly provided much of the inputs used in the book, had “lost his mind” and had been “dumped like a dog”. Mr. Trump had uncharitable words for Mr. Wolff as well. It is relevant to ask what the book is and what it is not. In the view of most White House analysts, it is a collection of statements that amount to gossip by members of Mr. Trump's inner coterie. It is not, according to many who cover the White House, a work of journalistic merit, or a rigorous factual account backed by catalogued evidence. Yet, even if one discounts many of the claims made in *Fire and Fury*, it paints an unmistakable picture of profound instability in Mr. Trump's office.

Consequently, the debate has circled back to the question of his mental health and his ability to discharge the duties of his office. If he is found wanting in this regard, his Cabinet and Congress may, under the provisions of the U.S. Constitution's 25th Amendment, remove him from office. Twenty-seven psychiatrists, including those from top universities, have described Mr. Trump's mental state as “dangerous”; some have called for an emergency evaluation of his mental capacity. Mr. Trump's weekend tweet that he was “a very stable genius” indicates that he is conscious of the growing clamour around the mental health question. Beyond this, however, what the embattled state – as described by the book – of White House functioning indicates is that Mr. Trump may not have expected to win the presidency at all. And that he only joined in the race for the mind-boggling publicity – and by extension commercial gain – that it could bring him and the Trump Organization. This theory would indeed explain certain broad trends witnessed since his inauguration, including a shortage of broad, programmatic or ideological approaches to policy issues and sudden policy shifts – particularly in the realm of foreign policy – which do not seem to factor in knock-on effects. Whatever the truth, this was the leader that the American electorate chose. The world must now live with the consequences of the decision.

# Dark clouds across Asia

From east to west, India must brace itself for more disorder across the continent in 2018



M.K. NARAYANAN

What awaits the Asia-Pacific in 2018? Prospects appear, if anything, bleaker than was the case in 2017. More disorder, coming with increasing signs of a breakdown in inter and intra-state relations, is perhaps on the horizon. The Asian region is nowhere near achieving the kind of equilibrium that the Concert of Europe brought to 19th century Europe.

### Between the two giants

The region is today an area of intense geostrategic and geo-economic competition. China is the rising economic and military power in Asia today – the second most important economic power after the U.S. and having the second or third most powerful military. In seeking dominance over Asia, however, it not only has to contend with a strong military and economic U.S. presence in the region, but it also cannot afford to ignore the competition from Japan and India. In mid-2017 in Doklam, India had demonstrated that it was more than capable of standing up to China's bullying tactics.

Much of the speculation about the extent of China's rise is based on the common presumption that the U.S. under President Donald Trump had surrendered its global leadership role. The reluctance of the U.S. to embark on “new wars”, especially in Asia, does not, however, undermine its geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic pre-eminence. It is not China's rise, but the breakdown of the institution of the state, as is evident in Afghanistan and Syria, that poses far more pressing problems for Asia.

Undoubtedly, East Asia will remain a troubled region for much of 2018, with the leadership of North Korea intent on playing increasingly dangerous games and



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engaging in nuclear sabre-rattling. It is unpredictable at this point whether this would lead to a major destabilisation of the region, with far-reaching consequences for Asia and the world.

The future of the rest of the Asia in 2018 is again dependent on how the strategic triangle of state relations between China, Pakistan and India plays out, as also the extent to which events in West Asia deteriorate. The situation has become more complicated as China and Pakistan have further strengthened their axis, which is inimically disposed towards India. Fragmentation of already difficult relationships does not hold out much hope for any improvement in 2018.

As it is, options for an improvement in relations in 2018 between China and India appear limited. The 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (October 2017) essentially highlighted China's quest for global leadership and the means to achieve it, including making China's military “world class”, one capable of “winning wars”. It contained few hints that signified a possible thaw in India-China relations.

### Shots across India's bow

In 2017, India-China relations had steadily deteriorated. China is clearly peeved that India refuses to participate in its Belt and Road Initiative that straddles Asia and Europe. The stand-off at Doklam in mid-2017 was possibly intended by China to be a “shot across India's bow”, to send a message to India. More such situations will, in all li-

elihood, be repeated in 2018.

China can also be expected in 2018 to resort to other pressure tactics against India. Backing Pakistani intransigence in “needling” India is certain to be one. Additionally, China can be expected to intensify its moves to displace India as the major partner in relations with many of India's neighbours – 2017 had already seen China moving in this direction *vis-à-vis* Nepal, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar. As it is, China has succeeded to some extent in denting India's longstanding relationship with Russia, having established a strategic congruence with that country.

India would again need to be on its guard in 2018 as China consolidates its takeover of Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) ports. Together with China's establishment of a base in Djibouti (on the Horn of Africa), India could find itself at the receiving end of China's “Wei-Qi tactics”.

As India grows closer to the U.S. in 2018, the India-China equation could further worsen. The most recent National Security Strategy of the U.S. refers to China as a “rival”, while welcoming India's emergence as a “strategic and defence partner”. This is certain to ratchet up the rivalry between India and China in the Asia-Pacific region, likely to be further compounded by India's association with the Quadrilateral (of U.S., India, Japan and Australia).

### Looking at Pakistan

Again, 2018 holds out little prospect of an improvement in India-

Pakistan relations. The last year ended with a serious ceasefire violation along the Line of Control in the Rajouri Sector, in which army men, including a Major, were killed. In 2017 there was an over 200% increase in ceasefire violations, with infiltration touching a four-year high.

This year began with a major terrorist attack by Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) elements on a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camp in Avantipur (Pulwama district) in which five CRPF men were killed. The treatment meted out to the family of Kulbhushan Jadhav (currently incarcerated in a Pakistani prison) and the fake news that followed their visit provides an index of Pakistan's cold, calculated and consistent hostility towards India. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) continues to remain in cold storage. Pakistan has also not refrained from persisting with its proxies like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the JeM in its war with India.

In its neighbourhood, India must be prepared during 2018 for a further deterioration of the situation in already disturbed Afghanistan. The Afghan state is in real danger of imploding, and this situation could worsen. The latest attack by Mr. Trump on Pakistan's duplicity in dealing with terrorism could well result in Pakistan adopting a still more perverse and disruptive role here, and providing further encouragement to the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network.

The current peace talks may well collapse as a result. Any possibility of exerting greater military pressure by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and allied forces may prove futile.

### West Asia in turmoil

The situation in West Asia in 2018 could well turn out to be far grimmer than in 2017. West Asia is at the crossroads today. The entire region is in turmoil. Syria has almost ceased to be a state. The war here entails major powers like the U.S. and Russia, proxies for certain West Asian countries, a medley of

non-state actors, apart from terrorist outfits such as the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda.

Intrinsic to the Syrian and West Asian imbroglio is the ongoing war within Islam featuring, at one level, intense rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, and at another, the spectre of a split down the line between the Arab and the non-Arab and the Sunni and Shiite worlds.

In addition, there are other forces aggravating an already complicated situation, viz. the war in Yemen, the disruption within the Gulf Cooperation Council, the nascent upheavals in Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the spectre of destabilisation that hovers over much of the region. None of these issues is likely to find resolution in 2018, and could suck in more states of the region.

If the U.S. were to follow through with its announcement to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital, it might well ignite new tensions across the entire Arab world. This will further inflame radical Islamist ideas and tendencies across the region, paving the way for a new round of conflict.

This year could also see a resurgence in terrorism. Both the IS and al-Qaeda seem to have acquired a new salience lately. The collapse of the so-called Islamic Caliphate and its territorial demise has hardly weakened the terror potential of the IS. In much the same manner as the Afghan jihad in 1980s and 1990s exacerbated insurgencies across parts of the world, retreating IS members returning to their homeland could provide a new narrative of terrorism in 2018. Existing cells across many parts of the world could well be re-vitalised as a result. The wave of attacks seen recently in Afghanistan can be attributed to this vanguard of retreating IS fighters.

Given such a scenario, it is difficult to be optimistic about a better 2018.

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

# The Liberian example

George Weah's victory as president consolidates the country's post-civil war democracy



GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM

Football hero George Manneh Weah's emphatic victory in Liberia's presidential run-off in late December is noteworthy for a far less sensational, but no less significant, reason. Here, the tiny West African state witnessed a smooth political transition, echoing a resilient democratic culture that is evolving in a continent where one-party dictatorship still remains entrenched.

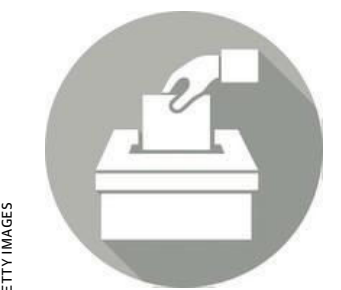
The election was violence-free by most accounts, belying fears of a descent into instability following the termination late last year of a UN peacekeeping mission. What helped was the relatively stable rule in the country, of more than a decade, under the outgoing President, the tenacious Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and also Africa's first elected woman head of state. The 2011 Nobel Laureate for Peace (which she shared with two other recipients) earned global acclaim for her stewardship of a nation ravaged by the 14-year civil war in which hundreds of thousands of

lives were lost and others displaced. Among several candidates in the running for the top job was the former guerrilla leader and mastermind of the 1990 coup that ousted the President, besides the ex-wife of Charles Taylor, the warlord sentenced to 50 years by a Hague tribunal. Accusations of a fraudulent poll and judicial intervention did force the deferment of the run-off but could not prevent the eventual concession of defeat by the outgoing Vice-President.

When the democratic process commenced in 2016 to elect her successor, the refrain of Ms. Sirleaf, the Harvard-educated former World Bank executive, was that neither the people nor her age would allow her to continue in power after the second term. Such a stance was in stark contrast to the constitutional crises orchestrated by the plutocracies in several African countries.

### Extending entrenchment

In 2015, for example, the entrenched rulers of Burundi, the Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, respectively, legally extended their tenures beyond the original constitutional stipulation. Burundi's Pierre Nkurunziza faces accusations of committing crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the



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brutal suppression of opposition to his manoeuvres.

In Brazzaville, President Denis Sassou Nguesso won a referendum that authorised him to a third term. In the case of Kigali, the former rebel leader, Paul Kagame, could rule till 2034.

This spell of wilful subversion of established procedures, broken in Burkina Faso under public pressure, has proved more of an exception.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Joseph Kabila, at the helm since 2001, has brazened out violent opposition against his refusal to hold the ballot due two years ago. Similarly, the prospects for Cameroon's scheduled polls this year depend on the whimsical Paul Biya, who scrapped the term limits a few years ahead of his 2011 re-election. Uganda's ruler since 1986 is also following in his footsteps. Yoweri Museveni is current-

ly backing a bill to scrap the upper age bar in time for the 2021 elections. Bettering them all is Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's autocratic ruler since the nation's independence in 1980, and only recently deposed. He is known to have opposed a 2013 constitutional amendment limiting terms.

Monrovia joins Banjul (Gambia) and Abuja (Nigeria), two other West African capitals, where new governments have recently defied the odds. When the 2015 polls that elected Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari were postponed for weeks, the move raised fears of army interference in the democratic exercise. But the landmark verdict turned out to be the first instance since the end of military rule in 1999 when an incumbent was voted out.

A defiant Yahya Jammeh, Gambia's dictator of two decades, after his defeat in December 2016, caused President Adama Barrow to assume office in neighbouring Senegal. The latter returned from exile only after the intervention of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Intervention in the 2010 elections in the Ivory Coast, the world's leading cocoa producer, is another instance of decisive action by the 15-member ECOWAS. The bloc endorsed President Alassane

Ouatara's victory, a result that was confirmed by the UN. That was an eminently more workable arrangement than the alternative proposal for power-sharing between the rivals after a bitterly-disputed poll.

The ECOWAS initiative underscores the paramountcy of security and political stability for sustained economic and trade cooperation among countries. The example thus raises awkward questions for the prospects of the East African Community (EAC) – the trade group that comprises among others, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda – with their egregious constitutional violations. Similarly, as a pre-eminent member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), South Africa could do more to foster compliance with the rule of law and the conduct of free, fair and transparent polls. The founding charter of the African Union (AU), the bloc that brings together the continent's 54 countries, commits members to effect a periodic change of leadership in accordance with constitutional procedures. Integration at the pan-African stage could prove critical to regional stability.

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## 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.

### Maintenance neglected

It is sad that INS Arihant, the indigenous and important platform within India's nuclear triad, seems to have suffered major damage on account of human error (Exclusive story – “INS Arihant left crippled after ‘accident’ 10 months ago”, January 8). It is hard to imagine the cost to the nation after this important asset, and which cost crores of rupees to manufacture, is now lying crippled. The manufacturing and the purchase of warships and submarines is just one step in a complex process. Proper maintenance by technically trained staff is, if not more, important as the first stage as such

equipment has to always be in a fit and ready condition for deployment at short notice. One can only call it sheer carelessness in being unable to look after such an important submarine. How can we forget that the neighbourhood around India is increasingly becoming threatening?

D. SETHURAMAN,  
Chennai

### Shooting the messenger

When global giants such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and PayPal have “bug bounty programs” – wherein they offer recognition and prize money for reporting security bugs – it is unfathomable how the UIDAI only thinks of filing

an FIR against a reporter for reporting security breaches (“UIDAI under fire for FIR against scribe”, January 8). A closed loop feedback system is imperative to ensure the efficient and effective working of such a system. Such an act would also dissuade cyber experts from exploring issues with the Aadhaar database. Incidentally, India is said to have the second largest number of bug hunters in the world. The UIDAI should take a cue from the Election Commission, which organised a hackathon so that its systems could be tested in a transparent manner.

SACHIN V.K.,  
Washim, Maharashtra

### Faraway islands

As a resident of the Port Blair, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, I am sure that very few are aware of the major problem residents on the islands face when compared to the rest of the mainland India when it comes to communication. Given their strategic location, the Islands are a vital base for our armed forces and a major tourist hub. However, the strange fact is that mobile and Internet facilities are way behind those offered in the rest of India. One has to spend just a day here to understand how bad the condition is. I am lucky to be living in the capital as the conditions in

the other areas in terms of connectivity through digital connectivity are deplorable and pathetic. There has been a proposal to deploy an underwater cable but it seems to be in a frozen state. Perhaps satellite connectivity using the Indian Space Research Organisation's technical advancements and know-how might work out to be better. Would it not be more cost-effective, quicker and more environment- and budget-friendly to launch a dedicated GSAT on board a satellite to handle all digital communication than laying a cable? The estimated lifetime would be far longer.

GOURAV MAHESHWARI,  
Port Blair

### The Ashes

One needs to compliment the Australian cricket team, ably led from the front by its captain Steve Smith, for its dream run in the Ashes. No one expected the England team to collapse like a pack of cards. The series has proved to be a boon for the Marsh brothers, Shaun and Mitchell, who contributed their mite when it mattered the most. Except for a flash at Melbourne, England's reliable opener, Alastair Cook, was a total failure. One hopes that at least it will be competitive during the ODI series.

N. VISWANATHAN,  
Coimbatore

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