



## Rallying together

A viable alternative must be founded on more than just a shared antipathy to the BJP

Not all political alliances increase the winning chances of the constituent parties. At the Patna rally on Sunday called by Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Lalu Prasad, 18 Opposition parties came together on a platform against the Bharatiya Janata Party, but not all of them can make meaningful alliances. The vote banks of many of them are in different States, and there is little chance of their being able to help improve the prospects of one another. The Trinamool Congress leader and West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, will gain nothing by joining hands with the RJD, which has negligible presence outside Bihar, or the Samajwadi Party, whose base does not extend much beyond Uttar Pradesh. Similarly, neither Mr. Prasad nor Akhilesh Yadav of the SP has much to gain from teaming up with the Trinamool. Only the Congress, with a nationwide presence, can hope to benefit from this coming together of different regional parties. The Congress is a small player in West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, but its national-level ambitions will get a big boost if the Trinamool, the SP and the RJD come together on the same platform. In the present circumstances, the Congress can emerge as an alternative to the BJP only at the head of a coalition of regional parties. But it will have to do a lot more than bring different parties from different regions together; it will need to stitch together viable alliances in each State. In West Bengal, for instance, the Congress cannot hope to tie up with both the Trinamool and the Left Front. The party might have to walk a fine political line to keep disparate elements together at the national level.

For Mr. Prasad, the rally was an opportunity to make a political statement after being dumped by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. It was also an occasion to share the stage with Janata Dal (United) dissident leader Sharad Yadav, who defied Mr. Kumar and chose to stay with the grand alliance. But the fact remains that without Mr. Kumar, the grand alliance is not the same in size or shape, and cannot be expected to take on the combined might of the BJP and the ruling faction of the JD(U). The situation is not very different in Uttar Pradesh where the Congress's alliance with the SP is not enough to best the BJP. Without Mayawati of the Bahujan Samaj Party on board, the alliance would not gain the critical mass to fight the BJP. Whether the Congress can indeed bring together at the national level parties opposed to one another at the State level is doubtful. But even if it manages that feat, the real challenge will be to present a viable national alternative to the BJP as the head of a cohesive coalition with well-defined policies and programmes. For that, a shared antipathy to the BJP is not enough.

## Two medals strong

P.V. Sindhu and Saina Nehwal continue Indian badminton's dream run

It was an epic final at badminton's biggest stage, and it stood out as the finest advertisement for the women's game. Two young title aspirants battled for 110 minutes before the gold at the World Badminton Championships in Glasgow was decided by the narrowest of margins. P.V. Sindhu may not have come out victorious against the eventual champion, Nozomi Okuhara of Japan, but she won more hearts for her gallant display of endurance. In doing so, she further raised the profile of badminton and of women's sport itself in India. A silver medal for Sindhu and a bronze for Saina Nehwal make this the most rewarding Indian campaign in the premier championship. It was a formidable challenge that they offered going into the Glasgow championships, and both had been seen to be in the reckoning for the gold. That challenge is made sharper by the fact that Nehwal, the silver medalist in 2015, and Sindhu, the bronze medalist in 2013 and 2014, have been engaged in a silent battle of their own. This rivalry is proving to be extremely beneficial for Indian badminton, providing the nucleus for a cluster of excellence that is vital for any sport to flourish. Sindhu's latest medal, to go with the Rio Olympics silver last year, has clearly taken her past Nehwal in terms of achievement in badminton's two premier competitions – the Olympics and the World Championships. Given Nehwal's famed never-say-die credo, she is sure to try to reclaim her status. She had carried an injury to Rio and returned for an unavoidable knee surgery, and makes it a point to remind everyone that her recovery is still incomplete, and that she would be back at her best in upcoming competitions.

There is, in fact, potential for further improvement in the women's game. This past week, both Sindhu and Nehwal were tamed by the far-fitter Okuhara. The Japanese shuttler rallied from a game down to stop Nehwal in the semi-final, and her resurgence from 17-19 in the deciding game ended Sindhu's quest for the title. This explains why Nehwal and Sindhu dwelled regretfully on missed opportunities instead of celebrating their unprecedented show of strength on the finals podium. Interestingly, the two women are very different personalities. If Nehwal is driven by a wounded pride to establish her credentials, Sindhu, at just 22, is a sunny character looking to make the most of the time on her side, and both owe a lot to their respective coaches, U. Vimal Kumar and Pullela Gopi Chand. Yet, their combined achievements also bring into focus the fact that the next best woman shuttler in India is nowhere close to them in potential. Their heroics will, hopefully, in time draw more talent to the sport, but currently the lack of other women badminton players in their class deprives India of a fighting chance at team titles. For now, however, it is time to celebrate these two exceptional women who have enriched the game.

# Lessons from Doklam

India must engage China a lot more. The BRICS meet is a good occasion to initiate a dedicated backchannel



HAPPYMON JACOB

The resolution of the Sino-Indian military stand-off at Doklam, that lasted close to two and a half months, is a much-awaited and welcome development where patient statecraft and deft diplomacy seem to have paid off. Even as several significant questions remain unanswered about the terms and conditions of the resolution, it provides New Delhi and Beijing an opportunity to reflect over what went wrong and rejig this important bilateral relationship. The upcoming visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to China to attend the BRICS summit will provide the two sides such an opportunity.

“War is the continuation of politics by other means,” observed the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz in his classic work, *On War*. In other words, military strategy should flow from carefully considered political thinking. Now that we have arrived at a peaceful resolution at Doklam, we need to examine the political strategy guiding India's military deployment at Doklam. Moreover, are there any lessons we can learn from this military stand-off with China?

### ‘Self-help’ world

The most self-evident lesson from the Doklam stand-off is that we inhabit a ‘self-help’ world wherein China is a world power – India is on its own and would have to fend for itself in case of a clash with China, a country with which every major state in the international system has a robust economic relationship. It is important to note that none of the major powers unambiguously and unreservedly supported India's position on Doklam. In fact, even Bhutan kept a studied



silence through the latter part of the stand-off. New Delhi, therefore, must carefully review the scenarios and consider its options before upping the ante. Moreover, regarding Doklam, instead of inviting military attention to itself and trapping itself in a conflict with Beijing, New Delhi could have convinced Thimphu to be more vocal about Bhutan's territorial rights.

The second lesson from the Doklam stand-off is that China is unlikely to respect India's ‘special relationships’ with its neighbours. India has long enjoyed a special status in the South Asian region and often treated it as its exclusive backyard. With China expanding its influence in the region and competing for status and influence, the ‘middle kingdom’ considers South Asia, with India in it, as its periphery. China uses economic incentives and military pressure to do so. Nepal is an example of the former, and Bhutan of the latter. Recall Bhutan, besides India, is the only country from the region that did not attend China's recent Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. India's traditional policy towards South Asia, of limited economic assistance topped with a big brother attitude, will need to undergo fundamental transformation to retain its influence.

Midway through the stand-off there had been concerns in New Delhi about how the Doklam stand-off would eventually pan out. It is pertinent to ask whether Doklam is so fundamental to Indian interests that we were willing to risk a possible military skirmish with China based on the sketchy clauses of the India-Bhutan friendship treaty. The lesson for us is clear: we should consider all odds and evaluate the merit of the cause before making military commitments.

Four, hyper-nationalism does not pay when it comes to dealing with China. China, simply put, is not Pakistan, and Indian political parties cannot make any domestic gains by whipping up nationalist passions against China. India needs to engage China diplomatically to resolve outstanding conflicts rather than engage in a war of words, or worse, threaten to use force. For sure, it is not 1962, and that's true for both parties.

Five, the Doklam stand-off is a direct fallout of the Indian and Bhutanese refusal to be part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While this round may have concluded without any of the three sides getting hurt, this is unlikely to be the last of Chinese designs against India or Bhutan. Surely India cannot, and should not, acqui-

esce to the BRI just because of Chinese pressure. And yet, at the end of the day, Indian abstention would only frustrate BRI, it will not derail it. Moreover, down the road, Indian unwillingness to be part of this mega-project will hurt its own long-term economic interests. Therefore, it needs to realise the importance of cooperating with China on the BRI while getting China to do so on various India-led regional projects. It cannot be a zero-sum game.

### Next steps

What is also becoming abundantly clear is that the snail-paced ‘Special Representatives’ talks on the India-China boundary question have not yielded much so far, and it is perhaps the appropriate occasion to revamp the dialogue process. The 19 rounds of talks held till last year have hardly anything substantive to show for them in terms of the resolution of the boundary dispute. Indeed, the focus is increasingly shifting from conflict resolution to conflict management. It is high time, therefore, that the two countries appointed dedicated high-ranking officials to discuss the boundary issues in a more sustained and result-oriented manner.

Let's briefly revisit the Doklam facts for the sake of clarity and future policy direction. The Indian Army was deployed on the soil of another country against a third country without proper treaty mandate or unambiguous official invitation to intervene on behalf of the Bhutanese government. The 2007 India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty states that the two countries “shall cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests.” And that: “Neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other.” Notwithstanding the special security relationship that India and Bhutan have shared over the past several

decades, nothing in the 2007 treaty binds India to send troops to help Bhutan. Nor did Bhutan explicitly request military assistance from India during the stand-off even though the MEA statement of June 30, 2017 refers to ‘coordination between the two countries’ during the stand-off.

The argument here is not that India does not have legitimate security and strategic interests in Bhutan which would be undermined by the Chinese territorial aggression, but that there is a need to engage in careful scenario-building before India decides to take China on militarily.

### The Xiamen opportunity

But finally, it all comes down to devising a strategy to engage a resurgent China, also a significant neighbour, in the days ahead. While Doklam may now be a thing of the past, Sino-Indian ties are never likely to be the same again - there will be skirmishes, war of words and attempts to outmanoeuvre each other in the neighbourhood and beyond. While New Delhi needs to constantly look over its shoulders for potential Chinese surprises, there is also an urgent need to adopt a multi-pronged strategy to deal with Beijing, for, after all, statecraft is not as black and white as some would like it to be. India, for one, needs to engage China a lot more at several levels: diplomatically, politically, militarily and economically. The upcoming BRICS summit in the Chinese city of Xiamen is a good occasion to initiate a dedicated backchannel with Beijing given the high potential for future disagreements. The two sides also need to conduct bilateral consultations on various issues - ranging from Afghan reconciliation to regional economic development. The more diplomacy the better.

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# Dera through the Punjab lens

There is a need to urgently address disquiet over multiple crises



AMANDEEP SANDHU

It was a decade ago that the shroud of banality ‘Saint Dr. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insaan’ spun fell on Punjab, in particular the Sikh community. I saw it first-hand in the summer of 2007 when my mother lay dying from stage IV cancer in Mandi Dabwali, south Punjab, 40 km from Sirsa where he is the head of a Dera. Soon after Baisakhi that year, Gurmeet Singh – whose rise remains shrouded in mystery and who was already charged with rape and accused in the murder of journalist Ramchandra Chhatrapati – had imitated the tenth Sikh Guru Gobind Singh's clothing and ritual Khande di Pahul while conducting the initiation for the followers of his cult, the Dera Sacha Sauda.

The Sikh faith disallows the use of the term Sacha Sauda and anyone dressing up as a guru, the term because it is associated with the first guru, Guru Nanak. When he was younger, Guru Nanak's father gave him some money for trade, which he used instead to feed the

poor and hungry. When his father asked if the deal was good, he answered it was a true deal – a *sacha saudra*. Though no one knows how Guru Gobind had dressed in the year 1699 at the inauguration of the Khalsa, the 20th century painter Sobha Singh had formalised the look of some of the gurus and the Sikh community had accepted the pictorial representation as an article of faith. When the self-styled godman parodied this, the Sikhs reacted. The Dera followers, called Premis (lovers), were at war against the Sikhs. The police stepped in. Curfew was imposed. Desperately and helplessly trapped, I could not leave my mother's side. Punjab remained frozen for weeks. The community took this matter to its own court, the Akal Takht.

### The rise of Gurmeet

In the last decade, the rise of the banality of Gurmeet Singh has known no bounds. He has taken on every available moniker – saint, doctor, Ram, Rahim, Insaan – and parrots messages of peace and harmony while leading a degenerate life. He has amassed Guinness world records for the largest vegetable mosaic, highest number of birthday greetings, eye scan and blood donation camps. His biography lists over 50 talents in the



arts and sports. His atrocious self-promotional movies succeeded at the box office and further established the strength of numbers of his followers. Owing to his reach in the political constituencies of south Punjab and Haryana, political parties of all hues – the Akalis, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress – have patronised him. Groups of Sikhs and Premis clashed, there were attempts on his life, but he seemed above the law – a power not only unto himself but a power broker in Haryana and Punjab.

In autumn 2015, the State froze over incidents of sacrilege of the Sikh Holy Book. Again Gurmeet Singh was involved, for two reasons: one was his Dera's alleged involvement in the stealing of a Granth Sahib from Burj Jawahar Singh Wala village, random posters

appearing in villages saying the Dera would target the Sikhs; the second was the Akal Takht, under the influence of then Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal-controlled Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, finally pardoning Gurmeet Singh for the incidents of 2007, even though he never presented himself to the Takht. When Sikhs protested, the Akal Takht revoked the pardon but the anger of community against their institutions falling prey to the shenanigans of politicians led to the Sarbat Khalsa (plenary meeting) which remained inconclusive. Even the probes into the 150-odd incidents of sacrilege remained inconclusive.

### Change in the air

Yet, something remarkable was unfolding. Whether it is river waters or lack of disclosure of the reasons to conduct Operation Blue Star or justice for victims of the anti-Sikh carnage of 1984 or probe into extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances during the militancy period of 1978-93, the Indian state has spectacularly failed in any attempt towards truth and reconciliation in a post-conflict Punjab society. But defying the dominant perception of the nation, even as the State was inflicted with desecrations, the people of Punjab – in-

cluding Hindus and Muslims – curled up in anger. There were some provocations, but they were minor. Social media rage turned to black flags, large gatherings took place, local gurdwaras supported the protesters, but Punjab displayed extraordinary restraint. It did not spiral into violence. Once could be an exception but Punjab repeated it last week. The Dera Premi incidents in Panchkula left 38 dead and damage to properties in Haryana but not in Punjab.

Punjab is sending out a signal: it is shunning violence. Do not mistake this shunning of violence as an absence of disquiet. I see my mother in Punjab – multiple malaises, desperately waiting for medication and healing, which remains unavailable. The disquiet looms large in its agrarian and industrial crises, the utter lack of social and economic healing despite the change of governments. Now that the courts have acted, locked away one Baba, the next step should be to strengthen the people's belief in systems of justice and address other long-standing grievances. It is only by establishing systems of individual and social justice that we can address post-conflict societies.

*Amandeep Sandhu is working on a book on Punjab*

## 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.

### Triumph of diplomacy

The disengagement of troops from Doklam shows how diplomacy triumphs over war (“Doklam standoff ends as India, China step back”, Aug. 29). A lot of pomposity and bragging was witnessed over the 73-day stand-off, especially from the Chinese side; yet our neighbour chose to be sagacious in the end. India and China require stability as they are global economic giants. While China is already high on economic and technological advancement, India is also not far behind. Peace was crucial before the BRICS summit; it is good that both countries have taken cognisance of that.

APARAJITA SINGH,  
Lucknow

This issue appears unresolved, with China issuing a vague statement

on whether it will continue road construction in Doklam. Diplomacy has led to only a temporary truce before the BRICS summit. As the Army has warned, more Doklams could happen. Prime Minister Narendra Modi should use the opportunity of his visit to China to convey in strong terms that border issues should be settled across the table and not after tensions mount. It would be in China's interest to have better relations with India, if its economic supremacy is to be maintained.

B. SUNDAR RAMAN,  
Coimbatore

This development will serve as a timely reminder to the world that diplomacy alone has the potential to resolve problems amicably. The fact is that war, from Iraq to Afghanistan, has yielded only chaos, while

diplomacy has proven its worth. However, the unnecessary quest to change the status quo has only resulted in some real losses for China. The war rhetoric from the Chinese side has only reduced its stature as a mature power. India has emerged as a more responsible power and has established that it can be a reliable and trusted friend.

SHASHANK JAIN,  
Delhi

### Dera chief convicted

The judge who sentenced Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh to 20 years in prison must be complimented for his courage. He must have withstood tremendous pressure from the followers of Dera Sacha Sauda as well as from sections of the political class that owe allegiance to Singh (“Court says Dera chief deserves no sympathy, gives 20 years

RI”, Aug. 29). Two pillars of our democracy, the judiciary and the media, have taken the lead in this case to counter threats from self-styled gurus and their followers. The journalist, Ramchandra Chhatrapati, who was the first to publish the anonymous complaint of one of the female followers of Singh and who was later killed, must be posthumously awarded. The victims must also be rewarded for coming forward to depose in the courts in such violent and life-threatening surroundings.

VARGHESE GEORGE,  
Secunderabad

The exemplary courage of the woman who deposed against Singh despite her brother being murdered on this account deserves praise (“Then and now, she's not

scared of him”, Aug. 29). Had it not been for her efforts, the truth of Singh's misdeeds would never have emerged. While another rape case involving another self-styled god-man, Asaram Bapu, awaits trial, one hopes that there is justice again. But as long as politicians aspire to grab votes by any means, even if that involves supporting such criminals, self-styled god-men will continue to endanger society.

D. SETHURAMAN,  
Chennai

The law has finally caught up with Singh. It is a surprise that he roamed around free for this long. It is undeniable that both the BJP and the Congress had tried to cosy up to him for electoral gains at every available opportunity. They must be embarrassed now. The media must refer to

Singh as Gurmeet Singh, not god-man or Ram or Rahim.

C.G. KURIKOSE,  
Kothamangalam

### The silence of Urjit Patel

Whatever qualities the writer claims Urjit Patel possesses, they have been dormant so far (“Diary of an unusual year”, Aug. 29). It seems as though Mr. Patel was appointed to toe the government line. Dodging the public on the quantum of money returned to the RBI after demonetisation shows this. He is lucky that the public seems largely disinterested in the outcome and accepting of the government's stories without a murmur. We may never know the truth about demonetisation.

M. BALAKRISHNAN,  
Bengaluru

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