



## Lines of defence

The inclusion of paper audit trails to the EVMs is costly but perhaps unavoidable

In the face of extreme and unreasonable complaints against Electronic Voting Machines by a number of political parties, the Election Commission perhaps had no choice but to have the working of the machines corroborated by a paper audit trail. To have such a facility ready for all constituencies by the 2019 Lok Sabha election is expensive (an estimated ₹3,174 crore) and also unnecessary (paper trails are at best required in a few constituencies to corroborate results). Its request to the Law Ministry to release funds for the procurement of voter-verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) machines for the 2019 Lok Sabha election should be interpreted in this context. As many as 16 lakh VVPAT machines will be required and only an urgent release of funds will allow the machines to be ready in time for 2019. It was possible for the EC to brush off the complaints from the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Aam Aadmi Party following their defeat in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab respectively, but it clearly became increasingly difficult for it to ignore the clutch of parties that joined the chorus, some demanding a return to paper ballots.

The EC has repeatedly assured voters that there are enough procedural and technical safeguards to prevent large-scale tampering or manipulation of EVMs. Since 2006, elections have witnessed the use of upgraded EVMs – Model 2 machines, with security features such as dynamic coding of key codes on ballot units and their transfer as messages to the control unit in an encrypted manner. EVMs feature encoded software that is burnt one-time on to programmable chips, enabling them to be used as stand-alone machines rather than computer-connected units, thus preventing any hacking by remote devices. Model 3 machines produced after 2013 have additional features such as tamper detection. The EC has laid down procedural rules of locking and storing EVMs before and after polling, besides functional checks and tests in the presence of representatives of political parties. The addition of the VVPAT machine to the process is to allow for cross-checking of EVM results through a paper audit, completing another layer of accountability to the indigenously produced machines (only the microchip is manufactured outside the country with the machine language embedded on it). Contrary to glib claims about tampering, studies show the introduction of EVMs has resulted in a drastic reduction in electoral fraud (rigging, stuffing of ballot boxes, etc.) and allowed for greater voter participation. Since reverting to the older paper ballot system will be regressive, the only option in the face of the protests is to have a back-up in the form of a paper trail – something that will hopefully put a quietus to the controversy.

## Equity in debt

The expert panel's recommendation to review the fiscal responsibility law is timely

The advice of the expert committee to review the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act of 2003 requires attention, given India's track record. This is all the more so given the born-again political conviction that promises of random largesse to voters is just fine. Excessive and unsustainable borrowing by the government is obviously perverse as it entails a cost on future generations while crowding out private investment. In the past, fiscal irresponsibility has cost jobs, spiked inflation, put the currency in a tailspin and even brought the country to the brink of a default. The possibility of default may have resulted in the liberalisation of the economy in 1991, but the key trigger was irrational public spending on borrowed money in the late-1980s. Less than a decade later, with fiscal discipline faltering and the deficit shooting up to 10% of GDP, the FRBM law was enacted to 'limit the government's borrowing authority' under Article 268 of the Constitution. But the target to limit the fiscal deficit to 3% of GDP (by 2009) was abandoned after the 2008 global financial crisis as a liberal stimulus reversed the gains in the fiscal space, creating fresh macro-level instability. The FRBM Act's deficit target is now only likely to be met next year.

Such damage transmissions from the political economy to the real economy need to be checked forthwith. The committee's proposal to maintain the 3% target till 2019-20 before aiming for further reduction is pragmatic, as the 'extraordinary and unanticipated domestic development' of demonetisation happened during its tenure. Such an event, the committee has said, could trigger an escape clause from fixed fiscal targets in its proposed rule-based framework. Instead of focusing purely on the fiscal and revenue deficit numbers, which should be brought down to 2.5% and 0.8% of GDP respectively by 2023, the panel has called for paring India's cumulative public debt as a proportion to GDP to 60% by 2023 – from around 68% at present. The latter, a simpler measure for solvency purposes, should inspire confidence among rating agencies. Though this has put paid to the government's hope that a fiscal deficit range could be targeted instead of absolute numbers, the Finance Minister has committed to the 3% target for the next two years, from the 3.2% target for 2017-18. A clear fiscal policy framework in tandem with the monetary policy framework already adopted could act as a powerful signal of commitment to macroeconomic stability. The Centre must swiftly take a call on the panel's recommendations – including for a new debt and fiscal responsibility law, and the creation of a Fiscal Council with independent experts that could sit in judgment on the need for deviations from targets. It is equally critical that States are brought on board, as the 60% debt target includes 20% on their account. Their finances are worsening again even as the clamour for Uttar Pradesh-style loan waivers grows.

# Lonely and disinterested

Excess focus on bilateralism is leaving India isolated in its larger neighbourhood



HAPPYMON JACOB



DEEPAK KHARICHANDAN

Picture this: China is steadily increasing its geostrategic presence in South, Central and West Asia; there is a China-Russia-Pakistan axis on the rise in Southern Asia; China and Russia are revelling in a new-found rapprochement and aim to fill the geopolitical vacuum bound to be created by the U.S. withdrawal from the region; and, a retired Pakistan army chief is all set to take over as the first Commander-in-Chief of the Saudi-backed Islamic Military Alliance (IMA). Now ask yourself: Which regional power has been missing from these significant developments on the regional geopolitical landscape?

New Delhi's foreign policy establishment and its national security team are either clueless about what is happening in its broader neighbourhood or seem to lack the wherewithal to anticipate, engage and shape geostrategic outcomes in the region and beyond. Or are they simply disinterested? Either way, New Delhi is increasingly looking like a grumpy old man constantly whining about age-old fears, stubbornly unwilling to explore new opportunities and face new challenges.

### China-Russia-Pakistan axis

Alliances are natural to international politics and friend-enemy binaries and historical hesitations are often cast aside when such alliances take shape. While China and Pakistan have been allies since the 1960s, China and the Soviet Union weren't the best of friends during the Cold War, nor did they have a great relationship in the post-Soviet days. Pakistan and the Soviet Union were Cold War rivals, and Russia did not, until recently, share a close relationship with Pakistan. All that is changing now, with them

ganging up to undo American dominance in the region, among other things.

The Afghan reconciliation process is a major focus of this new partnership. In a December 2016 meeting in Moscow, they highlighted the importance of seeking a "flexible approach" to dealing with the Afghan Taliban. This is over and above their ongoing individual engagements with the various parties to the Afghan conflict.

Clearly, this new axis of a resurgent Russia, ambitious China and opportunistic Pakistan, in combination with other related developments, will not only diminish U.S. power in the region but could also potentially constrain Indian influence. Sino-Russian relations, through joint military exercises and the Russian sale of advanced weaponry to China, for instance, could hurt India's strategic options globally.

Beijing has traditionally been a reluctant dealmaker, preferring to stick to business instead. Of late, it has overcome this pragmatic inhibition, first by joining the Afghan peace process and now increasingly focussing on West Asia. In a sense, its engagement in regional conflicts is a logical extension of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project. Having committed huge sums to the project, Beijing realises that some of its inherent political risks should be reduced by engaging in regional conflict resolution processes, a lesson well learnt from the playbook of great power diplomacy.

Both China and Russia have been

active in the West Asian theatre. Having vetoed U.S.-sponsored sanctions against Syria, they believe that it is necessary to nudge the warring Syrian factions to negotiate. Beijing has also been reaching out to and balancing the various adversaries in the region such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and even Iran, and increasingly talking the language of reconciliation. Also, recall while New Delhi buckled under pressure from Washington to take sides on Iran, Beijing refused to do so.

Compared to the thornier West Asia, engaging South Asia is easier for China given that the smaller countries in the region see it as an infrastructure provider, with deep pockets and without the usual moral science lessons. Bangladesh, one of India's close allies in the region, is likely to attend the OBOR summit in May and may even sign up for it. Chinese interest in Afghan reconciliation stems not only from a security/terrorism angle but also more significantly to ensure the sustainability of OBOR given its importance in providing access to Central Asia.

### Russian U-turns

Make no mistake, Russia is looking beyond a reluctant India in South Asia: President Vladimir Putin has no time for diplomatic subtleties and tales about the long history of Indo-Russian relations. Ignoring Indian sensitivities, Moscow has gone ahead with forging strategic ties with Islamabad: from lifting the arms embargo, selling weaponry, discussing the future of Afgh-

anistan, to joint military exercises.

When Russia formally joins OBOR, it will have indirectly taken a position on Kashmir which is not necessarily in keeping with the Indian stand on the issue. If the Russian envoy's remarks at the Heart of Asia conference in December are anything to go by, Moscow is also taking a pragmatic stand on terrorism in South Asia.

### The Pakistan pivot

The 'global outcast', Pakistan is today an inevitable lynchpin of Southern Asian geopolitics. In a world of realpolitik, norm regress and opportunistic bandwagoning, Pakistan is the new regional favourite. Whether we like it or not, now that Pakistan's generals have waited out the Americans and NATO from Afghanistan, the outcomer of the Afghan conflict will largely be determined by Rawalpindi. This fits well with the Chinese and Russian regional grand strategies. Gone are the days when Islamabad was currying favour with Washington; today, Moscow and Beijing are actively courting it. Normative considerations apart, it is this sense of the big picture that prevents Beijing from acting against Pakistan-based terror groups; irritating India is a side benefit.

For sure, Pakistan has consistently used terrorism as a tool of statecraft, and yet there is a recognition today that it is a pivotal state in addressing terror. Moreover, while the IMA is still in its infancy, we need to look closely at its potential. Will it emerge, even though it is at a moment an overwhelmingly Sunni sectarian force, as a potent regional military alliance in the years to come? What role would Pakistan play in this 'Islamic NATO'? What implications would it have for India?

### Head-in-the-sand approach

Amidst such geopolitical reshaping of the region, New Delhi has done precious little to counter them or to propose a collective regional future. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC),

which should have been the central plank of India's 'neighbourhood first' policy, is in doldrums today. Having jettisoned SAARC and unwilling to promote other regional initiatives, institutional or issue-based, India continues to prefer unilateralism towards neighbours. The shortcomings of bilateralism in a world hungry for institutions and structures should be evident to us.

The External Affairs Ministry's reactive diplomacy – its unflinching institutional hallmark – is unable to see the wood for the trees in its relations with Beijing. How does, for instance, designating Masood Azhar a terrorist become India's core interest *vis-à-vis* China? Should we allow a terror-monger to determine our relationship with one of our biggest trading partners?

While it is true that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will pass through Pakistan-controlled territory that India has claimed, we should find a via media with China on the issue rather than publicly dismiss the initiative. Given that OBOR is a futuristic mega-project, its benefits as well as cross-national and inter-continental linkages, all of which would eventually bypass India, will only become clearer in the years to come. To base our analysis on current cost-benefit calculations in terms of immediate returns and short-term sustainability is missing the big picture. Moreover, our ability to create regional infrastructural arrangements, excluding China and Pakistan, remains limited. In short then, a few decades down the line, India could end up far more isolated: the logical conclusion of an inward-looking political class.

It's time New Delhi focussed on the big picture and avoided puritanical positions while addressing the emerging fault lines on the global geopolitical landscape.

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# After the referendum

Turkey feels more and more socially divided, and Recep Erdoğan may not govern to unify



VIJAY PRASHAD

Turkey is a fundamentally divided society. The vote this weekend over a referendum to give the President additional powers and a longer term, showed the extent of Turkey's divisions. The "Yes" vote, a victory for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was won with 25 million votes, while the "No" campaign fetched almost 24 million votes. But given the nature of electoral democracy, a fractured verdict will nonetheless mean an expansion of the powers of Mr. Erdoğan and of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The referendum amends the 1982 Constitution with some significant provisions, such as making the President both the head of state and the head of government, weakening Parliament, the judiciary and the military. Mr. Erdoğan could remain in power – virtually unchallenged – till 2029. Society's divisions will not be reflected in the political sphere.

The AKP, and its far-right ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), had hoped to commandeer close to

two-thirds of the vote in order to make these changes legitimate. They were not able to get near this margin. Turkey's three largest cities – Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir – voted decisively against the changes. It was rural and small-town Turkey that delivered the votes for the "Yes" campaign. These areas, located in remote parts of Anatolia, have long been neglected by the Istanbul elite and have for the past two decades seen the AKP as their champion. Personal piety is not their only link to the agenda of the AKP, which has pushed against the barriers of Turkey's official secularism. A great deal of pent-up resentment against urban affluence is wrapped up in the support for Mr. Erdoğan, who speaks in the idiom of the small town.

### Unleashing repression

But this support base was insufficient during two parliamentary elections in 2015, when Mr. Erdoğan hoped to push these changes through a friendly Parliament. Since the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – a Kurdish and Left alliance – won over 10% of the vote, it was able to stymie Mr. Erdoğan's plans. What followed after that defeat set the terms for significant political repression. Mr. Erdoğan's government declared that the HDP was linked to terrorism, opened up



a war against the largely Kurdish southeast of Turkey with the displacement of over 200,000 people and imposed endless curfews on major towns. Visitors to the Turkish city of Diyarbakir might be tempted to make comparisons with the flattened cities of Syria's Aleppo and Iraq's Fallujah. HDP politicians have been imprisoned, with both their leaders, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, facing hundreds of years in prison.

A failed coup on July 15, 2016 deepened the repression by the state. It was blamed on the U.S.-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen. Almost 100,000 people have been arrested since that coup, and over 100,000 state employees fired from their posts. The purges (*tasfiye*) have not only denuded Turkish society of trained and capable people but have also chilled the atmosphere in the country. Gloom is the mood amongst large parts of the

urban population, which has not experienced this kind of open harassment since the coups d'état of 1971 and 1980. It was as if this failed coup had an aftermath as anti-democratic as the successful coups of Turkey's past.

### Curbing democratic processes

It was apparent during the campaign over this referendum that Mr. Erdoğan would prevail. Society is not united behind him, but the state apparatus came into great use. Opposition leaders were arrested – 122 HDP leaders by their count. Campaigners for the "No" vote were accused of being part of the Gülen plot. In the largely Kurdish province of Sırnak, the provincial governor banned the HDP's song "Say No" on the pretext that it would incite "public hate". The popular cartoonist, Musa Kart, spent a hundred days in jail, while Turkey's most respected constitutional law expert, Ibrahim Kaboğlu, lost his job. With 150 media outlets shut down and almost 200 journalists arrested, press scrutiny of these manoeuvres was minimal. Democracy was already curtailed before the referendum. Critics of Mr. Erdoğan warn that Turkey is under "tek adam" rule – one-man rule.

Turkey's High Electoral Board chief Sadi Güven announced that the referendum had passed despite

the numerous complaints of fraud. The Opposition moved the board to reconsider the 1.5 million ballots that raised eyebrows. The margin of victory was only 1.1 million. Intimidation of voters was general. Even supporters of Mr. Erdoğan who had decided to vote "No" – such as editor, Yeni Şafak, and columnist Ali Bayramoğlu – were beaten on polling day. The government dominated the media and prevented the Opposition from making its case against the referendum.

#HayirDahaBitmedi is the new hashtag on social media. "It is not over yet". There is great expectation from half of those who voted that the President must not be allowed to rule as if he has a mandate. No wonder that Mr. Erdoğan's victory speech was uncharacteristically subdued. His Prime Minister, Binali Yıldırım, said of the result: "We are one body. We are one nation." But it did not feel like that. Turkey feels more and more socially divided. Mr. Erdoğan will not govern to unify. That is not his style. His policies – like that of other Strong Men in the Age of Anger – will more ferociously tear at the social fabric of this fine country.

Vijay Prashad's most recent book is "The Death of the Nation and the Future of the Arab Revolution". He is a columnist for the Turkish daily, *BirGün*

## 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.

### Bribe bid

AIADMK (Amma) deputy general secretary and defacto leader, T.T.V. Dhinakaran, is in the news again for all the wrong reasons ("T.T.V. Dhinakaran charged with bid to bribe poll panel", April 18). The Tamil Nadu politician's alleged link to conman Suresh Chandrashekar, and his alleged attempts to bribe Election Commission officials over reclaiming the party symbol are not only shocking but have also shown the party in a poor light. The allegations are no doubt serious and once again underline the need to rein in politicians who resort to devious means to outwit their opponents.

N.J. RAVI CHANDER,  
Bengaluru

### Jayalalithaa case

While B.V. Acharya may be right if a narrow technical

view is taken of the provisions of law, it has to be borne in mind that the ends of justice are higher than the ends of mere law ("Why the Jayalalithaa case matters", April 18). There is no point in imposing or recovering a fine from a person who died before the judgment was pronounced.

NARESH GUPTA,  
Chennai

### On triple talaq

The BJP is raking up contentious issues such as triple talaq to keep the communal cauldron boiling. While we are appreciative of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's resolve "to save Muslim sisters from injustice", we want him to match it with his resolve to save Muslim brothers from attacks by right-wing Hinduism zealots. Practising a religion of one's choice is a fundamental right. The

practice of triple talaq is a part of Shariat. Both these facts combine to rule out the state's interference in the personal law of Muslims. Islam cannot be singled out as a religion biased against women. Gender discrimination and gender inequality are embedded in all religions. The BJP did not consider even one Muslim woman fit to be fielded as a candidate in the Uttar Pradesh election. Needless to say, its concern for Muslim women in distress smacks of hypocrisy. Reform has to happen organically from within a religious community ("Muslim sisters should get justice: PM", April 18).

G. DAVID MILTON,  
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

### Unrest in Kashmir

The PDP-BJP government which was formed with great fanfare seems to have

failed miserably in Jammu and Kashmir. The BJP government at the Centre appears to be so focussed in its aim of achieving a Congress-free India that it has left Kashmir to burn. Though it may sound odd, perhaps the Prime Minister should try to form an all-party government in Kashmir. It would at least stop various parties from indulging in a blame game and help in confidence-building measures with the people of the Kashmir Valley. Such an exercise will also send out a signal to Pakistan that India is united as far as Kashmir is concerned.

N. NAGARAJAN,  
Secunderabad

■ Tying a man to the bonnet of a vehicle and driving him around the city is an inhuman act. What is worse is that he was used as a

human shield. Is not the Indian Army destroying human values? Is it not tarnishing the image of the Army as an institution and also giving anti-national elements intent on creating more trouble in Kashmir a stick with which to beat India? There must be a quick investigation and swift punishment awarded.

AMANATULLAH,  
Sitamarhi, Bihar

■ Before talking about the Geneva Convention we need to look at both sides of the picture. If the Indian Army has been accused of and criticised for using Mr. Dar as a "human shield" what are the stone pelters doing there everyday? Aren't they violating the Geneva Convention by using women and children as human shields?

DEVANSHI MOHAN DWIVEDI,  
Allahabad

### Man versus animal

The rise in man-animal conflicts can be linked to extreme conditions that cause drought and in turn a loss of vegetation, deforestation and also crop loss. Humans are also increasingly encroaching into forest areas ("Understanding crowd dynamics", April 18). The government should undertake steps such as fencing off forest areas and increasing manpower in our forest departments. Communities near forests should also approach forest officials when there are signs of man-animal conflict. Joint efforts in reducing conflict must include village communities, the forest department, the police and wildlife experts.

VAJJI HEMA SUNDAR,  
Bobbili, Andhra Pradesh

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