



What suits Trump

The U.S. President violated diplomatic protocols in talking of mediation on Kashmir

Facing a furore in Parliament over the issue, the government has clarified in no uncertain terms that Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not request U.S. President Donald Trump to "mediate or arbitrate" on the Kashmir issue, as Mr. Trump claimed on Monday. Addressing Parliament, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said India remains committed to its policy of discussing all outstanding issues with Pakistan only bilaterally, and assured the House that Mr. Modi did not raise this with Mr. Trump at their recent meeting in Osaka during the G-20 summit. In making the claim that has been roundly denied by New Delhi, Mr. Trump breached several well-laid diplomatic protocols, including one against discussing privileged conversations with a leader, during a public conversation with another. Mr. Trump also said a "lot" of his talks with the Pakistan Prime Minister would focus on India and Afghanistan, an odd departure from the precedent of putting bilateral issues to the fore, and being more discreet when discussing sensitive relations involving other countries. For New Delhi, it may be time to recognise that Mr. Trump's comments are a sign of new realities in international diplomacy, where leaders care less about niceties and more about open communication. Mr. Modi will have to prepare accordingly for some plain-speaking when he visits the U.S. and meets with Mr. Trump, as he is expected to, in September this year.

In the short term, the government's decision to address the claim by Mr. Trump will have nipped any repercussions in the bud. The government should pursue the issue through diplomatic channels with the U.S. government, and determine whether Mr. Trump made the comments out of confusion or deliberately. India has always opposed any suggestion of third-party mediation on Jammu and Kashmir; both the 1972 Shimla Agreement and the 1999 Lahore declaration included India's and Pakistan's commitment to resolving issues between them. It is unlikely that Mr. Modi would have spoken out of line with this policy, and the most charitable explanation for Mr. Trump's new contention is that he mistook India's appeal to the international community to hold Pakistan accountable for terror groups on its soil that carry out attacks in Kashmir, for a general desire for mediation. Mr. Trump's comment in March that the U.S. successfully mediated for the release of captured fighter pilot Abhinandan by Pakistan may have even given him some hope that the U.S. could play a larger role on the Kashmir issue, and New Delhi would need to address that. A more worrying proposition is that Mr. Trump took the line favoured by his Pakistani interlocutors on Kashmir as a way of enhancing his own plans for a pullout from Afghanistan with Pakistan's help on security and talks with the Taliban. While the damage from Mr. Trump's words may not have a very lasting impact on India-U.S. ties, that from any rushed measures to force a resolution in Afghanistan will have far-reaching and lasting impact, including on India.

Caribbean cruise

India goes to the West Indies sensing more cricketing opportunities than threats

In the past, a tour of the West Indies was deemed the toughest endeavour for any cricketer. Reputations were either enhanced or lost and fractures seemed imminent in the battles against the fiery fast bowlers, while the crowds requested the perfume-ball, a euphemism for a nasty bouncer. But times change, and the inherent quality of the Caribbean squads has declined so much that a sporting visit to the isles with their sunny beaches is seen as an exercise towards etching triumphs, fattening batting averages and multiplying bowling yields. With this as the backdrop, India will fly half-way across the earth for a set of three Twenty20s – interestingly, two of them are being hosted in the United States of America – three ODIs and two Tests against the West Indies from August 3 to September 3. India will be the favourites across the three formats, though in limited overs games, where the abridged nature of the sport tends to iron out the flaws, the host might fancy its chances. The tour, coming as it does close on the heels of the World Cup in England, presents an opportunity for India to look ahead, make a few changes in personnel and prepare for the future. Transition always coincides with the quadrennial World Cup and India too is part of that global trend.

M.S. Dhoni has straddled three generations, the one that had Sachin Tendulkar, the second with the likes of Yuvraj Singh and the latest under Virat Kohli as captain. The former India captain has held firm in a storied career of triumphs, losses, frenzied runs, sharp catches and quicksilver stumpings, but at 38 he is near his cricketing twilight. Though he avoided retiring from the blue shade by preferring to serve the Army in his role as an honorary lieutenant colonel, Dhoni presented an opportunity to M.S.K. Prasad and his fellow selectors to fast-track Rishabh Pant as the first-choice wicket-keeper batsman across all formats. Dhoni, who retired from Tests in 2014, might still make appearances in the shorter versions, and there is speculation about next year's Twenty20 World Cup in Australia being his preferred last spot. But it all depends on what the selectors and Kohli prefer as they look at building the team afresh for the 2023 World Cup in India. The imminent West Indies tour will help the team management get a fair idea about the potential in the likes of Shreyas Iyer, Mayank Agarwal, Manish Pandey, Rahul Chahar, Krunal Pandya, Washington Sundar, Khaleel Ahmed, Deepak Chahar and Navdeep Saini, besides the other regulars. The opposition may be depleted, but for these players, hope floats and a crucial August awaits.

A bridge across the India-Pakistan abyss

It would be a travesty to waste the opportunities made possible by the Kartarpur corridor plan



SUHASINI HAIDER

Ties between India and Pakistan are at an ebb – their lowest in two decades. The thread from this phase, as a series of events – the Kargil war (1999), the Agra Summit (2001), the attack on Parliament (2001) and Operation Parakram (2001-02) – meant a sustained period of deep hostilities, with diplomatic missions downgraded and travel routes truncated. Since 2015 and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Lahore visit in the same year, the leaders of both countries have not met for talks. In mid-2018, the backchannel diplomacy between the National Security Advisers of both countries was called off by Pakistan, while in September 2018, India called off a planned meeting between the Foreign Ministers in New York. In the wake of the Pulwama terror attack in Jammu and Kashmir in February this year, India attacked terror targets in Pakistan which in turn sent fighter jets to the border. Subsequently, after India moved missiles and deployed submarines, Pakistan raised a full air alert and imposed an airspace ban that lasted till mid-July.

Unbroken thread

What has been disconnected from all those tensions are the talks on the Kartarpur corridor. The offer from Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan to open the corridor was conveyed first by Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, and accepted by Mr. Modi, marking a rare moment of coordination between the two nations.

That the talks have continued through one of the most difficult years in the relationship is equally remarkable; there have been three rounds of technical-level meetings to ensure both sides complete the infrastructure needed before November 2019, the 550th anniversary of Sikhism's founder Guru Nanak.

The symbolism for pilgrims who will be able to travel from Dera Baba Nanak town in Punjab to the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib Kartarpur just a few kilometres inside Pakistan, which are sites where Guru Nanak spent his last few years, goes well beyond the date and year. This is a route that the Guru and his followers traversed with ease for half a millennium until Partition resulted in the India-Pakistan border cutting through it. While Sikh pilgrims have been given easy access since then to Guru Nanak's birthplace at Nankana Sahib, the circuitous 200 km route to Kartarpur via Amritsar-Wagah has been off limits. The Kartarpur shrine has one of the last copies of the original Guru Granth Sahib; there are some who believe that it contains not only the wisdom of the 10 Gurus but is itself the 11th and last Guru. Giving life to the wishes of so many will also ensure political dividends in India, an aspect no government in the State or at the Centre can ignore.

Some irritants

Despite the rich significance of the corridor, there were many reasons for the earlier hesitation to revive the project. The Kartarpur corridor project is an issue that has been raised by India for several decades, with New Delhi's reasons for wanting the corridor clear. However, in the case of Pakistan, these have not been as transparent, with the military establishment's surprise backing only raised doubts on whether Islama-



NABINDER MANIJA/AP

bad has an ulterior motive. In a dossier handed over during the last round of talks on Kartarpur on July 14, India spelt out its apprehensions over Pakistan allowing separatist Khalistani groups, including those funded by groups based in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, to try and influence pilgrims. Of specific concern is the 'Referendum 2020' plan by the Sikhs for Justice group (banned by India).

This group has already held a series of public events in the U.S. and the U.K. demanding a 'worldwide referendum' on a separate Sikh state. The other irritant is the possible use of the corridor for drugs and arms movement; there are many routes and tunnels at the border between the two Punjab. The terror threat by Pakistani Punjab-based anti-India groups such as the Lashkar-e-Toiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammad is also a constant concern.

Agreeing to the Kartarpur corridor means the government has made an exception from a matter concerning national policy for a matter of faith. In the last few years, every avenue has been shut down from those for official, bilateral and regional (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) talks to even those for travel and tourism. Trade too has ground to a halt with cross-Line of Control (LoC) trade route suspension the latest casualty.

With such strictures in place, New Delhi's decision to embark on a course that will need regular and repeated India-Pakistan meetings is nothing short of a breach of its otherwise firm "no talks without terror ending" policy. For example, at a time when Indian and Pakistani Ministers do not even hold talks when they meet at multilateral conferences, New Delhi sent two senior Ministers to Pakistan to participate in the ground-breaking ceremony for the event. It remains to be seen who the government will send to the inauguration, and whether Mr. Modi, who has likened building the Kartarpur corridor to the fall of the Berlin wall, will grace the occasion.

A range of possibilities

With the Kartarpur exception to India's policy on Pakistan now established, it is necessary to see whether it can be built on to create a mechanism for broader conversations between India and Pakistan. The obvious extension from this would be for having other faith-based "corridors" for Hindu, Muslim and Sikh pilgrims in both countries; this would be in addition to the list of 20 shrines (15 in Pakistan, five in India) that were negotiated under the 1974 Protocol on visits to Religious Shrines.

The template that Kartarpur has given both sides is also worth considering for the format of other bilateral negotiations given that the talks have been immunised from both terror attacks and election rhetoric. The venue of the talks, at the Attari-Wagah zero point, lends itself to more successful outcomes too away from the glare of the media, without focus on arrangements for both parties. The two sides can cross over, meet for the duration of talks and return after issuing a pre-arranged joint statement.

The timing of the Kartarpur

opening may also lend itself to exploring other bilateral engagements.

Ahead of the next plenary of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in October, Pakistan will remain under pressure to keep terror groups subdued. According to various reports, infiltration figures at the LoC are significantly lower (a 43% reduction since the Balakot strikes in February); officials have marked about 20 terror camps in PoK they believe have been "shut down" recently. Civilian and military casualties from ceasefire violations have also reduced. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's government, which has been buoyed by Mr. Khan's U.S. visit and by Pakistan's new-found acceptance in the international community for its role in Taliban talks, and Mr. Modi's government, which has been bolstered by its strong electoral mandate, will also be in the strongest positions politically to forge agreements.

Thus, it would be a travesty to waste the opportunity made possible by the Kartarpur corridor, and by extension, the founder of the Sikh faith himself (revered by Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan) to bring both countries back to the table for talks. The most famous story at Kartarpur is the one of the 'miracle' that Guru Nanak wrought after his death as his Hindu and Muslim followers debated late into the night whether their Guru should be cremated or buried. When they awoke, his body had vanished, replaced by flowers which they divided up. The Guru Nanak's 'samadhi' and grave were built side by side. As pilgrims across the border pay a visit in November, it should be clear what the bigger miracle is: that the Kartarpur exception has been made at all.

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Faltering steps in the anti-AIDS march

The commitment to end the AIDS pandemic by 2030 needs strong and fearless leadership



J.V.R. PRASADA RAO

The Joint UN programme on AIDS, commonly known as UNAIDS, is facing one of the worst challenges afflicting the global AIDS response – this time an existential threat questioning its very relevance. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, is expected to appoint a new executive director after the departure of Michel Sidibé in May 2019 on the recommendation of the programme coordinating board which manages the organisation. There are strong contenders from Africa and the U.S. in the reckoning among those who have been shortlisted.

A pivotal role

At such a crucial time, it is disturbing to hear voices again questioning the relevance of UNAIDS for the global response.

There are suggestions that AIDS should go back to the World Health Organisation (WHO) where it originally belonged to some 25 years ago. And that the new executive director should be equipped

with an exit strategy to wind up the organisation.

Since its establishment in 1994, UNAIDS has been able to successfully mobilise world opinion to mount an exceptional response to an epidemic which has consumed over 20 million lives with still no effective treatment or cure. The UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) 2001 was a game changer with the adoption of a political resolution that itself was exceptional in many ways. The creation of a Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) and the slashing of prices of AIDS drugs by Indian generics have brought treatment within the reach of many countries. Today some 22 million people are under antiretroviral therapy (ART) and preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV has become an achievable goal by 2020. The organisation has provided leadership to many countries which in 10 years (2001-2010) could halt the epidemic and reverse the trend.

The epidemic is still alive

However, at a time when it should be leading the global response to end AIDS as a public health threat, the organisation has started to falter in its strategy. First came the extremely optimistic messaging blitz that the world was going to



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see the end of AIDS very soon. This is far from true. Regions such as eastern Europe and Central Asia and West Asia are nowhere near reaching that goal, with many countries such as Russia witnessing a raging epidemic among drug users and men who have sex with men (MSM) communities. With the top leadership in UNAIDS exhorting countries to bring AIDS "out of isolation" and integrate with health systems, the political leadership in many countries have thought that AIDS is no more a challenge.

Second has been the thinking that the AIDS epidemic can simply be treated away by saturating anti-retroviral (ARV) coverage. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is forgotten that AIDS affects the poor, the marginalised and criminalised communities disproportionately as they face challenges in accessing the 'test and treat' programmes. The ever increasing number of young people who are

joining the ranks of vulnerable populations do not get prevention messages like in the past. National programmes do not any more consider condoms, sexual education and drug harm reduction as central to the prevention of HIV transmission that results from unprotected sex and drug use. Funding for non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations working on prevention has virtually dried up.

Third has been the weakening of country leadership of UNAIDS in many high-prevalence countries. Senior country-level positions are, in many instances, held by people who do not possess the core competence to constructively engage political leadership to undertake legal reforms and provide access to services to marginalised populations.

Weakening activism

But the biggest setback has been the lost voice of vulnerable communities which was the main driving force of AIDS response in the decade after UNGASS. Activism surrounding AIDS has suddenly fizzled out emboldening many countries, especially in Africa, to further stigmatise and discriminate by enacting new laws that criminalise vulnerable sections of society.

To add to its woes, the charges against one of the senior most staff and his exit from the organisation have seriously compromised UNAIDS at a time when the global response needs its leadership the most. The new executive director will have an unenviable task of not just restoring the credibility and relevance of the organisation but strengthening its presence at country level and making it more meaningful to the communities which look to it for leadership. The new executive director has to work relentlessly to place prevention of the epidemic and empowering communities at the centre of global response.

With 1.7 million new infections and one million deaths occurring every year, we can't afford to drop the ball half way. The commitment to end AIDS by 2030 is ambitious but not impossible to achieve. What we need is a re-energised UNAIDS with a strong and fearless leadership from a person of high integrity and commitment along with a sincere effort to remove the deadwood from the organisation. Any thought of winding it up or giving the mandate back to WHO would be suicidal at this moment.

J.V.R. Prasada Rao is a former Health Secretary, Government of India. The views expressed are personal.

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.

Trump and the 'K' word

The claim by U.S. President Donald Trump that Prime Minister Narendra Modi broached the subject of Mr. Trump's mediation on the Kashmir issue during the meeting of the two leaders in Osaka in June, is stunning (Page 1, "I would love to be a mediator on Kashmir: Donald Trump", July 23). Is it a white lie? Or is it a political gimmick? Even if India had sought his assistance, the fact that the U.S. has all along been providing military assistance to Pakistan would by itself make America very unsuitable as a mediator.

B.V.K. THAMPI,
Thiruvananthapuram

■ Mr. Trump's offer could well be a trap, a product of his meeting with the Pakistan Prime Minister. The U.S. has a history of long friendship with Pakistan. There may be a hitch at present in their

relationship but self-interest has always been a priority in American foreign policy. The offer may be a part of a strategy relating to Pakistan-China policy. Once we are drawn to the mediation table, our contention of sovereignty over Kashmir will be jeopardised.

S. RAJAGOPALAN,
Chennai

■ It is significant that as no less than the POTUS himself has named the Indian Prime Minister as personally having sought Mr. Trump's mediation, it is in the fitness of things and in keeping with the best parliamentary traditions that the Prime Minister offers his own clarification on the floor of the House even if it means causing personal embarrassment to Mr. Trump, who is not known to observe diplomatic niceties. If Mr. Modi chooses to remain silent fearing a diplomatic backlash from the

U.S., a doubt about who is economical with the truth will gain ground hurting the Prime Minister's credibility.

S.K. CHOUDHURY,
Bengaluru

■ India may maintain that the Kashmir issue should be resolved bilaterally but the fact is that there have been regular global interventions as far as India-Pakistan relations are concerned. During the Kargil intrusions in 1999, it was the Clinton administration which led Pakistan to step back. Also after 9/11, it was the U.S. and the U.K. which helped in blacklisting Pakistan-based terror outfits. India has relied on global support when it comes to cornering Pakistan. Therefore, Mr. Trump wanting to be a mediator should not raise hackles.

HARVINDER SINGH CHUGH,
Jalandhar, Punjab

statesman, examples being his meddling in Obamacare, his unilaterally scrapping the Iran nuclear deal, verbal attacks on European leaders and his mishandling of the immigrants issue in the U.S. Mr. Trump needs to set his own house in order first before he can even think of mediating on Kashmir.

HANNAH JACOB P.,
Bengaluru

■ The U.S. has most often been at the wrong end of understanding the geopolitical affairs of developing countries, Vietnam, Iran and Iraq being examples. America's attempt to help these countries has ended in disastrous results. In the Kashmir conflict, a mediator must understand the socio-cultural context of the State as well as its history which Mr. Trump is clearly unaware of.

I am sure that the Prime Minister, despite his shortcomings, did not raise

the question of mediation seriously with Mr. Trump. Observing the U.S.'s previous attempts at mediation, it would be much better if the process involved only India and Pakistan even if it takes another 70 years.

HANNAH JACOB P.,
Bengaluru

The ISRO model

The successful launch of Chandrayaan-2 demonstrates what India is capable of doing if there is unwavering focus and funding. The successful model of ISRO should be replicated in the defence sector especially when India is spending billions of rupees buying arms. If we can develop a credible weapons manufacturing ecosystem that is on a par with our space industry, we can save billions and also tap the billion dollar international weapons market.

D. N. RATHAN PRASAD REDDY,
Gajwel, Telangana

Narcotic hub

That it is not just youngsters from 'dysfunctional families' but also those from 'perfectly normal families' who are becoming drug victims "solely for recreational purposes" is alarming ("Ground Zero" page, "Ecstasy and the agony", July 20). This is possibly due to a lack of proper parental monitoring, compounded when one or both parents is/are working abroad as in Kerala. The pocket money being given to middle and upper-class youngsters is way beyond basic requirements.

The statement that Uthampuram is "notorious for ganja trade but remains out of bounds for enforcement agencies" is baffling. The "Student Police Cadet" scheme must be emulated across India.

KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI,
Hyderabad