



Andhra triangle

Competitive politics is putting the TDP on a collision course with the BJP

Sometimes, the opponent is less important than the rival. The decision of the Telugu Desam Party to leave the National Democratic Alliance is more about its competition with the YSR Congress Party and less about its conflict with the Bharatiya Janata Party. The desertion of the NDA happened alongside the announcement of a no-confidence motion against the NDA government. But importantly, the TDP moved it separately, independent of the one served by the YSRC. Clearly, the effort was not to join hands with other parties against the BJP, but to isolate the YSRC politically. The TDP wants to demonstrate that it is prepared to do more than the YSRC in taking on the BJP, and winning concessions for Andhra Pradesh from the Centre. In all this, there is no danger to the NDA government. The BJP has the numbers to survive a no-confidence vote even without any help from the other disgruntled allies such as the Shiv Sena. But the attempt of the TDP is to show itself as the aggrieved party, as being more aggressive than the YSRC, rather than bring down the BJP-led government. Electorally, the BJP has been a good fit for the TDP so far. The vote banks added up very well against the Congress, which was the TDP's main rival until 2014. The emergence of the YSRC after a split in the Congress, however, has thrown in a new variable: unlike the Congress, the YSRC is not averse to a tie-up with the BJP, and the TDP did not like the BJP cosying up to the YSRC. In aggravating its conflict with the BJP, the TDP was following the YSRC's lead. From being a sought-after suitor in the eyes of both the TDP and the YSRC, the BJP in Andhra Pradesh seems to have morphed into the villain.

With an Assembly election looming next year, neither the TDP nor the YSRC can afford to be seen as an ally of the BJP. No matter what the Centre does in terms of special packages for the State, both regional parties will jockey in demanding more rather than settle for what is given. Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu must be calculating that any loss in votes because of the exit from the NDA will be more than compensated for by the political dividends from taking a tougher stance against the Centre. Indeed, the assertion that the Centre is diverting tax revenues collected from the southern States for the development of the northern States is part of the competitive regional politics that the TDP is forced to play with the YSRC. Whether this will see the marginalisation of the national parties, as happened in Tamil Nadu, is not clear. But those in the BJP who see in the TDP's decision an opportunity similar to the one in Maharashtra, where the Shiv Sena ceded space after breaking the alliance, might be mistaken. For the moment, the BJP looks like the biggest loser in the competitive regional politics of the TDP and the YSRC.

A perfect attack?

The suspicion of a Russian hand in targeting a spy in the U.K. will test British diplomacy

The attack on Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy who had defected to the U.K., and his daughter Yulia in the cathedral city of Salisbury on March 4 was an outrageous act flouting all international norms. The military grade nerve agent used in the attack, the first of its kind in Europe since World War II, has been identified as being from the Novichok class of chemical agents developed by Russia during the Cold War. The *modus operandi* of the attack was similar to the polonium poisoning of another former Russian spy, Alexander Litvinenko, in London in 2006, an attack that is likely to have been approved by Russian President Vladimir Putin according to a U.K. inquiry. It is therefore entirely reasonable that Britain asked Russia to clarify if it was behind the attack or had somehow lost control over the nerve agent, two possible explanations for the Salisbury incident. Having failed to get a quick reply from Russia, British Prime Minister Theresa May instituted a slew of measures in response to the attack, including expelling 23 Russian diplomats (Russia has promised to retaliate), and freezing its government assets considered potentially harmful to Britons.

In addition to its relationship with Russia, the attack has tested Britain's ties with the U.S. and its NATO and European Union allies as the country leaves the EU. After some initial hesitation and qualified support, the U.S. administration got behind Britain at the UN Security Council; France and Germany have also supported the British position that Russia was behind the attack. The attack brings home the point that it is crucial for Britain to continue a coordinated security strategy with the rest of the EU once Brexit happens. Within the U.K. itself, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn supported Ms. May's decision to expel Russian diplomats but, correctly, questioned the haste with which it was done, especially since a thorough investigation had not been completed. He also asked that Russian finance be blocked from funding British political parties. Britain and the rest of the democratic world have every reason to be outraged at this barbaric attack and to look to Russia for an explanation. Although the available evidence points at Moscow, it is within the realm of possibility that a rogue actor and not the state acquired and deployed the nerve agent. It is because the so-called free world cherishes the rule of law and reason, that a thorough investigation into Russia's role in the attack is done before punitive action beyond that already instituted are considered. Tensions are running high and the last thing a fractious world needs is another Cold War. It is in the U.K.'s interests in terms of security, support and goodwill, if firm and resolute action – that is the need of the hour – is thoroughly backed by reason and evidence.

The self-blinding Russia prism

The 'Russia collusion' narrative in the U.S. has rendered any diplomacy between the two countries impossible



VARGHESE K. GEORGE

Many have been quick to conclude that it was his strong anti-Russia position that led to Rex Tillerson's dismissal as U.S. Secretary of State by President Donald Trump on March 13. The nerve agent used to poison a former Russian spy and his daughter in Britain on March 4 clearly came from Russia, Mr. Tillerson had said, while the White House was more guarded initially. It "sets a profoundly disturbing precedent in which standing up for our allies against Russian aggression is grounds for a humiliating dismissal," said House of Representatives Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi.

The Trump singularity

History, that had been declared ended, appears to have started all over again for the U.S. on November 8, 2016 when Mr. Trump won the presidency. The mainstream punditry in America that missed the revolt around them initially blamed Mr. Trump's victory on the lack of education, racism and misogyny of his supporters. But the revival of the cult of liberal capitalism appeared elusive; it needed visions of a demon at the door. Enter Russia. Mr. Trump's suspected ties with Russia and its President Vladimir Putin have remained the obsessive theme of American media almost every day for more than a year now. Ms. Pelosi's explanation of Mr. Tillerson's sacking would have fitted perfectly with the bizarre notion that has become the new Washington Consensus: a President allegedly helped into office by the country's arch-enemy. But for the fact that until recently Mr. Tillerson himself was accused of being soft on Russia.

The insinuation that Mr. Tillerson had questionable links to Russia coursed through reporting on him since the day his appointment



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was announced. This March alone, news reports linked Mr. Tillerson to the State Department's failure to spend the \$120 million available to it for countering Russian influence operations; a widely commented profile of a former British spy, Christopher Steele, who prepared a salacious dossier on Mr. Trump for the Hillary Clinton campaign, in the *New Yorker*, suggested that the President may have acted on the Kremlin's advice in not appointing former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney as his Secretary of State. "The choice [of Mr. Tillerson] was a surprise to most, and a happy one in Moscow," the article said, and blamed him for not being tough on Russia.

What is Russia accused of?

The moment he was sacked, Mr. Tillerson became the anti-Russia hero who had paid the price for his boldness. "Russia is at war with us right now," said James Clapper, former Director of National Intelligence, discussing Mr. Tillerson's dismissal on CNN. "He has been an advocate for more muscular response to Russia."

Reporting on what is loosely called "Russia collusion" is largely based on selective leaks. The substantive allegations against Russia are in a court document filed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, indicting 13 individuals and some entities connected to Russia. He has charged them with "informa-

tion warfare" against the U.S. and "spreading distrust towards the candidates and the political system in general" in the context of the 2016 election.

Starting in 2014, Russians spent "thousands of dollars every month," the indictment says. The amount was around \$100,000 between 2015 and 2017, according to Facebook – the key platform of this alleged Russian operation – which deposited before a U.S. legislative committee through its lawyer. Russian-linked entities placed ads that in turn led users to Facebook pages on which they ran propaganda. They posted 80,000 pieces of content over the same time. For context, during the same years, American users saw 11.1 trillion Facebook posts. Facebook told the committee that 126 million people may have seen a post generated by Russian operatives or bots, 56% of which happened after the election. As per the indictment, some Russians misrepresented their purpose and travelled to the U.S. to collect intelligence on the country's political process, and from unwitting Americans, they learned they should focus their campaign on "purple states like Colorado, Virginia and Florida." Meanwhile, \$1.2 billion was spent on Hillary Clinton's campaign, and \$600 million on Mr. Trump. The indictment says the Russian campaign supported Bernie Sanders during the Democratic primary and Mr.

Trump during the presidential election. They also magnified Green Party presidential candidate Jill Stein and groups such as Black Lives Matter.

Whether or not all this constitutes an act of war as concluded by Mr. Clapper, what is unmistakable is the pervasive bipartisan push for tougher retaliation against Russia. The Trump administration is willing to oblige them. With two documents in recent months, the National Security Strategy and the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the U.S. has declared Russia as its main adversary, slightly above China in the order, and left little room open for reconciliation. The NPR declares that the era of great power rivalry is back, and has lowered America's threshold for a nuclear first strike, citing Russia as the main reason. All-round modernisation of its nuclear infrastructure, by upgrading delivery systems, weapons and defence systems, and widespread battlefield deployment of tactical nuclear weapons are part of the new posture. All of this is estimated to cost more than a trillion dollars in inflation adjusted dollars, assuming no cost overruns, over the next 30 years. Stocks of American defence companies have consistently outperformed the market since Mr. Trump came to power. His administration has a declared policy of "hard power, not soft power." How much more muscular could it get? On Thursday, two days after sacking Mr. Tillerson, the White House announced a new round of sanctions against Russia.

The ability of a journalist or a citizen to independently verify the allegations against Russia is only as much she had in verifying the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, before the U.S. invaded the country in 2003. Assuming that all that has been said and all that can be said about it is true, the current obsession of the American elite with Russia is still counterproductive and potentially dangerous in at least two ways.

First, it disenfranchises U.S. citizens and delegitimises its democratic process. The groundswell of

public outrage against America's economic and strategic culture took two forms in 2016. Mr. Sanders represented one; and Mr. Trump represented the other. As the only advanced country in the world where life expectancy is falling, where 96 people die from gun violence every day, where heroin related deaths increased six-fold since 2002, where opioid overdose kills 115 people a day, the signs of distress are unmistakable. It is unclear whether Mr. Trump relied on Russian intelligence to run a scorched-earth campaign in swing States in the last days of the 2016 campaign; without any inputs from Russia, Ms. Clinton also focussed her efforts on swing States, though not as much as her rival. What is clear is that those who voted were Americans. By repeatedly asserting that it is impossible to determine the extent of Russian imprint on the Sanders movement or Mr. Trump's victory, the onus has been shifted to any citizen critical of the American system to first prove that she is not acting on behalf of Russia or, even worse, she is not a Russian bot. The theocratic enthusiasm to protect American democracy from Russian digital pamphlets is, ironically, undercutting it.

This neo-McCarthyism

While this denial of agency to its average citizens can corrode America's democracy further, a second upshot of this neo-McCarthyism is that it has rendered any diplomacy between the nuclear rivals impossible. The 'Russia collusion' commentaries presuppose that unless proven otherwise any contact between a Trump official and a Russian is illegitimate and treason. When a democratically elected President's authority to pursue diplomacy is undermined, the U.S.'s political system is weakened and the world becomes a more dangerous place. The Russia prism has not merely bent perspective, but blinded vision in America. Perhaps, deliberately and conveniently.

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The long fight against TB

To outsmart the disease, India must intercept infection, progression and transmission



T. JACOB JOHN & SHOBHA VARTHAMAN

Science borrows words from common parlance and assigns quantifiable meanings. For example, "significance" in biostatistics, measured by 'p' value, clarifies if a study result is reliable or mere chance finding. "Incidence" in epidemiology is a rate: new cases per unit population, per unit time. The incidence rate of tuberculosis (TB) in India is estimated at 200-300 cases per 100,000 population per year. As a comparison, in western Europe it is five per 100,000 per year.

"Control" in public health is "deliberate reduction of incidence to a desired and defined level by specific interventions". Without monitoring incidence and defining the desired target, the Revised National TB Control Programme (RNTCP) is not a valid control programme, but a great humanitarian programme of free diagnosis and treatment.

India's estimated annual TB burden is 28 lakh, 27% of the global total; our population is only

18%. Every day 1,200 Indians die of TB – 10 every three minutes. The tragedy 1,200 families face every day is beyond imagination. No other disease or calamity has such Himalayan magnitude. Had control efforts registered even pass grade, we would not have become the TB capital of the world.

Know the enemy

Infection with TB bacilli is the necessary cause of TB, a disease that mimics other diseases, confusing doctors and delaying diagnosis. Cough and blood in sputum occur only in lung TB. For example, a young man developed headache and began making silly mistakes in arithmetic. He had brain TB and treatment cured him. Pelvic TB is the commonest cause of female infertility in India. TB can affect the lungs, brain, bones, joints, the liver, intestines or for that matter any organ and can progress slowly or kill in weeks.

In designing TB control three processes must be understood: infection, progression, transmission. Infection occurs when TB bacilli are inhaled. Bacilli may stay in the lungs or travel to other organs. Infection is lifelong, with bacilli lying dormant. This phase is "latent TB", diagnosed by a tuberculin skin test (TST). The "annual rate of TB infection" (ARTI) is about 1%. Cumulatively, 40% to 70% of us are



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living with latent TB. From this reservoir pool, a few progress to TB disease, one by one, 5-30 years, average 20 years, later.

Progression occurs when bacilli become active, multiply and cause pathology; now we have "active TB". Only when active TB affects the lungs do bacilli find an exit route to the atmosphere, necessary for transmission.

Principles of control

All of us, the public, health-care professionals, Health Ministry policy planners and implementers, must form a united battlefield. Beginning with schools, public education on TB and its prevention must replace ignorance and misconceptions.

Transmission and infection are ends of a tunnel. If no one spits in public places and if everyone practises cough and sneeze etiquette (covering one's mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing), the

TB affected will also fall in line.

A person with lung TB disseminates TB bacilli over several weeks. By the time treatment stops dissemination, unfortunately, all his close contacts would have been already infected. This is why TB treatment has not brought down the TB burden.

To block transmission, treatment should begin as soon as a symptom shows up. RNTCP guidelines – for testing only after two weeks of cough – result in the loss of precious lead time. Some 70% of people seek health care in the private sector. As cough is a very common symptom of many diseases, doctors don't think of TB until other treatments fail. Frustrated patients also shop around until someone thinks of TB; bingo, the sputum test is positive. While treatment is the patient's urgent need, it will not control TB. It is like shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Partnership with the private sector is essential for early diagnosis of TB. Delay in diagnosis, for which we are notorious, is a fallout of the lack of efficient primary health care. Universal primary health care, a basic human right, and a diagnostic algorithm for early diagnosis are essential for TB control. Every country that has reduced TB incidence practises universal health care.

How can progression be retarded? The biomedical method is drug treatment of latent TB. Experts recommend an age window of 5-10 years when all children must be screened with TST; those with latent TB must be treated to prevent progression. The spin-off is in getting annual data on ARTI to track the trajectory of decline. A yearly 5% reduction of ARTI is achievable. In 20 years we can be on a par with western Europe in terms of infection incidence. Active TB will also decline, but more slowly.

Now or never

To outsmart TB bacilli, we must intercept infection, progression and transmission. While TB bacilli are efficient in all three, our weapons against them are blunt. Our only chance of victory is by the concerted use of all interventions – biomedical and socio-behavioural. There is no glamour in this long-drawn-out battle.

Any further delay may convert a controllable disease into an uncontrollable one, because of increasing frequency of resistance to drugs against TB.

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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.

Bottled water

The survey ("How much plastic is there in your packaged water", March 15), by Orb Media, a non-profit journalism organisation based in Washington DC, is shocking given that many of us take for granted that water stored in plastic bottles is considered safe and the best potable form of water. Plastic has become an inevitable part of human life and after reading the report it is clear that it poses a serious threat in the food chain. People who thought they were safe from waterborne diseases now have to fear the hidden dangers of plastic. Reducing plastic use

is the only solution to lead a healthy life. But where do we begin?

RIKRU ZACH KURIAN, Thiruvananthapuram

■ It is painful to know that the world has yet to come to terms with the possibility that even the water we all consume is contaminated. We might be technologically advanced but we should be aware that technology can never be a replacement for nature.

Now that the gross danger has been uncovered, rules and regulations that govern the packaged food market should be made even more stringent.

N. KANMANI MEERA DEVI, Chennai

Neutrinos over water?

While the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) has gone into overdrive to grant environmental clearance to the India-based Neutrino Observatory Project (INO) in Tamil Nadu's west Bodi Hills – much against local sentiment – the Union Minister for Water Resources appears non-committal on a possible time frame for the constitution of the Cauvery management board. What a study in contrast this is. All said and done, the neutrino project is likely to be a wild goose chase for an elusive particle that may or may not be found. For now, what is urgently needed for the people and farmers of Tamil

Nadu is life-giving water from the Cauvery and not some particle that is so notoriously hard to detect. It looks as if the supply of water from Karnataka will be as elusive as the 'god particle'.

KANGAYAM R. NARASIMHAN, Chennai

Left's survival guide

As far as the Left is concerned, any alliance with the Congress will do more harm than good ("The Left doesn't need the Congress", March 15). While the Left does not have the force to stop the BJP in States where the latter is dominant, an alliance would lead to an erosion of support for the Left in States such as Kerala where it is strong. This

would further marginalise the Left. The space for the Left in Indian politics is at an ideological level and on the streets where it is the voice of the oppressed and the marginalised sections of society. It is this point its leaders must concentrate on.

AMAL BAHULEYAN K., Pullazhy, Thrissur, Kerala

Media on a pedestal

The Chief Justice of India is not incorrect in his opinion that the media have to exercise restraint while disseminating information ("Media think they're on a pulpit: CJ", March 16). The coverage of the death of a popular actor while in the UAE recently is one example of the electronic media

breaching the line. Another example is reports on the alleged leak of a CBSE examination paper which the media concluded was because of an insider. The shock it must have caused to students and parents cannot be fathomed. With no censorship and the practical difficulties in monitoring the media on a minute by minute basis, the media appear to be having a free run. There is no attempt at any self-regulation. A country with diverse caste, regional and religious equations can ill-afford to have an irresponsible media.

V. SUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

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