



Road ahead from Gogra

While disengagement happens, a long-lasting solution along the LAC remains a challenge

After the talks on July 31, India and China have taken one more step towards restoring peace and normalcy on the LAC by disengaging at Gogra. It is, however, only one step, and the road ahead towards returning to the status quo of April 2020, before the tensions of last summer upended years of a carefully managed even if uneasy peace along the LAC, remains uncertain. It has taken 12 rounds of military-level talks to see both sides disengage and put in place buffer zones in the Galwan Valley, the site of the June 2020 clash that marked the worst violence since 1967, Pangong Lake, and now Patrolling Point 17 in Gogra. The disengagement process at PPI7 took place on August 4 and 5, with a return to permanent bases. The next round of talks will discuss PPI5 in Hot Springs. Demchok, where China has transgressed in relatively smaller numbers than the deployments seen in Pangong Lake, also remains unresolved. Beijing has appeared unwilling to discuss the strategically significant Depsang plains, where the Chinese side has been blocking Indian patrols. The buffer zone model, where both sides temporarily cease patrolling in disputed areas, has appeared to work so far in keeping the peace. It is, however, only a temporary measure, and one that India should not accept as permanent as it would prevent India from enforcing its territorial claims and favour the PLA, which can deploy faster in larger numbers owing to more favourable terrain and better logistics.

The next step will be full de-escalation, and a withdrawal of some of the new forward deployments that have come up close to the LAC. India has signalled that it is prepared for the long haul; its message: relations cannot return to normal without a full restoration of normalcy on the borders. While the strategic motivations of China's border deployments last year are not clear, the tactical objectives are not difficult to ascertain. Since the 2017 Doklam crisis, China has consistently stepped up building new permanent airbases and air defence units closer to the LAC, with at least 13 new positions coming up since then, according to an analysis of satellite images from Stratfor. India has been moving to rapidly upgrade its own infrastructure to close the gap. The result is an entirely changed security dynamic along the LAC. There is a need to come up urgently with new protocols and confidence-building measures, as both sides gradually resume patrolling in the buffer zones. The multiple transgressions by China and the violence of last year have set back years of efforts to carefully manage the borders and thrown into doubt whether the four agreements regulating the behaviour of both sides still remain valid. While the recent moves towards restoring the peace are certainly welcome, finding a more long-lasting solution to ensure peace along the LAC will present a taller challenge.

Code red

IPCC's warning on climate points to a small window of opportunity that still exists

The IPCC has issued arguably its strongest warning yet on impending catastrophe from unmitigated global warming caused by human activity, lending scientific credence to the argument that rising wildfires, heatwaves, extreme rainfall and floods witnessed in recent times are all strongly influenced by a changing climate. In a stark report on the physical science basis of climate change contributed for a broader Assessment Report of the UN, the IPCC's Working Group I has called for deep cuts to carbon dioxide emissions and other greenhouse gases and a move to net zero emissions, as the world would otherwise exceed 1.5°C and 2°C of warming during the 21st century with permanent consequences. Climate change is described by many as a far greater threat to humanity than COVID-19, because of its irreversible impacts. The latest report is bound to strengthen the criticism that leaders in many countries have stonewalled and avoided moving away from coal and other fossil fuels, while even those who promised to act, failed to influence the multilateral system. The new report attributes catastrophic events to sustained global warming, particularly the frequency and intensity of hot extremes, marine heatwaves, heavy precipitation, agricultural and ecological droughts, proportion of intense tropical cyclones, reductions in Arctic Sea ice, snow cover and permafrost. A phenomenon such as heavy rainfall over land, for instance, could be 10.5% wetter in a world warmer by 1.5°C, and occur 1.5 times more often, compared to the 1850-1900 period.

More than five years after the Paris Agreement was concluded, there is no consensus on raising ambition to reduce emissions, making access to low carbon technologies easier, and adequately funding mitigation and adaptation. COVID-19 had the unexpected effect of marginally and temporarily depressing emissions. The IPCC's analysis presents scenarios of large-scale collapse of climate systems that future leaders would find virtually impossible to manage. Heatwaves and heavy rainfall events experienced with increasing frequency and intensity are just two of these, while disruptions to the global water cycle pose a more unpredictable threat. Also, if emissions continue to rise, oceans and land, two important sinks and the latter a key part of India's climate action plan, would be greatly weakened in their ability to absorb atmospheric carbon dioxide. The new report sets the stage for the CoP26 conference in November. The only one course to adopt there is for developed countries with legacy emissions to effect deep cuts, transfer technology without strings to emerging economies and heavily fund mitigation and adaptation. Developing nations should then have no hesitation in committing themselves to steeper emissions cuts.

Saudi Arabia, Iran and the possibilities of détente

Recent pronouncements from Riyadh and Tehran could be supportive of peace and security in the Gulf littoral



HAMID ANSARI

Individuals and human collectives have memories and time spans. The two do not converge but at times overlap. The latter are infrequent yet meaningful. Prudence, if not wisdom, lies in using them. One such occasion betides the Gulf region at this juncture.

The Persian Gulf is a nearly 990 kilometre-long body of water that separates Iran from the Arabian Peninsula. Seven member States of the United Nations lay claim to washing their hands or feet in its waters. At its narrowest point, in the Strait of Hormuz, it is only 54 km wide and the main shipping channels that pass through it are 30km-35 km wide and 8km-12 km wide. They are critical to the transportation of crude oil and LNG to global markets.

For over a century till the early 1970s, the Persian Gulf was a British lake. The imperial withdrawal propelled the United States to step in as the guarantor of the sub-region with its Twin-Pillars (Iran-Saudi Arabia) policy. An abortive effort was also made by Oman through the Muscat Conference in November 1976; it floundered on the obstinacy of Baathist Iraq. Bilateral efforts were also made by King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and the Shah of Iran; King Faisal initiated his Islamic solidarity policy in 1964 and visited Iran in December 1965; in 1966 Saudi Defence Minister Sultan bin Abdulaziz described the Iranian-Saudi friendship as a

perfect example of Islamic brotherhood and neighbourly relations; the two States were also active members of the Five Power 'Safari Club' for intelligence sharing.

Impact of unrest

The Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 disturbed the strategic balance in the region and put an end to efforts to develop a regional consensus on security issues. Over the next decade, and particularly during the period of the Iraq-Iran war, the effort of the Gulf monarchies and of their western supporters was to destabilise and wish away the revolutionary regime. The formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 was part of the effort to reassure the Gulf sheikhdoms. The end of the war and the cooling of tensions allowed saner perceptions to emerge. These were spelt out among others by the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister in the Manama Dialogue in December 2004. In 1996, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami told the Saudi Defence Minister that a defence pact would be mutually beneficial. Crown Prince Abdullah attended the Islamic Summit conference in Tehran in December 9-11, 1997. This was seen in Tehran as 'a good beginning for removing misunderstandings'. Subsequent developments in the region relating to Syria and the Hezbollah on the one side and the Saudi intervention in the Yemen on the other conflict pushed back, even reversed, the developing perceptions in Riyadh.

Yemen in particular has been critical to Saudi perceptions of national security. The clash of viewpoints dates back to the 1930s when King Abdulaziz ibn Saud was expanding the boundaries of the



Kingdom of Najd to incorporate the western and southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Conflict developed over the southern region of Najran and resulted in a Saudi military victory and the Treaty of 1934. This maintained peace till the Egyptian Revolution and Gamal Abdel Nasser's 'intoxicating blend of nationalism and radicalism' that set the region alight. It led to the Yemeni coup of 1962, the Egyptian military intervention in Yemen and the souring of Saudi-Egyptian relations that lasted till the Arab-Israeli war of 1967. This suited the interests of the United States; military assistance programmes and the stationing of U.S. troops during the Kuwait war of 1990 followed. The Trump era and the jettisoning of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action witnessed a qualitative strengthening of ties between them.

The key issues

The last few years have witnessed geopolitical tensions in the Gulf littoral. Most States have been affected adversely by the historically low oil prices and by COVID-19. The GCC has become inoperative with the focus on the boycott of Qatar that is now being reversed. There are new tensions between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh's access

to the Oval Office in Washington is now not what it was in the Donald Trump era. The Abraham Accords between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain have qualitatively influenced the Arab-Israeli calculus in the Persian Gulf States and in the wider Arab world.

More recently, the U.S.'s decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan and reduce commitments in Iraq has been the subject of discussions on policy options among knowledgeable observers in Washington. One expert has observed that "on balance, the American ground-force base in Kuwait, the Fifth Fleet naval base in Bahrain, [the] Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE and the access arrangements in Oman provide the U.S. with a politically and financially sustainable military presence" in the region. Another view is that "the post-COVID-19 environment is going to be unfriendly to Saudi Arabia perhaps more than any other leading power in the Gulf". The Saudi failure to subdue the Houthis and to close the Yemen conflict on their terms has become a source of concern. The U.S.'s inability to subdue Iran on its terms has also become evident. Others have drawn attention to the Saudi Crown Prince's remark in April that his country wants good relations with Iran and to the Iranian reaction of welcoming it. It is evident that policy options are being explored.

Security is the concern

The impact of these recent developments on Saudi Arabia-Iran relations needs to be assessed in this context. The effort to impart a sectarian orientation to the divide does not seem to hold. Their prim-

ary concern is security in the Gulf littoral and the security of the waterway for the transportation of their hydrocarbon exports.

In January 1987, the then U.S. Secretary of State said the Gulf has become 'critical to the economic health of the West.' A good part of the rest of the world can with justice be added to it.

For this to be given practical shape, its essential ingredients would need to be: freedom of access to, and outlet from, Gulf waters through the Strait of Hormuz; freedom of commercial shipping in international waters in the Persian Gulf; prevention of conflict that may impinge on the freedom of trade and shipping; freedom to all States of the Gulf littoral to exploit their hydrocarbons and other natural resources and export them; ensure conditions of peace and stability in the individual littoral States, and ensure that regional or extra-regional conditions do not impinge on any of these considerations.

Could the achievement of such an arrangement, or a part of it, be the beginning of a much desired and reassuring development? Overtime, it may address itself to bring forth answers to questions such as security for whom, by whom, against whom.

The recent pronouncements from Riyadh and Tehran do tend to suggest an inclination to be supportive of some of these suggestions. This is to be welcomed since from an Indian viewpoint the requirement is and will continue to be stability in the littoral States, freedom of navigation and safety of sea lanes.

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The shaky foundation of the labour law reforms

It could be a long wait before employers and workers enjoy the so-called benefits extended by the labour codes



K.R. SHYAM SUNDAR

The National Democratic Alliance government enacted the Code on Wages (<https://bit.ly/3fMralj>) in August 2019 and the other three Codes, viz., the Industrial Relations Code, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code and Code on Social Security (CSS) in September 2020. Later, it had framed the draft rules albeit incompletely under all the codes – incompletely because the rules have not covered some aspects of the Codes, e.g. rules regarding recognition of central trade unions have not been framed so far.

A rushed exercise

Controversies surround the processes of the enactment of codes and the framing of rules. The Government has held only symbolic and partial consultation with the central trade unions. The three codes were passed in Parliament even as the Opposition parties, otherwise insignificant, boycotted the proceedings. The tearing hurry in which the Government carried out the reforms even during the COVID-19 period gave tremendous hope to employers and potential investors. It announced its intentions of implementing the Codes from April 1, 2021 even as State governments were completely unprepared with the rules. Further, the major political parties reallocated their energies to regional elections rather than the

implementation of codes. Symbolically, labour law reforms have been affected and the government can boast of it. Since the Government has not shown serious intent to implement the codes, the NDA government effected reforms to boast that it has executed the long-pending reforms; simply put, it is more symbolic rather than a meaningful act.

Court directives

The central government has deferred the possible date of implementation to October 1, 2021, again tentatively. In the meanwhile, the Supreme Court of India has exerted pressure on both the central and the State governments to implement a 'one nation, one ration card' (ONOR) scheme and register all the unorganised workers under the National Database for Unorganised Workers (NDUW), which was to have been done by July 31, 2021. Government agencies are rushing to comply with both the directives. In ONOR, Aadhaar seeding and the universal availability of an electronic point of sale (EPOS) system are necessary. And for the NDUW, it has to register each of the approximately 400 million workers, a conservative figure.

Perhaps, the Supreme Court passed such an extraordinary perhaps impracticable order following the hesitancy in early 2020 to provide relief to suffering migrant workers following the national lockdown. The governments did not honour the Supreme Court's orders relating to the registration of construction workers for many years. So, it has a bad track record. One is not sure when governments would comply fully and well with the Supreme Court's orders. Unor-



ganised workers including migrant workers will continue to be deprived of their promised and extended entitlements.

Government's line vs reality

The Government said the codes would extend universal minimum wages and social security, enable enhanced industrial safety and the provision of social security to gig workers, among other things. The Industrial Relations Code provides for recognition of trade union(s) by employers, a labour right that eluded workers for seven decades. On the other hand, employers celebrated the extension of tremendous flexibility to them, even those unasked, such as relief from framing standing orders for most firms. But do they enjoy these benefits?

On August 3, 2021, I browsed the Simpliance website (a law portal) to assess the record of State governments regarding rules under the codes. It was a revelation to find that major States such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Haryana and Delhi have not issued the draft rules under any codes. Karnataka, Gujarat and Jharkhand have framed Rules for the Code on Wages and the Industrial Relations Code. Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pra-

desh, Uttarakhand and Punjab have framed rules for all the codes. Even though the Code on Wages was enacted in August 2019, it was only in March 2021 that the central government notified the constitution of an advisory committee. On June 3, 2021 it also announced an expert committee with a tenure of three years to advise it on minimum wages. Then, on July 12, 2021, it announced that the wage index's base year would be shifted from 1965 to 2019 to use the revised wage index to determine minimum wages. The Government seems to be clueless regarding the implementation of minimum wages.

Poor safety record

The incidence of major industrial accidents has remained undiminished even during the COVID-19 period. For instance, IndustriAll reported that between May to June, 32 major industrial accidents occurred in India, killing 75 workers (<https://bit.ly/3ApvxRV>). The media reported four accidents in Vizag during 2020. Safe in India's annual reports, CRUSHED, for 2019 and 2020, provide a disturbing picture of industrial accidents in the automobile industry in the Gurgaon region (<https://bit.ly/3CxPfwv>). Industrial safety continues to be a grave concern even after the enactment of the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code.

According to several research reports, COVID-19 intensified informality, led to the withdrawal of workers from the labour market, reduced earnings, increased unemployment and widened inequality. The non-statutory floor level minimum wage remains a meagre ₹178 still even as Whole-

sale Price Index-inflation rates have galloped to 12% in June 2021. The Government's relief measures to workers, especially unorganised and migrant workers and even to the so-called organised sector workers, are too meagre to make any difference. It did not implement the widely endorsed measure of direct benefit transfer at least for low-income families.

In perspective

Thus, we see two aspects concerning labour market governance in India. One, the Government has failed to provide legal visibility to millions of unorganised and migrant workers, even after decades, and despite direction by the highest court in the land. Two, despite the gazetting of four Codes, age-old laws are in force. Thus, they reflect poorly not only on the governance abilities of the governments but also on the countervailing power of the Opposition parties. Were the labour law reforms rushed with little or no debate and consultation whatsoever, only to remain in the gazette books? Employers and workers cannot enjoy the so-called benefits extended by the codes.

Given the facts mentioned above, the legislative impasse continues; one does not know how long it would be. However, India would score impressively on the ease of doing business exercise by any agency including the World Bank by the mere execution of labour reforms without them being implemented: what else then is needed!

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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.

Vaccine mix

Ever since the worldwide devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the heterologous prime-boost concept of vaccination has been in the purview of scientific research, discussion and debates. Preliminary small clinical trials using a mixed regimen of Pfizer-BioNTech and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines in the U.K. (Com-COV), Spain (Combivacs), and Germany (Charite and Saarland studies), have all shown a boost to the immune response, with none or minor side effects, when compared to those who got both jabs of the same

vaccine (Page 1, "Covishield-Covaxin mix gives better protection, says ICMR", August 9). Safety, reactivity, efficacy and immunogenicity of these combinations are the fundamentals for their use on a large scale. Until long-term follow-up studies are conducted and the data peer-reviewed and substantiated, the use of such combinations of vaccines remains in the realms of speculation. The results of the study in the Philippines, combining the inactivated vaccine CoronaVac, with six other approved vaccines, and the CMC Vellore mixed vaccine trial of Covaxin and Covishield will shed more

light on the mix-and-match benefits of COVID vaccines.

Dr. BIJU C. MATHEW,
Thiruvananthapuram

Vaccine trial volunteers

I would like to draw attention to the challenges being faced by a particular group, namely, the volunteers of the Covishield vaccine trial of 2020. I am a doctor, 64, and volunteered at my alma mater, KEM hospital, Parel, Mumbai, for the ICMR/Serum Institute sponsored phase 2/3 double blind Covishield vaccine safety and effectivity trial. I received my two doses in September and October 2020. On my request in early 2021, the

randomisation was unblinded, and I was informed in February 2021 that I had received the vaccine and not the placebo. We, vaccine trial volunteers, face the following challenges: the ICMR/Serum Institute have not yet issued us a proper vaccination certificate. The KEM authorities have issued us a letter, which may not be valid nationally or internationally for our travel. We vaccinated volunteers do not appear as COVID-19 vaccinated on the Co-WIN App or government records, linked to our Aadhaar number. New variants of the virus have since been detected and we

are exposed to them constantly, during the course of our work. A year has passed since our vaccination and despite reminders, there have been no efforts made by the ICMR/Serum Institute to check our antibody levels or guide us regarding a booster dose of the vaccine. We volunteered in good faith, to be of help to others in this pandemic, especially at a time when all sorts of negative messages were floating around. I urge the ICMR/Serum Institute/Government to understand our challenges and evolve appropriate measures.

Dr. SURESH SUNDAR,
Mumbai

Game changer

The Olympics gold medal in javelin by Neeraj Chopra is a game changer and is sure to inspire a new generation of Indians, who could then go on to dominate in the international sporting arena. I am confident many youngsters will now be interested in javelin throwing as well as the other track and field events such as hammer throw, discus and shot put. Cricket may have some competition now. There could be a quantum jump from the spade work done by earlier stalwarts.

A.V. NARAYANAN,
Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu