



Fall of Kabul

With Afghanistan under the total control of the Taliban, the future looks bleak

History came full circle on August 15 when the Taliban captured Kabul, almost 20 years after the U.S. launched its global war on terror. The city of roughly 5 million people fell to the Islamist insurgents without even a fight while Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, and the Americans abandoned their Embassy and rushed to Kabul airport. It was a surreal moment for the U.S., which had pledged to defeat the Taliban in every corner of Afghanistan, and a tragedy for the Afghans, who were left at the mercy of a murderous militia. The soldiers did not fight. Police abandoned their stations. Former Northern Alliance warlords left the country. And the government crumbled like the proverbial house of cards. There is already worrying news coming from the provinces that the Taliban are enforcing a strict religious code on the public and violence against anyone who resists. The last time the Taliban were in power, women were not allowed to work. They had to cover their faces and be accompanied by a male relative outside their homes. Girls were not allowed to go to school. The Taliban had also banned TV, music, painting and photography, handed out brutal forms of punishment to those violating their Islamic code, and persecuted minorities. The chaotic scenes from Kabul airport, where people are desperately trying to cling on to airplanes hoping to leave the country, bear testimony to their fear of the Taliban.

This is a historic development that will have lasting implications for global geopolitics. Unlike 1996, this is not only about the Taliban taking power. This is also about an Islamist group with a medieval mindset and modern weapons defeating the world's most powerful country. The U.S. can say in its defence that its mission was to fight al-Qaeda and that it met its strategic objectives. But in reality, after spending 20 years in Afghanistan to fight terrorism and rebuild the Afghan state, the U.S. ran away from the battlefield, embarrassing itself and leaving its allies helpless. The images from Arg, the presidential palace in Kabul, and the airport will continue to haunt President Joe Biden and the U.S. for a long time. In 1996, when the Taliban took Kabul, the government did not flee the country. Ahmad Shah Massoud and Burhanuddin Rabbani retreated to the Panjshir valley from where they regrouped the Northern Alliance and continued resistance against the Taliban. This time, there is no Northern Alliance. There is no government. The whole country, except some pockets, is now firmly under the Taliban's control. The Taliban are also more receptive to regional players such as China and Russia, while Pakistan is openly celebrating their triumph. It remains to be seen what kind of a regime a stronger Taliban will install in Kabul. If the 1990s are anything to go by, darker days are ahead in Afghanistan.

Beating plastic pollution

Serious implementation of new plastic waste rules can address the problem of waste

The Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules notified by the Centre on August 12 acknowledge the gravity of pollution caused by plastic articles of everyday use, particularly those that have no utility beyond a few minutes or hours. Under the new rules, the manufacture, sale and use of some single-use goods made with plastic, polystyrene, and expanded polystyrene, such as earbuds, plates, cups, glasses, cutlery, wrapping and packing films, are prohibited from July 1 next year, while others such as carry bags must be at least 75 microns thick from September 30, 2021, and 120 microns from December 31 next year, compared to 50 microns at present. The decisions follow recommendations made by an expert group constituted by the Department of Chemicals and Petrochemicals two years ago. In 2018, India won praise globally for asserting on World Environment Day that it would eliminate all single-use plastic by 2022, a theme that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stressed more than once. Yet, policy coherence to achieve the goal has been lacking. The Central Pollution Control Board has reported that 22 States have, in the past, announced a ban on single-use plastic, but this has had little impact on the crisis of waste choking wetlands and waterways and being transported to the oceans to turn into microplastic.

At about 34 lakh tonnes generated in 2019-20, India has a staggering annual volume of plastic waste, of which only about 60% is recycled. What is more, a recent study of the top 100 global producers of polymers that culminate in plastic waste found six of them based in India. It is unsurprising, therefore, that in spite of the staggering problem, policymakers have been treading on eggshells. The international view is changing, however, and support for a UN Plastic Treaty is growing; the majority of G7 countries too are supportive of cleaning up the oceans through a charter in the interests of human wellbeing and environmental integrity. India's policies on environmental regulation are discordant, lofty on intent but feeble on outcomes, and plastic waste is no different. State governments have felt no compulsion to replace municipal contracts, where companies are paid for haulage of mixed waste, with terms that require segregation and accounting of materials. Considerable amounts of plastic waste cannot be recycled because of lack of segregation, leading to incineration, while mixing newer types of compostable plastic will confound the problem. Patchy regulation has led to prohibited plastic moving across State borders. Now that the Centre has adopted a broad ban, further pollution must end. Microplastic is already found in the food chain, and governments must act responsibly to stop the scourge.

The message from the IPCC report

Equitable cumulative emission targets and not net zero is the key to achieving the Paris Agreement's temperature goals



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& TEJAL KANITKAR

The recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the Working Group I contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), titled 'Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis', is the first of four that the Panel will issue over the next one and a half years. The reports are eagerly awaited as they provide a summary assessment of all aspects of the challenge of global warming and past reports have heralded significant shifts in climate policy. This particular report has added significance as it is the only one of the four of AR6 to be ready before the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to be held in Glasgow in November.

Findings of the report

A significant section of the report reinforces what is already well known, though, importantly, with updated numbers, higher accuracy and specific regional assessments, including South Asia. Global surface temperature is now higher by 1.07°C since the pre-industrial era. The impact of climate change on the atmosphere, oceans and land is unmistakably of human origin and this impact is picking up pace. It is a striking fact that there is no part of the inhabited world that is now untouched by the impact of global warming. Carbon dioxide is the dominant source of warming. Aerosols con-

tribute to reducing the impact of warming by other greenhouse gases, by almost a third. Methane reduction, while needed overall, is particularly significant only as part of the endgame as the drastic reduction of aerosols actually leads to an increase in warming.

A major scientific advance in this report is the use of multiple lines of evidence (through precise technical methods) to pin down the values and trends of key climatic variables more accurately, and narrow their range of uncertainties. Climate predictions from models appear to be working better in many specific ways due to improved representation of basic processes and higher resolution, while the use of other evidence enables scientists to ensure that the modelling output is suitably filtered to match more closely the real world. Thus, the value of equilibrium climate sensitivity – the measure of how a specified increase in carbon dioxide concentration translates into long-term surface temperature rise – is now pinned down to the range of 2.5°C to 4.0°C, with a best estimate of 3°C, compared to the Fifth Assessment Report range of 1.5°C to 4.5°C. With the inclusion of the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology's Earth System Model among the climate models used in AR6, India too has joined the climate modelling fraternity.

The report expectedly projects an increase in climate extremes due to global warming, with heat waves, extreme rainfall events and occurrence of extreme sea levels all expected to intensify and be more frequent. Coincidentally, the IPCC session for the approval and release of the report was held in the background of news of unprecedented disasters from the global



North, including massive forest fires, unprecedented rain and flooding, and record heat.

Restrict cumulative emissions

A major finding of the report is that air pollution reduction and steep climate change mitigation are not complementary goals but require independent efforts over the short and medium term. This is particularly important as the claims of such a linkage have been used to argue that India, for instance, must cease the use of coal immediately, despite its continuing importance as the key element of the country's energy security.

The truly disconcerting news though, for the global North, is the report's clear message that reaching net zero was not the determining factor for the world to limit itself to a 1.5°C, or 2°C, or indeed any specific temperature increase. The report is clear that it is the cumulative emissions in reaching net zero that determine the temperature rise. This obvious conclusion from past reports and scientific literature had become something of a casualty in the massive campaign mounted on net zero by the developed countries with the partisan support of the United Nations Secretary General and UN agencies.

India's Ministry for Environment, Forest and Climate Change was quick to note this point about net zero in a statement, adding that "historical cumulative emis-

sions are the cause of the climate crisis that the world faces today." It also noted that the "developed countries had usurped far more than their fair share of the global carbon budget." The limitations of the remaining carbon budget for 1.5°C are so stringent – a mere 500 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide for an even chance of keeping to the limit – that they cannot be met by promises of net zero 30 years from now. The report is indeed a "clarion call for developed countries to undertake immediate, deep emission cuts," as the Union Environment Minister, Bhupendra Yadav, tweeted, especially if they are not to deprive the rest of the world, barring China, of any hope of future development. Developed countries must, in fact, reach net zero well before 2050. That Alok Sharma, the COP26 President, is not unaware of all this is seen from the shift in his discourse, appealing to "keep 1.5°C alive".

Little cheer for Global South

However, the exposure of the misleading character of the net zero campaign can bring little cheer to the global South, for an equally disconcerting finding is that the world is set to cross the 1.5°C limit within 10-15 years. If deep emissions cuts by the three big emitters – the U.S., the European Union and China – are not forthcoming, even the prospect of a mild overshoot of the limit followed by a later decline is likely to be foregone. After years of procrastination in real action, the constant shifting of goal posts to avoid immediate emissions reduction, and marking time with their obsession with Article 6 negotiations to pass the burden on to developing countries, the developed countries now have nowhere to hide.

Regrettably, India cannot save the world from the consequences of the neglect of those whose responsibility it was to lead in taking credible action. India has contributed less than 5% of global cumulative emissions to date, with per capita annual emissions a third of the global average. India is also the only nation among the G20 with commitments under the Paris Agreement that are even 2°C warming-compatible. India needs its development space urgently to cope with the future, one where global temperature increase may be closer to 2°C. With India's annual emissions at 3 billion tonnes in carbon dioxide equivalent terms, even the impossible, such as the total cessation of emissions for the next 30 years, with others' emissions remaining the same, will buy the world less than two years of additional time for meeting the Paris Agreement temperature goals. The prospect of keeping almost a sixth of humanity in quasi-permanent deprivation for the rest of the century as a consequence cannot even be contemplated.

Focusing on definite cumulative emission targets keeping equity and historical responsibility in view, immediate emission reductions by the developed countries with phase-out dates for all fossil fuels, massive investment in new technologies and their deployment, and a serious push to the mobilisation of adequate climate finance is the need of the hour. This is the message that the IPCC report has sent to this year's climate summit and the world.

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Decoding the Tamil Nadu Budget

The focus at a time like this should be on shoring up demand and enhancing people's purchasing power



KALAIYARASAN A.

du was among the worst-hit States in terms of the lockdown-induced economic distress leading to disproportionate job losses.

Let's first look at the positive aspects. The Budget has made allocations for many promises made in the DMK's election manifesto. This is laudable. The reduction in the effective rate of tax on petrol by ₹3 per litre is certainly a relief to many. Similarly, schemes such as nine new SIPCOT parks in industrially backward areas and the establishment of Tidel Parks in Tier-II and Tier-III towns are welcome steps in building industrial infrastructure across the State. So are measures such as strengthening public education. The Budget promises to improve the quality of teaching in government schools as enrolment in government schools fell from 76% of the total student population in 2012 to 53% in 2020. Learning outcomes, it says, will be accorded the highest priority.

Following the DMK's historical legacy of federal assertion, the Budget's proposal of establishing an advisory council to develop a Federal Fiscal Model, ostensibly to propose a new road map on revenue and taxation, including the Goods and Services Tax, again is welcome.

Economic recovery

However, the Budget's prescriptions fall short of what the diagnosis in the white paper requires, particularly with respect to revenue mobilisation. The proposed property taxes mentioned in the white paper are missing in the Budget document.

Besides the nitty-gritty of num-



bers, what is important is to offer a robust path for the economy to recover. As the white paper has shown, the State's fiscal position is poor, particularly with rising revenue deficits and unsustainable public debt coupled with falling expenditure which has affected productive investment and the development sectors. The share of development expenditure in total disbursement was 62.9% in 2011-12 as against all States average of 63.1%. This came down to 57.5% in 2018-19 which was substantially below the all-States average of 62.9%.

The ability of government intervention in any economy lies in its fiscal capacity, the size of government, measured by its ratio of revenue/ tax to the GSDP. The ratio of total revenue receipts to the GSDP has been declining. It was 12.49% in 2006, peaked at 13.35% in 2008-09, and came down to 8.7% in the year of pandemic. The most alarming figure is the falling tax GDP ratio from 8.48% in 2006-07 to just 5.46% in 2020-21, a decline of 3.02 percentage points.

If we look at the disaggregated figures, the only receipt which has not come down during the period analysed in the white paper is tax

collection from TASMAT, a public sector network of liquor shops. It was 1.22% in 2006-07 and 1.40% in 2019-20. Such a trend is really disturbing given the fact that it is the poor who disproportionately contribute to such tax revenue.

Union aggression

While the State's ability to levy tax has come down, its revenue mobilisation was further hindered by Union government policies. One, the State was hit the most by the declining share in a divisible pool of Union taxes, particularly after switching to the 2011 Census base from the 1971 Census by the 14th and 15th Finance Commissions. Its shares in the divisible pool came down from 6.6% during the 10th Finance Commission to 4.02% during the 15th Finance Commission. To put it differently, the State is paying a penalty for controlling its population growth.

Two, with the arrival of GST, not only has the State lost its ability to generate revenue, but is also losing revenue from other sources. For instance, the Union government has imposed a cess on petrol and diesel which are not shared with the State governments.

There are some sectors which ought to have received immediate attention. The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), a key sector in the State's inclusive growth trajectory, are in trouble now. Given their degree of informality as well as demand and supply constraints, MSMEs suffered the most during the lockdown while the companies listed in the stock market are doing relatively better. Many of them were charged

the same rate of interest even during the pandemic. While the Budget mentions a tripartite agreement between MSMEs and their creditors to reach an agreement on restructuring loans, there is no comprehensive package for them.

Similarly, the Tamil Nadu government was appreciated for its proactive measures during the second wave of the pandemic, including its COVID-19 assistance package to ration card holders, but the Budget does not have any specific programmes for the informal workers and urban poor. On August 3, 2021, a parliamentary standing committee recommended the institution of an urban employment scheme at the national level. While a similar scheme had a passing mention in the Budget, Tamil Nadu could have set a model by instituting one. Labour Welfare Boards for informal workers are in a shambles. Revitalising these boards would go a long way protecting informal workers.

Finally, fiscal deficits matter only as numbers. What matters most is the strategy of revenue mobilisation efforts and expenditure priorities. The excessive focus on fiscal deficits and public debts in the time of a pandemic is undesirable. Instead, the focus ought to be on shoring up demand and enhancing people's purchasing power. Experiences from the world over suggest that the path to recovery is well-timed stimulus. Tamil Nadu is no exception.

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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.

Return of the Taliban

The Taliban will likely impose their medieval idea of governance in Afghanistan, with scant regard for human rights, freedom of speech, educational opportunities and freedom of work and leisure, especially for women ("Afghan President Ghani leaves country as Taliban reach Kabul", August 16). One can only hope that the new dispensation will recognise that it must allow citizens to exercise freedoms in order for it to gain more legitimacy in the eyes of the world.

A. MOHAN,
Chennai

Now that the Taliban have taken over, we need to ask some hard questions. How were the insurgents able to hoodwink the American intelligence? From where do the Taliban get their stockpile of deadly weapons? How did they regroup, grow and launch so many successful operations? How did they escape aerial attacks? And how did they manage to overthrow the government so easily? The world needs answers from the U.S. administration.

V. JOHAN DHANAKUMAR,
Chennai

It is shocking that the UNSC, the international

community's principal organ for peacekeeping, did not convene to discuss the Afghan crisis as it was unfolding and chose to meet only on Monday once the U.S. had left Afghanistan and the Taliban had taken over. Whose interests does that serve? It is time for a complete restructuring and reform of the UNSC.

RATNARAJ JAIN,
Rajahmundry

Scientific temper

The scholarly articles of the I-Day special were insightful. I particularly wish to highlight the piece "Scientific temper as key" by Dr. Gagandeep Kang. It

was bold and exceptional for a country with so many traditions, conventions and social taboos to have adopted a Scientific Policy Resolution as early as 1958. Indeed, the first quarter of independent India saw many concrete steps taken in the direction of developing a scientific temper. However, the state policies followed in the last few years give the impression that questioning, which is the essential tenet of scientific temper, is unwelcome, and seem to promote a line of thought which accepts primeval theories and beliefs as final truths. In fact, much money is spent

in promoting projects to explore those "facts". While there is some merit in testing the views and beliefs of centuries through modern means, the problem arises when it is done more to prove them rather than to test their validity. By asking whether we can thrive as a society

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS: In an Open page article titled "Grace, gratitude and humanism" (August 15, 2021), there was an erroneous reference, in the context of men's high jump at the Tokyo Olympics, to Italian athlete Gianmarco Tamberi getting injured and not attempting another jump. Actually, Tamberi had a history of injuries before coming to the event. He was not hurt during the event.

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without scientific temper, Dr. Kang has expressed a concern that we can ill-afford to neglect.

RAJIVA RAMAN,
Banasaras

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