



## Aftermath

Only the threat of global backlash can stop the Taliban from inflicting harm on Afghan society

As nations come to terms with the abrupt change of regime in Afghanistan, they will seek answers to many questions about the nature of the new Taliban government that controls most of the territories. Almost as an emergency measure that reflects the sense of alarm in Afghanistan's prospects of a stable future, U.S. President Joe Biden and U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson have agreed to hold a virtual G7 leaders' meeting to discuss a common strategy and approach. Yet, it will be a complex and likely frustrating task for the G7 to reconcile its position on minimum governance norms for Afghanistan with the ground realities of rule by the Taliban. In its May 2021 Foreign Ministers' communiqué, the G7 noted that "a sustainable, inclusive political settlement would be the only way" to achieve a just and durable peace that benefits all Afghans. To that end, the G7 promised its support to the negotiations in Doha and efforts to convene a high-level conference on Afghanistan in Istanbul. But the sheer audacity of the Taliban takeover and its promise to make Sharia orthodox the basis of jurisprudence suggest that Taliban interlocutors attending these parleys may not truly represent the voice of their commanders and administrators on the ground. Similarly, the G7's enduring aspiration for meaningful participation and inclusion of the voices of women, young people, and those from minority groups, looks to be dashed.

Given that the project of long-term military occupation and regime change has amounted to naught in this country, going forward, the only lever that G7 might have to press for internal change in Afghanistan is foreign aid and, should the circumstances warrant it, sanctions. Indeed, the May 2021 communiqué noted that "Current and future support to the Afghan government relies on the adherence to the principles set out in the Afghanistan Partnership Framework and progress towards the outcomes in the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework II as decided upon at the November 2020 Geneva donors' conference". Yet, if there is one signal that the conditional norms elucidated by the G7 will be brazenly disregarded by the Taliban it is that they have already been disregarded to the extent that the Islamist group has been linked to numerous attacks on civilians, including targeted campaigns against women in public life, human rights activists, and media persons. This means calls for eschewing violence and allowing unhindered access to humanitarian aid may fall on deaf ears unless there is a punitive element that lends teeth to such demands. If the Taliban have distilled past strategic learnings, it might hold out hope that this time around, they will limit the damage they inflict on the fabric of mainstream Afghan society, if nothing for fear that the backlash that it will bring from the global community will once again break their grip on power.

## A delayed intervention

With global demand booming, the Centre must act faster to rev up export growth engine

After much delay, the Government has notified the rules and rates based on which exporters can claim rebates on taxes paid on their outbound cargo. That it took nearly eight months to come up with these critical details after the scheme promising such rebates kicked in has meant that exporters have had to conjure up additional working capital to the extent of taxes paid but not refunded during this period. A new scheme was necessitated to replace the erstwhile merchandise exports incentive scheme after the WTO dispute settlement body held it was not compliant with the multilateral trade watchdog's norms. The Government is confident that the new scheme, Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP), and effective from January 1, is WTO-compliant. Covering 8,555 tariff lines, or roughly 65% of India's exports, the remission rates now notified, range from 0.5% to 4.3% of the Freight On Board value of outbound consignments. For some goods, there is a cap on the value of the exported items. Steel, pharmaceuticals and chemicals have been excluded from the RoDTEP. Some sectors are concerned about the rates being lower than expected, while engineering firms are worried that taxes on key raw materials are not adequately offset. Fine-tuning may be needed, but a vacuum has been plugged at last.

There can be no doubt that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call to scale up exports to \$400 billion this year helped expedite the disentangling of inter-ministerial red tape over the RoDTEP scheme. A new foreign trade policy, a couple of smaller export-related schemes and a mechanism to fork out the last two years' pending dues under the earlier export incentive programme are expected by September. This urgency must not be lost. Having opted out of RCEP, India is looking to re-ignite free trade pact negotiations with Australia, the U.K., the EU and the U.S. The global economy is on the cusp of one of its strongest rebounds as COVID-19 vaccination drives cross a tipping point in many advanced economies. As they look to go beyond China to service domestic consumption demand, India needs to aggressively step up to the opportunity. Although the second wave's damage on the economy is less severe than the wreckage from last year's national lockdown, domestic recovery is still feeble and uneven. Consumption may see some pullback on pent-up demand as well as the impending festive season, but its sustainability is fragile. Till that firms up, private investments are unlikely to take off. That leaves public capital spending and exports as the two growth engines with feasible firepower to aid the recovery momentum. There is no time to dither on either of these fronts.

# The significance of the 'there is no data' answer

The Government's consistent 'no data' declarations on important issues are a critical part of a larger political project



SEEMA CHISHTI

It can be safely assumed that the popular American dictum, "In God we trust; all others must bring data", is unlikely to be found in any office of the Narendra Modi government. There is mounting evidence to show that either the Government has 'no data' about issues that show it in a bad light, or with its 'alternate facts', the answer is zero. If there was a filing cabinet that citizens maintained, then the file titled 'No Data' would be the thickest. The desperate scenes of migrants walking back to their villages after the announcement of the sudden lockdown on March 24, 2020 were recorded by global media. A World Bank report concluded that 40 million migrant jobs were impacted/lost in India in April 2020. But when the Government was first asked how many migrants had lost their jobs, the answer was that it had no data. When asked in September 2020 on how many frontline health workers had lost their lives during the pandemic, the then Health Minister announced that there was no data.

### Consumer data, other cases

Well before the novel coronavirus pandemic, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation decided not to release the results of the all-India Household Consumer Expenditure Survey conducted by the National Statistical Office during 2017-2018. The results of the Survey would have come before the 2019 parliamentary elections. But the Government waited for after the results, offering an excuse in November 2019 that there were "data quality issues". It is pertinent to note that leaks from the data had suggested a noteworthy slump in consumption expenditure, an ominous proposition that showed this for the

first time since data collection had started in 1972-73.

The no data declarations have continued this year. The Government told Parliament in this monsoon session that the number of deaths caused by manual scavenging were not available. On the lack of oxygen claiming lives in the second wave of COVID-19, the Government said it had no information. On the number of farmers dead during the farmers' agitation, it has been a stubborn stone-wall of no data. On the economic loss caused due to Internet shutdowns, in which India has the world record for the most by any democracy, the Government said it had no information. On a parliamentary question on vaccine shortage, clear as day with a number of inoculation centres shutting down due to no doses, the Union Minister of State for Health declared in Parliament (written reply to the Rajya Sabha) on July 20, that there was no shortage of vaccines.

The Government understands the power of constructing a narrative using data. The power of the ₹1.76-lakh crore 'notional loss' due to airwaves sold during the second term of the United Progressive Alliance government was a datapoint that was used masterfully to weave a narrative. A serious attempt to comprehend why it is saying no data is important, because this is no trivial matter but critical to a larger political project.

### Hands off responsibility

The first reason why 'no data' is to be maintained is easy to understand. If the Government were to acknowledge any data, even if these were highly discounted numbers, it would be tantamount to entering the ring and opening itself up to scrutiny as being accountable for the mess and deterioration in the state of affairs. "Thank You Modiji" has replaced *Acche Din* on Government advertisements across the board, embodying the total personalisation of governance. The flip side is that any failure by the Government would imply failure of this centralised machine that continually claims



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credit. Denial of data on important markers of governance, delivery and issues that matter to people – whether it is farmers killing themselves, people consuming far less than before, hunger rising, the mismanagement of the pandemic or the botch-up in the vaccine policy – keeps responsibility at bay. If the Government knows, it must be responsible. And conversely, if it does not, it can pretend no one died or no one lost jobs and that the failures did not occur at all.

### Bounced to States

The second reason for not acknowledging facts or numbers is to deflect accountability to the only other unit of power that continues to stand and challenge the Centre – and that is State governments. The fall in the share of taxes due to States has never been so low in five years, as it is now. To continue to mesmerise citizens and keep them invested in the benefits of centralisation, washing hands off responsibility is critical for the Union government. Acknowledging data or information of failures details the project and the creation of alternate facts is very important. This needs not just avoidance of responsibility but deflection from vital issues. So, we continually hear variants of "health is a State subject." India was told that there was no data on deaths due to 'no oxygen' because States did not give the data. And if it is not the States, it must be the political Opposition or past governments that will be held accountable by the Centre.

The third reason, apart from the direct evasion of responsibility and accountability, why 'no data' is consistently maintained is that it allows regimes to rewrite the story of the times. This is not about re-

writing history but about retaining the power to script the present at a future date. The truth does not matter, the narrative does. Recently, crucial health data from the National Health Mission's Health Management Information System went missing. It was only after data-watchers made a fuss that the data on the website was restored. Consider giving absolutely no data for the lack of oxygen deaths. The news cycle allows public memory to be only that long. It might be fully possible to tell the story of oxygen in the second wave in a year's time, by writing fiction, if data on it is simply withheld now. If data on this subject were provided now, it narrows the flight of how far spin can go on to market a dismal failure as a success.

### Widening information gap

Information is power and a lack of information is the absence of power. There is a gigantic and growing information gap between the state and citizens. The state is building the largest ever technology-driven structure ever built by India for identification under Aadhaar, which wants biometrics before poor people even get their food grain rations. The state wants to be able to use facial recognition tools before putting in place a legal framework to be able to do so. All this data is sought to be extracted from citizens while it is trying to maintain an effective 'no data' position on the biggest snooping revelations that an international consortium has exposed globally, after the National Security Agency (NSA) revelations in the United States by Edward Snowden. The asymmetry of power can only be sustained by keeping citizens in the dark while increasing the rulers' reach to know everything about everyone else.

Moreover, there is a certain brazenness in saying with a straight face and on record, at constitutional fora such as Parliament, that the Government does not have the data. It is seen to feed the public image of a 'strong ruler' by demonstrating unbridled authority and unconstrained power, but this

partly is also apiece with the information skew – encouraged not only because the Government does not wish to part with data but because denying citizens the data helps to restate the emergent power equation between the Government and citizens. It is something that Right To Information activists witness routinely as they try and exercise their 'right' to get information. Lest the total concentration of power with the rulers get diluted, the data will not be given, shared or made easily available.

Sometimes, dead citizens speak up. At the height of the second wave of COVID-19, when poor and hapless citizens ended up burying their dead relatives on the shores of the Ganga, it was taken as the end of the matter. But being in denial did not help when it rained. Sixty buried bodies floated up on the banks of Allahabad's Phaphamau on July 30, and the Uttar Pradesh State government was forced to perform their last rites that night.

### Challenge before citizens

But those were exceptional and dramatic circumstances. Eventually, lived experiences of people, those whose kith and kin died due to lack of oxygen, or of those who died of COVID-19 begging for medical aid, will have to challenge the Government narrative. This can be a tall order, expecting citizens to hold their reality as a contrast to *sarkari* spin, that too in a situation where several institutions and a large section of the media have turned into government mouthpieces.

Denial of data is not a bug but a feature of the political ideology governing the country. In a scenario where a majority of citizens may be dead to the truth of their times, the challenge would be for them to recognise the truth and unhesitatingly push for it. It is a long road, but good and truthful information is the very basis of the quality of democracy. It matters to fight this fight.

Seema Chishti is a journalist-writer based in Delhi

# Keeping an eye on China's expanding nuclear stack

Even if there is contention about the scope and prospective size of Beijing's capabilities, India needs to be watchful



HARSH V. PANT & KARTIK BOMMAKANTI

More evidence emerged recently that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is expanding the size of its nuclear arsenal by building more missile silos. The debate, though, surrounding China's nuclear build-up is mired in considerable dispute. The source of contention is over the scope and prospective size of the PRC's nuclear capabilities. The construction of the nuclear missile silo field in Xinjiang region in western China indicates the PRC is fielding a larger nuclear force based on fixed land-based capabilities. The site is believed to host 110 silos. This development comes against the backdrop of evidence that China had built a site with 120 silos in the arid region of Yumen, in the Gansu province.

The most likely reason behind the current expansion of China's nuclear arsenal is: increase the survivability of its arsenal against a first strike from their nuclear adversaries, most prominently the United States. Washington, which possesses a larger arsenal, stands at 3,800 warheads, and paired with its growing missile defence

capabilities poses a threat to Chinese retaliatory nuclear forces. However, other countries too loom large in China's nuclear expansion such as Russia and India, even if Russia is not an overriding concern presently.

### Rate and extent is key

The key question is not so much why or whether the PRC is expanding its arsenal, but rather the rate and extent of the production. Does China want a usable and deployable atomic stockpile running into thousands of warheads, or does Beijing want an arsenal in the middle to high hundreds? Making a precise estimate of the PRC's nuclear strength is not easy. However, Chinese nuclear forces stand at roughly anywhere between 250 to 350 nuclear warheads according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) as well as the Federation of American Scientists (FAS).

Last year, the United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) chief Admiral Charles Richard stated that the PRC could double its current operational stockpile which is still in the "low 200s" over the next decade. However, the current silo-based missile expansion being undertaken by the PRC can be misleading, because the PRC's quest might be as much to conceal the number of missiles tipped with nuclear warheads in its possession as it is to disassemble and deceive by building a large



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number of decoy missile silos.

### A first strike strategy

Land-based nuclear capabilities also enable the Chinese to present a nuclear adversary with a larger menu of targets to strike, exhausting a large number of the enemy's missiles in a first strike. Indeed, some of the decoy silos are meant to absorb and exhaust a part of the enemy's first strike nuclear forces. Thus, the larger the target list for any potential opponent, the greater the chances of China's arsenal surviving a first strike thereby boosting the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent. In all probability, the PRC is expanding its nuclear forces if not to match the larger nuclear forces fielded by the Americans and the Russians, but sufficient to withstand a first strike and then execute a retaliatory attack that would defeat U.S. missile defences.

China's nuclear tipped ballistic missiles forces, whether land-

based or sea-based, have certainly improved in quantity and quality. The PRC's Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capabilities and Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) capabilities in the form of the Dongfeng-41 (DF-41) and the DF-26, respectively, are its most potent land-based missile systems. At least 16 launchers of the DF-26 are known to be deployed in the Xinjiang region close to the Sino-Indian border.

In the case of the first, the silos being built in Xinjiang and Gansu could house DF-41 ICBMs that are capable of carrying multiple warheads much like their road mobile counterparts. In addition, the decoy silos can launch conventional armed ballistic missiles, and since they are likely to be interspersed with nuclear-tipped missiles, they create inadvertent escalation risks.

### What New Delhi should track

Consequently, the latest development of silos presents a grim and disturbing set of consequences for the world and India. The PRC has refused to enter any tripartite arms control negotiations with Americans and Russians that could forestall the deployment of a more numerically robust nuclear arsenal, and possibly sees its current build-up as a necessity to bridge the nuclear asymmetries it faces vis-à-vis Washington and Moscow.

The growth in China's nuclear

arsenal might not have an immediate impact on India, but its development of land-based nuclear silos in the Xinjiang province should worry decision-makers and strategic elites in New Delhi given the region's proximity to India. More importantly, it is likely to have an impact on the ongoing boundary stand-off between the two countries in Eastern Ladakh. The issue is not so much actual nuclear use by the PRC against India, but the coercive leverage fixed land-based nuclear capabilities give the Chinese in consolidating their territorial gains in Depsang, Demchok and Gogra-Hotsprings. If anything, it is likely to produce a suppressive effect against any conventional military escalation. The more extreme and adverse outcome for India is that New Delhi is left with no choice but to accept China's *fait accompli*.

The strategic balance between China and India is unlikely to be altered because of the Chinese nuclear expansion, but New Delhi would be wise to keep a close eye on its neighbour and work on enhancing its own strategic capabilities. Amidst an all-round sharpening of great power contestation, the nuclear issue will continue to challenge policymakers.

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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.

### Change in Afghanistan

Those who hope to lead Afghanistan must stand by their pledge to protect the person, property, and honour of all Afghans in an Islamic system of government: lasting peace and the well-being of Afghans. One should read the opening pages of the Islamic decree, 'Fatwa Against Terrorism and Suicide Bombings', written in book form by Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, a scholar from Jhang, Pakistan. We should not only prevent a day such as 9/11, but the disease of terrorism itself. It would be

beyond shameful to pass this onto another generation on both sides of the Durand Line, Americans, and the world. The message of peace should never be destroyed. The Afghan desire for a peaceful, sovereign, united, and neutral nation must rise and shine.

ZOHAL OSMAN,  
Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.

■ Going by the past record of the Taliban, one cannot rely on their "assurance" that they will uphold the rights of women and not pose threats to other nations. Afghanistan should not be allowed to

drift and become a hub of extremism, especially with the U.S. acknowledging that the Taliban is in possession of very sophisticated American-made weapons. Who will be held accountable in case there is a violation of rights? And how is the UN going to deal with a Taliban Afghanistan?

S. HARITHA RAO,  
Wanaparthy, Telangana

### Kohlism

The columnist ('Sport' page, 'Between Wickets' – "Kohli did a great job, but Kohlism needs to be reviewed", August 18) has articulated what many cricket fans feel

strongly about. Winning is good; winning abroad and playing tough is spirit-lifting and great viewing when the Indian cricket team pulls off a victory against all odds. What is not palatable is the manner in which Virat Kohli personally leads with an ungentlemanly show of aggression, which is at odds completely with winning with grace. He does not need to stoop to such levels. Derivative comments go beyond sledging, though, unfortunately, now accepted as a way of playing the game. He must also realise that today's viewers, including

children in their formative years, can understand abuse picked up during a telecast. Let the bat do the talking. Virat Kohli should recall that Ajinkya Rahane and team pulled off a victory in Australia under tougher circumstances but won the hearts and respect of all.

TERENCE D'SOUZA,  
Bengaluru

■ A great win does not justify poor behaviour on the field. Misplaced aggression is very much against the sporting ethos of cricket. It is time Virat Kohli matures as a sober leader. And emerging cricketers should not walk

into the trap of giving importance to sound over substance. We have to win the hearts too, not just the matches.

Y.V.N. SARMA,  
Mumbai

### Maki Kaji

Maki Kaji, the creator of Sudoku, gifted us the pleasure of solving wonderfully challenging puzzles. Many of the puzzles are a great stimulant to the thinking process. They will continue to enthrall millions.

V. ANANTHA SUBRAMANIAN,  
Chendamangalam, Kerala