



Reboot to reset

With Indo-U.S. trade deal off, it is time India reorients its global economic engagement

India's largest trading partner, and one with whom it has a significant trade surplus, the U.S., is no longer interested in securing a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA), as per indications from the Joe Biden administration. An official acknowledgement of this, from Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, suggests that years of negotiations towards a 'mini-trade deal' followed by a full-blown trade pact that Mr. Biden's predecessor oversaw may well be infructuous now. The Government will now seek to work on market access issues on both sides, he said, adding that lowering of non-tariff barriers, mutual recognition pacts and adopting common quality standards can also help Indian exports in the interim. There is a possibility that even these issues, which include long-festering dissonances over providing access to U.S. agricultural products or easing import duties on automobiles and Bourbons, would have to be discussed afresh. On Friday, the U.S. envoy to India met Mr. Goyal for what he said was a parley on attaining the \$500 billion bilateral trade vision of the U.S. President. The trade target, set when Mr. Biden was the Vice President in the Barack Obama regime, remains unchanged, but the tools for achieving it are no longer clear. India was pulled out of the U.S.'s Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) that granted some tariff relief to its exports by the Trump government in 2019, and hopes of its reinduction through a mini-trade deal now appear bleak. While India was expected to gain from the Sino-U.S. trade wars under the Donald Trump administration, its retaliation to the GSP status revocation with hiked tariffs on U.S. products had led to frictions that perhaps stymied the conclusion of a mini-trade deal before the change at the helm in the White House.

The U.S.'s no-go stance on the FTA implies ambitions may have to be pared down but also provides an opportunity for India to holistically review its stance on global trade. It is refreshing that Mr. Goyal has signalled a revamped approach towards FTAs and reminded Indian industry there cannot be one-way traffic. This needs to be matched by actions that start unwinding India's creeping walls of import tariffs. The Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign has further exacerbated that view – as the advent of a protectionist 'closed market' project. Strenuous exhortations that the self-reliance drive is one that seeks to integrate with global value chains can only go so far. Trade policy cannot be perpetuated in isolation and, in fact, affects investments too. Having walked out of RCEP, India needs to demonstrate to its potential FTA partners, including the EU and the U.K., with which rivals like Vietnam have already sealed a deal, that it is a viable alternative to China in a post-COVID world. To be a major trading and manufacturing nation, India can ill-afford to keep sending mixed signals.

Faith and marriage

Dubious legislation cannot be allowed to criminalise inter-faith marriages

Aggressive and patently unconstitutional feature of recent anti-conversion laws enacted by different States is the criminalisation of inter-faith marriages by treating them as a means to convert one of the parties from one religion to another. While anti-conversion laws, euphemistically called in some States as laws on 'freedom of religion', have always sought to criminalise conversions obtained through fraud, force or allurement, the recent enactments or amendments have created "conversion by marriage" as one of the illegal forms of conversion. In its interim order protecting parties to inter-religious marriages from needless harassment, the Gujarat HC has made it clear that the "rigours" of the State's amendments introduced earlier this year will not apply to marriages that do not involve any fraud, force or allurement. So, it has stopped the initiation of criminal proceedings against those who have married across religious faiths, unless there was any of these illegal elements. A Bench has rejected the State government's attempt to adopt an innocent reading of the provisions of the Gujarat Freedom of Religion (Amendment) Act, 2021, by claiming that inter-faith marriages that did not involve fraud or coercion and leading to conversion would not attract the penal provisions. The argument is obviously contrary to the wording of the amendment, which makes conversion "by marriage" or "by getting a person married" or "by aiding a person to get married" an offence. The court said, "A plain reading of Section 3 would indicate that any conversion on account of marriage is also prohibited."

It is regrettable that Hindutva votaries continue to believe in medieval-minded laws aimed at curbing inter-faith marriages. Despite clear Supreme Court rulings that it is no more constitutional to police private lives and beliefs, sections in the polity still believe that inter-religious marriages are aimed at religious conversion, that they have an adverse impact on public order and invariably involve coercion or deceit. It was always clear to the secular minded and legal experts that constitutional courts will not see such marriages as events that impinge on public order, and that making their solemnisation a ground for prosecution under anti-conversion laws was unlikely to be upheld. It is clear that the Gujarat law's provisions "interfere with the intricacies of marriage" and an individual's right to choice, thereby infringing Article 21 of the Constitution. The principle that the right to marry a person of one's choice is integral to Article 21 flows from the verdict in *Shafin Jahan vs Asokan*. The order stalling criminal action against those entering into a valid inter-faith marriage constitutes a significant judicial pushback against communal divides through dubious legislation.

The fall of Kabul, the future of regional geopolitics

The post-American power vacuum in the region will aid China and shape India's strategic choices and behaviour



HAPPYMON JACOB

The fall of Kabul in the wake of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan will prove to be a defining moment for the region and the future shape of its geopolitics; it would be as defining, if not more, as the Soviet intervention in 1979 and the American one in 2001. While a lot depends on the Taliban's actual conduct both domestically as well as on the southern and western Asian geopolitical chessboard in the months ahead, the Taliban are likely to continue as a 'useful villain' in the unfolding great power competition. For New Delhi, the fall of Kabul is a moment of reckoning and it must rethink its regional strategies and options. Unfortunately, of the latter, it does not have many.

A vacuum

What is most disconcerting is the regional power vacuum in the Eurasian heartland created by the haphazard manner in which the United States withdrew from Afghanistan and its potential knock-on effects. An axis of regional powers such as China, Pakistan, Russia, and the Taliban, have already started filling this power vacuum, shaping, thereby, the contours of the region's geopolitics based on their individual and common interests. Iran might also jump on this opportunistic bandwagon under the Chinese leadership.

What is abundantly clear is that each of these countries harbour deep anti-American feelings in varying degrees which will further shrink the American influence in the Eurasian heartland. While it is too early to determine whether what these countries have on their hands is an opportunity or a ticking bomb, the U.S., as a direct consequence of the formation of this

axis, might decide to explore new ways of working with them to stabilise the region, if it desires to do so, and remain relevant there. If indeed that happens, could it result in a potential softening of the American rhetoric against China, Pakistan, Russia and perhaps even Iran? More so, what would that mean for India? While a healthy conversation among the great powers – the U.S., China and Russia – on global and regional challenges is a good sign, India is neither a great power nor present at the table. New Delhi must ensure that it does not become a casualty on the south-western Asian geopolitical chessboard.

Advantage China; extremism

The post-American power vacuum in the region will be primarily advantageous to China and its grand strategic plans for the region. Beijing will further strengthen its efforts to bring every country in the region, except India, on the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative bandwagon, thereby altering the geopolitical and geo-economic foundations of the region. More so, the much-feared Chinese encirclement of India will become ever more pronounced. Having been further emboldened by the U.S.'s withdrawal and in stamping its writ on the region, Beijing is likely to become less accommodative towards India including on the Line of Actual Control. Even in trade, given the sorry state of the post-COVID-19 Indian economy, India needs trade with China more than the other way round. Unless New Delhi can find ways of ensuring a rapprochement with China, it must expect Beijing to challenge India on occasion, and be prepared for it.

The bigger challenge for India though would be a near-certain increase in terrorism and extremism in the region. The U.S. presence in Afghanistan, international pressure on the Taliban and Financial Action Task Force worries in Pakistan had a relatively moderating effect on the region's terror ecosystem. With the Taliban now back in



Kabul, things are bound to change. The visuals of the Taliban releasing terrorists from Afghan jails would send a powerful message to their fellow travellers, handlers, and sympathisers in the region.

While the neighbouring countries are also worried about terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, the reality is that they are busy making their own private deals with the Taliban to not host terror organisations targeting them. There is little appetite for a regional approach to curbing terrorism from a Taliban-led Afghanistan. This enables the Taliban to engage in a selective treatment towards terror outfits present there or they have relations with. Moreover, given that the international community may have no choice but to recognise the Taliban regime – UN Security Council members such as China and Russia have already indicated their intent to do so – would also mean that the Taliban would hold more power in a bargain on the terror question. Sanctions are unlikely to deter an outfit that does not need to bother about the next election.

It is unlikely that the Taliban will proactively export terror to other countries unless of course for tactical purposes by, say for instance, Pakistan against India. The real worry, however, is the inspiration that disgruntled elements in the region will draw from the Taliban's victory against the world's sole superpower.

To that extent, the triumphalism in Pakistan over the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan could eventually become counterproductive for Pakistan itself. Whether Pakis-

tan Prime Minister Imran Khan refers to them as a force that has 'unshackled the chains of slavery' or the country's deep state considers them as a strategic asset, the reality is that many anti-Pakistan terror organisations would be emboldened as well.

Impact on regional interests

The return of the Taliban to Kabul has effectively laid India's 'mission Central Asia' to rest. If New Delhi could not find its way to Central Asia with encouraging partners such as Iran and the Hamid Karzai/Ashraf Ghani governments, the possibility of New Delhi doing so now is next to nil. India's diplomatic and civilian presence as well as its civilian investments will now be at the mercy of the Taliban, and to some extent Pakistan. If there is a concerted effort by China, Pakistan and the Taliban to erase the Indian presence from Afghanistan, there is little India can do about it. Had New Delhi, as I had argued earlier, cultivated deeper relations (which by no means would have meant recognising the outfit) with the Taliban, Indian interests would have been more secure in a post-American Afghanistan. New Delhi's lack of strategic foresight will prove to be costly.

What is perhaps not yet understood is how the rise of the anti-America axis (China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and a Taliban-led Afghanistan) and anti-American sentiments in the region would impact India's regional interests given that it has become closer to the U.S. than ever before in its history. We have to wait and see what this mismatch between the region's mood and India's strategic choices would mean for the country. There is little doubt that because of these developments, India's regional ambitions will take a major hit in the months and years ahead.

The fall of Kabul and the consequent knock-on effects in the region will have several potential implications for India's foreign policy and its strategic choices and behaviour. For one, given the little physical access India has to its

north-western landmass, its focus is bound to shift more to the Indo-Pacific even though a maritime grand strategy may not necessarily be an answer to its continental challenges. Second, New Delhi might also seek to shed the arrogance it displayed towards its smaller neighbours during Modi 1.0 and cultivate friendly relations with them. Myanmar is a case in point. India has already indicated that it would not challenge the junta on the coup and its widespread human rights violations. This policy is likely to continue even if the Joe Biden administration seeks New Delhi's help in turning up the heat on Myanmar's generals. The last thing New Delhi needs now is an angry neighbour rushing to China.

India-Pakistan ties

Third, the developments in Afghanistan could nudge New Delhi to seek stability, if not peace, with Pakistan. While there is little desire in New Delhi today to reopen a broad-based dialogue process with Pakistan, even a 'cold peace' would be in India's interest. For Pakistan too, such a 'cold peace' will help it to focus its energies on consolidating its interests and gains in Afghanistan. As a result, both sides might refrain from indulging in competitive risk-taking unless something dramatic happens which is always a possibility between the two rivals. That said, stability between India and Pakistan depends a great deal on how politics in Kashmir plays out, and whether New Delhi is able to pacify the aggrieved sections in the Valley.

The lesson for India in the wake of these developments is clear: It will have to fight its own battles. So it must make enemies wisely, choose friends carefully, rekindle flickering friendships, and make peace while it can.

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In battleground Uttar Pradesh, a churn in Dalit politics

The marginalised are ready for their share in developmental opportunities, which the BJP has recognised



BADRI NARAYAN

In an emerging and new situation, the political mobilisation of Dalits and the marginalised in Uttar Pradesh is now becoming complex. It is no longer simple and unidirectional as it was in the decades of the 1990s.

During my visits to various Dalit bastis (hamlets) in and around Allahabad, Banaras/Varanasi and a few other district towns nearby, I met several people who are Scheduled Castes (SCs) and who used to, for years, cast their votes in favour of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). They were staunch BSP supporters, and without doubt, its vote bank. But things have changed after the advent of the Seva project of the Rashtriya SwayamsevakSangh (RSS). They have begun to admire the RSS, with some of them even beginning to send their children to the Saraswati Shishu Mandir, the Vidya Bharati-run chain of schools in India.

The section that is being influenced by the Hindutva mission – which is reaching to them either through the politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the Seva

Karya (the social service project of the Sangh) – is growing by the day in Uttar Pradesh. The slums and bastis inhabited by the migrant poor, mainly Dalits, are evolving into a centre of activities of Sangh-inspired organisations who are working for their education, health and microfinance. Various governmental schemes of the BJP government, at the Centre and in the State of Uttar Pradesh, are impacting the BSP's vote base and finding resonance among the marginalised communities of the State. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (affordable housing), the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (LPG connections to women of Below Poverty Line families) and various cash transfer schemes are rapidly changing the politico-socio landscape of the Dalits and marginalised communities. The strategies of the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, to focus developmental initiatives on the most marginalised communities such as the Mushahars and Bantangiyas are evolving new constituencies for the BJP among Dalits and the marginalised.

Real empowerment

The marginalised need empowerment in a real sense beyond ideologies and political positioning. They are ready to receive their share in developmental opportunities be it in the form of support



from the right, left or centre. Those who have to 'dig a well every day to drink water (roj kuwan khodana, roj pani pina)' are more aware now, which the middle class with facilities and access to the power of social media may not be able to comprehend. One should not perceive the Dalits and the marginalised as a vote bank for a certain kind of politics. The shift in their voting patterns in the last few years shows that considering them as a homogeneous vote bank of a particular political party may be a myth. They are open to any political party which may offer them an appropriate package which enables them to partake in the country's developmental projects and representation in democracy.

In the decades preceding the 1990s, the dreams that the national freedom movement evoked more or less worked as a binding thread by keeping them mobilised towards the Congress despite being let down at times in terms of meeting their aspirations.

Gradually, things began to

change and became visible in States such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar; the Kanshi Ram initiated Bahujan movement which later emerged as the BSP in the northern part of India especially in Uttar Pradesh was an example of this. It is true that in the beginning of the 1990s, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement attracted a section of marginalised communities towards Hindutva mobilisation.

Centres of mobilisation

The RSS's work among these communities, in the form of seva karya (opening schools, hospitals, highlighting sanitation and cleanliness and other support services), and their cultural project to provide cultural and religious dignity, offered the Hindutva stream as another alternative for Dalits and subalterns in a State such as Uttar Pradesh. So, the Bahujan and Hindutva are the two centres of mobilisation that have emerged in the socio-cultural and political arena of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh. Both are reshaping Dalit aspirations in their own way. The Bahujan positioning, which was earlier a socio-political project, has now been reduced to political campaigns that try and create aspirations among the marginalised for their share in power. In contrast, Hindutva mobilisation is trying to provide them socio-cultural religious dignity in various ways and also working to

ensure their share in power by providing them space in the politics of the BJP. There are also a few other political options in the form of Samajwadi politics (in U.P.) which also offer them space in the democratic politics of the State.

Other factors

Another side of this growing heterogeneity in terms of their political mobilisation is the result of constant changes that are taking place in the making of the community. The impact of the liberal economy, the rise of the Dalit middle class, and exposure to the mainstream and alternative media have encouraged aspiration among the marginalised and subalterns and working as a motivational force to search for ways to ensure their development and empowerment.

Dalit mobilisation in Uttar Pradesh is undergoing a big churn. One can easily see how multiplicity is emerging in their political choices. This is the result of various changes taking place in the social-political and developmental mobility of the community and the constantly changing nature of politics in Uttar Pradesh in recent times.

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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.

Afghan policy

Let not India be led by the reactions of the western nations towards the regime change in Afghanistan. It needs a fresh draft on foreign policy towards the new dispensation in Kabul. If history is a teacher, it shows the very same western blocs who are now making a U-turn as far as the Taliban are concerned. India is caught between the power sharks and should tread cautiously. Our stakes in Afghanistan are already in peril.

SHIVAMANI VASUDEVAN,
Chennai

Day of remembrance

The statement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi

that August 14 would henceforth be known as "Partition Horrors Remembrance Day" lacks statesmanship let alone political marksmanship. It is hardly the expression to use, and will be counterproductive.

On the eve of Independence day, the Prime Minister is expected to remind people of the struggles and sacrifices made in securing freedom from colonial exploitation. Only this would consolidate the spirit of freedom-loving people in building a new India. Far from it, reminding the people of the horrors of Partition and the massacres of and atrocities committed against millions

would only accentuate the communal divide and consolidate communal forces, which will not help in nation building. No nation can be built on hate and divide. The Government rather than indulging in such gimmicks should spell out its constitutional ideals and work towards consolidating the nation, and not the party in power.

N.G.R. PRASAD,
Chennai

A democratic polity would require any declaration such as instituting August 14 as 'Partition Horrors Remembrance Day' to be based on long, informed and open debates, both among

the public in general and domain experts in particular, as to the purpose, manner and nature of marking that day. As for Partition itself, it is not certain whether and indeed why people geographically and historically removed from the horrors should hold similar emotions about it as held by the people from regions and communities directly affected by the violence. Indeed, it is unfair and absurd to expect the same response to the event from an inhabitant of the Andamans or Bastar as would perhaps emerge among those coming from the Punjab, Bengal or even the erstwhile United Provinces. One wonders

whether the objective behind marking the day is really about atonement, a healing of wounds and ensuring that such violence is never repeated. Or is it to keep burning the embers of hate and violence?

FIROZ AHMAD,
New Delhi

Decorum in Parliament

Much has been written about the irreverent acts of some of our learned MPs in Parliament. Much of the hand-wringing later can be averted if a code of behaviour is evolved. Our elected MPs are expected to bring repute to Parliament. But it is pathetic to note that some of them are bent on making a

mockery of our democracy.

MANI NATARAJAN,
Chennai

Guide to health

Though the Mahatma's experiments with truth are known, we are hardly aware of his tips on health and hygiene, and treating common ailments (OpEd page, "A Hundred Years Ago – August 20, 1921", August 20). As the simple guide is said to be based on his knowledge of treatises and his own experience, it would prove invaluable in the midst of the pandemic. One hopes that the book is republished.

N. RAMA RAO,
Chennai