



Words and deeds

PM Modi did well to commit India to its democratic traditions at UN General Assembly

For the third consecutive year in a row, and his fourth such speech since he was elected in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the UN General Assembly, outlining his outlook on India's place in the world. Referring to India's large population, he said that the world grows when India grows, and transforms when India reforms, pointing to examples of the country's progress and impact: in the area of vaccines and pharmaceuticals, particularly to counter COVID, green technology and the promise of 450 GW of renewable energy by 2030, and poverty alleviation. He also enumerated how many Indians had been provided water connections, banking access, insurance coverage, health services and homes, although his claim that these "all-inclusive" development goals had been achieved only in the "last seven years", struck a politically partisan note that was out of place. Moving to regional matters, Mr. Modi pointed to the contrast between India's actions and those of Pakistan and China in veiled references. In an apparent message to Pakistan, he linked events in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have taken control, to the problem of "regressive thinking" that leads to the use of terrorism as "a political tool". He also called for safeguarding the maritime sphere from the "race of expansion and exclusion" and referred to the need for investigating the "origins of the coronavirus", subjects China is sensitive about. Addressing the UN directly for its own shortcomings, the PM said that time waits for no one, urging the UN to speed up the reforms process that has been flagging for more than a decade, which would include an expanded Security Council. This, he explained, is the only way to restore the credibility of global governance institutions.

Mr. Modi's strongest words came at the beginning of his speech, where he launched a defence of the state of Indian democracy, which has come in for some criticism over the past few years. He said India had been named the "mother of democracy" for its adherence to democratic values, symbolised by its diversity, pluralism, inclusivity, and equality, that allowed someone like him, who had once worked at his father's tea stall, to become the country's leader. The PM's words appeared to be a response to comments made during his Washington visit, where U.S. President Joe Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris stressed the need to strengthen democratic processes internally. Even as he addressed the UN, protesters outside criticised his government for actions against activists, NGOs, the laws on agriculture and citizenship, and incidents of lynching and mob violence. While the PM's commitment to India's "great tradition of democracy" was heartening, it will be measured not by words at the world body, but by answers and actions on the ground in India.

High water

India must create a social safety net to manage the fallout of cyclonic storms

Tropical cyclones laden with moisture and accumulated energy pose a growing challenge, as they have the propensity to inflict heavy damage to lives and property. As the annual monsoon retreats, thousands are left assessing the impact of cyclone Gulab, a rare event for September, on coastal Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and other areas inland. This weather system, with a gusting wind speed of 70 knots at landfall, appears to have been less intimidating than cyclones Yaas and Tauktae, although it continued to keep the seas unsafe for fishermen all along the coastline north of Andhra Pradesh, after moving overland. There have been some distressing deaths and inevitable material losses for many, and the focus must now be on relief and rehabilitation; in the recovery phase of COVID-19, the weather system has upended life for many, disrupting key inter-State road links and leading to the cancellation or diversion of several trains. The imperative is to reach out to those affected by Gulab with food, shelter and health-care support, deploying the many administrative capabilities acquired during the pandemic with the same alacrity. The welcome concern for public health and economic security must lead to stronger institutional responses to natural disasters too.

The northern Indian Ocean, of which the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal are a part, experiences only a minority of tropical storms annually, at about 7% of worldwide events, but their destructive impact on the subcontinent is severe due to a dense population and poor capacity to absorb large quantities of rainfall dumped in a short period over cities and towns. Financial arrangements to insure the population against material losses also remain weak, and as the experience in West Bengal with cyclone Amphan demonstrated last year, relief measures can easily fall victim to corruption. The influence of climate change on cyclone characteristics in a world that is heating up due to accumulation of greenhouse gases is an ongoing topic of study. The IPCC, in its scientific report on 1.5° C warming, said with a high degree of confidence that changes in the climate system, including the proportion of tropical cyclones, would experience a larger impact from increasing warming. Research evidence shows more cyclones forming over the Arabian Sea when compared to the Bay; overall there were eight storms of concern to India in 2019, and five last year, Amphan being a super cyclone. The Centre and all States cannot afford to allow large-scale losses to communities to continue each year, and, going beyond disaster response, must put in place institutional structures and insurance systems for financial protection. Cities must prepare to harvest every deluge that brings vast quantities of water, so vital to sustain mass populations.

The Quad could end up running out of steam

It has too many items on its agenda, and with the announcement of AUKUS, faces the danger of becoming a talk shop



HAPPYMON JACOB

Coming on the eve of the first in-person Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) summit in Washington DC, the new Australia-U.K.-U.S. (AUKUS) trilateral security partnership appears to be sending a subtle message to the Quad: shape up or become irrelevant. The announcement of the AUKUS and the recent outcome of the Quad summit indicate that AUKUS will go on to form a key security arrangement of the Indo-Pacific region, thereby potentially forcing the Quad to recede to the background in a struggle for attention, political will, and resources. But before we get to the implications of AUKUS on the Quad, let us briefly examine how AUKUS is also useful to the Quad.

A reassurance to allies

Still reeling under intense international criticism in the way the United States withdrew its forces from Afghanistan resulting in a humanitarian disaster, AUKUS seeks to unambiguously signal U.S. President Joe Biden's commitment to U.S. allies especially in the Indo-Pacific.

In some ways, AUKUS helps reassure its allies of the U.S.'s security commitments and underlines Washington's pivot to the Indo-Pacific. Second, the deal and particularly the sharing of American nuclear submarine technology with Australia will help Canberra overcome past hesitations about taking on China with more conviction. Third, notwithstanding the point that AUKUS may set alarm bells ringing for the Quad, AUKUS is still a shot in the arm for the larger Indo-Pacific agenda of which India, the U.S., Japan, Australia, among others, are key partners. In other words, AUKUS

will help the Quad's declared aim of keeping the Indo-Pacific region free, open and inclusive thereby contributing to its core agenda.

No replacement, but...

AUKUS may not replace the Quad and yet it appears that AUKUS has ventured where the Quad has been reluctant to make forays into – the military domain. More so, AUKUS also exposes the inherent, also self-imposed, limits of the Quad, i.e., its inability and lack of desire to give itself any military role. The focus of the recently-held Washington summit, on challenges ranging from COVID-19 to climate shows that the Quad is unlikely to take a security-dominated turn; that is precisely the vacuum AUKUS seeks to fill.

The larger question then is whether the Quad is losing its steam. For sure, the Quad seems to offer no clear purpose which, as a result, leads to too many items crowding the agenda. It neither has a secretariat or a charter, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), nor a clear set of activities such as AUKUS. The ever-growing list of focal areas of the Quad will eventually make it a less than useful deliberative forum.

Put differently, with too many items on its agenda, the Quad faces the danger of becoming a talk shop with very little actual work. What is ironic is that all the Quad members have security/military considerations in mind *vis-à-vis* China while engaging the Quad platform, but no one seems to be keen on framing it in such a manner, as is evidenced by the summit's joint statement (North Korea and Myanmar find mention in the statement though, not China). There is little interest in properly institutionalising the Quad nor has the objective for 'Quad Plus' been purposefully pursued.

Let me put this somewhat differently: Indo-Pacific remains a grand strategic vision, AUKUS has the potential to become a major military/security arrangement in



the Indo-Pacific, and the Quad/Quad Plus could end up becoming a talk shop within the Indo-Pacific.

New Delhi's hesitations

New Delhi has taken the stand that "there is no link between the AUKUS and the Quad" just as it had argued earlier that there is no link between the Malabar naval exercises and the Quad even though the Quad membership is replicated in the Malabar exercises and two-thirds of the AUKUS form 50% of the Quad.

Technically, New Delhi's stand is accurate – just because there is a striking similarity in the membership of these forums, they are not the same institutional architecture. And yet, if one were to go beyond such technicalities, it is evident that these groupings share a larger vision about the Indo-Pacific, i.e., addressing the challenge from China, and the desire for an open and free Indo-Pacific. Be it AUKUS, which enables Australia to stand up to Chinese bullying or provides the United Kingdom – its aircraft carrier, *HMS Queen Elizabeth*, the flagship of the U.K.'s Carrier Strike Group, is in the region – with a more prominent, and desirable, role in the Indo-Pacific or the annual Malabar exercises which focus on the Indo-Pacific or the Quad, their common geopolitical theatre is the Indo-Pacific. So while they are not technically related to each other, there is a broader reality that unites them all. There is no point in refusing to accept that self-evident reality.

There is also little doubt today that the Indo-Pacific is of great importance to India for a number of reasons. For one, given the conti-

mental challenges it faces including from the new developments in Afghanistan, New Delhi would do well to shift some attention to the maritime sphere. Second, at a time when India is continentally pressed against a rock and a hard place, an opportunity has presented itself for India – in the form of growing global interest in the Indo-Pacific – to be at the centre of a new geopolitical churning which it must make use of for its own security and prosperity. Third, it is also a major way of bringing together like-minded states to check Chinese hegemony in the region.

Given this context, if AUKUS potentially overshadows the enthusiasm around the Quad, it would be disadvantageous to India's interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Other Quad countries are either on the AUKUS or are alliance partners; India is neither. Eventually, therefore, the Quad faces the potential challenge of becoming a talking shop without an actionable mandate. More so, bereft of any defence arrangement, the material returns from the Quad over time would also be minimal.

Indo-Pacific engagement

This situation is made worse by India's hesitation about joining major regional economic frameworks. India, for instance, is neither a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership nor can its trade relations with the Indo-Pacific countries rival those of China. So, given our rather weak economic influence and performance in the Indo-Pacific region, what might help the country is being part of a security arrangement which can take care of its regional defence/security concerns. Even before AUKUS, India's current engagement of the Indo-Pacific was neither capable of contributing to its national security nor promoting its economic influence in the region. And now, AUKUS may have further shrunk the potential space available for the Quad, and India, to play a se-

rious role in the region's security architecture.

Sources of India's hesitations

Even though it is not just New Delhi which is hesitant about the Quad venturing into the security/military domain, India has been hesitant about the Quad moving beyond the non-military issues. So, what are the sources of New Delhi's hesitation regarding a robust role for the Quad in the security/military domain? One could advance two hypotheses in this regard. One, India's traditional reluctance about military alliances and the desire to maintain strategic autonomy. New Delhi fears that militarising the Quad could undo this jealously guarded tradition. It is, however, possible to explore military utility for the Quad without making it a formal military alliance. More so, exploring mutually beneficial military and security cooperation within the Quad framework need not contradict the principles of strategic autonomy. The operative part of 'strategic autonomy' is 'autonomy, not strategic.

The second hypothesis has to do with domestic political considerations: The Narendra Modi government is keen to avoid any military overtones for the Quad due to potential Chinese reactions to it. Recall how India and Australia had for many years soft-peddled the forum for fear of provoking China. Australia seems to have overcome its hesitation, but has India done so? For the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, any heat on the Line of Actual Control with China in the run-up to crucial State elections next year and then the 2024 parliamentary election would be unwelcome. This seems, therefore, to be a case of domestic political considerations trumping the pursuit of strategic necessities.

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The curious case of the Punjab Congress

Even with 'operation Captain' over, the party has hurdles to cross if it is to emerge successful in the Assembly elections



ASHUTOSH KUMAR

The installation of Charanjit Singh Channi as the new Chief Minister of Punjab may be viewed as an important landmark in the State's political history in terms of the politics of 'presence'. Mr. Channi is the first Chief Minister from the Dalit community in the political history of Punjab, going back to its pre-Partition days when governments were formed after the 1937 and 1946 provincial elections. Even the key portfolios in successive governments never went to the community in the past despite it constituting one-third of the population in Punjabi Suba, since its reorganisation in 1966.

It is the Jatt Sikh community that consistently got disproportionate representation in successive Assemblies and in the governments. Giani Zail Singh, a Sikh OBC, was the lone exception, as the Chief Minister of the State (later the President of India). Jatt Sikhs qualify as the 'dominant caste', going by the noted sociologist M.N. Srinivas (1972) formulation, as they are numerically strong, land-owning and not very low (middling) in the caste hierarchy.

The change is a major gamble

Considering the extremely narrow social basis of political power in the State, it is obvious that the Congress high command, a euphemism for the Gandhi family, has ta-

ken a gamble, even if done reluctantly, by anointing a non-Jatt Sikh, and from a Dalit community. Landless Dalits, being farming labourers in rural Punjab, have historically shared an uneasy relationship with Jatt Sikhs.

The high command has also made a gamble by indicating that it wants Navjot Singh Sidhu, a late entrant to the party, as the face of the Assembly election campaign as clearly indicated by Harish Rawat, the Congress party's Punjab affairs-in-charge. Though it was denied later after protests, the position of the Chief Minister has already come under cloud. Mr. Sidhu being the first choice of the high command in case of an electoral win, is making it obvious in the way he has been allowed to play the role of king-maker. He has reportedly vetoed the chief ministerial chances of Sunil Jakhar and Sukhinder Singh Randhawa and is currently influencing key administrative decisions. His loyalists such as Pargat Singh have been included in the Channi cabinet. If the high command actually takes such a drastic step, it is going to be in a spot facing another round of dissidence from Sidhu detractors within the party. The party shall also lose the Dalit community support base in the State and elsewhere also.

The third gamble the party high command has taken is by abruptly replacing a long-term powerful Chief Minister (Captain Amarinder Singh), less than three months before the election code of conduct comes into effect. This is probably for the first time in the history of the Grand Old Party that the high command has moved so recklessly; there was no such development even during the Indira Gandhi-Rajiv Gandhi era. There are not many



parallels in other parties except the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) replacing Sahib Singh Verma with Sushma Swaraj just before the 1998 Assembly elections in Delhi, which did not work.

'Social balancing' is a risk

The 'historic' appointment of Mr. Channi is being hailed as a 'master stroke'/'game-changer'. The running argument is that purported 'social balancing' would fetch electoral dividends for the incumbent party as the 'Channi factor' would consolidate and galvanise the Dalit community. However, the community has historically been divided along regional, religious, linguistic and caste lines. Scheduled Castes as in other States have never voted en bloc for any party if one is to go by surveys by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and a field-based study by Kanchan Chandra (2004).

In fact, the Congress should instead be wary of a brewing counter-mobilisation among the Jatt Sikh community which may be sensing a loss of power and blaming it on the internecine war among its power-hungry community leaders such as Mr. Sidhu. A 'humiliated' Captain, a royal from a former Sikh princely State and a senior Jatt leader with a five-decades long career, is most likely to accentuate this sense of loss. Capt. Amarinder has enjoyed considerable support among his fellow com-

munity due to his bold stands *vis-à-vis* the Centre on panthic issues, by getting the Punjab Termination of Water Agreements Bill passed as the Chief Minister in 2004 that resulted in the annulment of the pact entered into by the State in 1981 on the sharing of Ravi and Beas river waters with Haryana and Rajasthan and, more recently, on the contentious farm laws issue. Whether a rebellious captain would try to damage the Congress's prospect by forming a regional outfit or joining another party is another issue.

Unfulfilled promises

It is questionable whether removal of Capt. Amarinder would be sufficient to address the anti-incumbency factor. After all, it was not only about the leadership of Capt. Amarinder, however unpopular he might have become of late – as being projected by citing surveys. It has mainly been due to the non-fulfilment of the promises made by the party in 2017, after it won, about creating new jobs, bringing industries back, rejuvenating the farming sector and improving the power sector that made party legislators and workers restless and wary of facing voters.

Capt. Amarinder may be held culpable in the public eye for his inability to show urgency in acting against those responsible for sacrilege and the subsequent police actions (the incidents relate to the desecration of a religious text and subsequent police firing that took place at Faridkot in 2015). However, greater failures such as bringing an end to the drug menace and flourishing land, sand and transport mafias may not be viewed as Capt. Amarinder's sole responsibility. As Aam Aadmi Party leaders have been alleging, it is not only

AKALI Dal leaders but also many Congress leaders who have been under scrutiny for being complicit in wrong-doings.

A lot to mind ahead

With 'operation Captain' over, the onus now is on incumbent Mr. Sidhu and fellow rebel Jatt Sikh leaders – most of them are influential only in one region – to not only secure their community vote but also those from other communities and the other electoral regions. The direct and visible role played by the Gandhi siblings (Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra) means that they have to take greater responsibility in keeping dissidence in check and ensuring the party's success. A tall order for them.

Already, the 'revelation' by loyalist Ambika Soni that a non-Sikh should not be appointed as a Chief Minister in the Punjabi Suba, reportedly to deny space to senior leader Sunil Jakhar, has brought back the contentious Hindu-Sikh question that might be to the electoral advantage of the beleaguered BJP.

Finally, the Channi cabinet, with six first-time Ministers, would need the whole-hearted support of the State's higher bureaucracy, undergoing large-scale transfers at the moment, to fulfil at least some of the unfulfilled promises. The higher bureaucracy may not be too willing to cooperate fully as elections are round the corner and with the Centre watching things intently. The paucity of time, the empty treasury and high indebtedness are also going to be huge challenges.

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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.

Marx and social justice

It is refreshing to find the Chief Justice of India citing Karl Marx and saying women have nothing to lose but their chains (Inside pages, "CJI backs 50% quota for women in judiciary", September 27). Interestingly, E.M.S. Namboodiripad was punished for citing Marx in justification of his statement that courts are instinctively with the rich

and against the poor. The then Chief Justice of India, Justice M. Hidayatullah, said that EMS had not read Marx properly. The statement of the present Chief Justice of India has to be taken seriously and Marx's works should be made a compulsory part of the legal curriculum so that courts become an instrument of social justice. The Chief Justice of India has made many more

insightful statements in recent times which have to be read and implemented. This is the only way of breaking the shackles.

N.G.R. PRASAD,
Chennai

Facing NEET

I would not go as far as terming Tamil Nadu's case against the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) as tilting at windmills because there is

some merit in the argument that the test leaves out a large reservoir of poor students, especially those schooled in public-funded schools. At the same, the right diagnosis needs the right solution, and more so because other States also share the problem. Trapping the losers in victimhood or exempting them from the test will disempower future generations. Instead of

demanding scrapping of NEET or diluting its standards, the Government should ensure that teachers walk the extra mile, raise their standards of teaching and equip the students to compete in the national test with confidence.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Candide Bishan Bedi

While the entire cricketing world knows Bishan Singh

Bedi to be the magician of left-arm spin bowling, the spinner is equally well known for his candid views about the game. Even today, the genial spinner venerates cricket and feels distressed if someone tampers with the purity of the game. He has also had issues with the IPL.

R. SIVAKUMAR,
Chennai

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