



## A probe after prodding

U.P. police must do a credible probe to inspire public confidence in farmers' killing case

The arrest of Ashish Mishra, son of Union Minister of State for Home, Ajay Mishra, appears to be a course of action impelled mainly by the intervention of the Supreme Court, which voiced its dissatisfaction with the way the Uttar Pradesh police were handling the killing of four farmers and four others during a protest. By taking cognisance of the incidents that took place during a farmers' protest at Tikonia in Lakhimpur-Kheri district, the Court may have helped infuse some much-needed impetus to the investigation. The Bench gave enough time until its next hearing on October 20 to the police to pursue the probe diligently, but not without thinking aloud on whether any other agency ought to take it over and asking the State police chief to preserve the evidence. The arrest of the Minister's son, coming after he had skipped an earlier summons and was questioned for long hours once he appeared, is largely in response to the Court's criticism. The Bench, headed by the Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana, wondered how investigators in a murder case could merely issue summons to the prime suspect instead of taking steps to apprehend him. Scepticism about the intentions of the State police is not misplaced. It is not the first time that the initial response is one of hesitancy and obfuscation, but once an incident blows up enough to occasion judicial intervention, there is some action.

What is known so far is that vehicles in the Minister's convoy ploughed through a group of farmers, causing four deaths. Three others may have died in retaliatory violence by the infuriated mob, while Raman Kashyap, a television reporter, may also have been run over. Initial reports that the driver lost control after being hit by a hail of stones have been superseded by footage that seems to show the vehicle being driven into a group of unsuspecting people. The FIR says Ashish Mishra was in one of the cars, even though he claims to have been elsewhere. The role of the Union Minister should also be subjected to scrutiny, as some reports suggest he may have made a provocative speech earlier to the effect that the protesting farmers should either mend their ways or he would set them straight. The mention of a 'conspiracy' in the FIR gives scope to the police to examine this angle. It is regrettable that the Union government is noticeably silent, and there appears to be no effort to advise Mr. Ajay Mishra to step down until his and his son's names are cleared. It is difficult to see how an impartial probe can go on as long as he is in office, and his party's government in the State is seen to be soft on the accused. The onus is on the Uttar Pradesh police now to conduct a credible investigation, if the Court does not replace the present set of investigators.

## A homecoming

Tatas will find turning around Air India tough with high fuel costs, travel hit by COVID-19

Air India, the airline started by J.R.D. Tata in the 1930s, is all set to return to the Tata fold after a 68-year-long journey as India's state-owned flag carrier. The Centre's announcement on Friday that Tata Sons' subsidiary Talace Pvt. Ltd. was the winning bidder for the 100% stake in the debt-laden airline rings the curtain on the government's multi-year effort to privatise the loss-making carrier. Talace emerged winner in the two-horse race by bidding to take over ₹15,300 crore of Air India's more than ₹60,000 crore of accumulated debt and offering an additional ₹2,700 crore in cash for the Government's equity stake. For the Tatas, who have retained an abiding interest in the country's airline industry and currently majority own both a budget carrier, AirAsia India, and a full-service airline, Vistara, the Air India acquisition brings opportunities to gain scale and synergies at a significant level. With Air India and its low-cost unit, Air India Express, together serving 55 overseas destinations, holding over 3,000 landing and parking slots, operating a 141-aircraft fleet of wide-body long-haul jets and narrow body planes for shorter flights, and the parent holding membership of the 26-airline Star Alliance, the Tatas in one stroke add unparalleled global reach among Indian carriers. Air India's 13.2% consolidated market share of domestic traffic as of August also gives the group a more competitive combined share of almost 27%, albeit still a substantial 30 percentage points adrift of market leader IndiGo.

The Centre, for its part, can finally heave a sigh of relief at having successfully exited the commercial aviation space, a high-cost industry that most governments around the world have left in the hands of private carriers so as to ensure taxpayers' money is deployed more meaningfully in social and strategic sectors. After having ploughed in more than ₹1-lakh crore of capital in the past decade alone and seeing Air India suffer a daily loss of over ₹20 crore, the Government's desperation to cut its losses and close out a fire sale is understandable. The pandemic's impact on public finances and the carrier's operations, especially given the devastating impact on air travel both domestic and international, is sure to have helped spur the Government's decision to agree to not only absorb 75% of the carrier's debt, but to also pick up the tab on medical benefits for former employees. And in a bid to protect the interests of the more than 13,000 permanent and contractual staff at the airline and its unit, the government has bound Talace to ensuring there should be no job cuts for at least one year. Still, integrating the state-run carrier's sizeable workforce is going to be one among the many serious challenges, awaiting the Tatas. To turn around Air India at a time of soaring fuel costs and COVID-hit air travel, is sure to test the conglomerate's managerial mettle.

# A 'Taiwan flashpoint' in the Indo-Pacific

In pursuing its Indo-Pacific strategy, India needs to be mindful of the China-U.S. equations in the region



SHYAM SARAN

If the rising confrontation between the United States and China erupts into a clash of arms, the likely arena may well be the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan is the unfinished business of China's liberation under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. The Guomindang (KMT) forces under Chiang Kai-shek lost the 1945-49 civil war to the CCP forces under Mao Zedong. Chiang retreated to the island of Taiwan and set up a regime that claimed authority over the whole of China and pledged to recover the mainland eventually.

### 'Strategic ambiguity'

The CCP in turn pledged to reclaim what it regarded as a "renewed" province and achieve the final reunification of China. Taiwan could not be occupied militarily by the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC) as it became a military ally of the United States during the Korean War of 1950-53. It was described as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" underscoring its strategic significance. This phase came to an end with the U.S. recognising the PRC as the legitimate government of China in 1979, ending its official relationship with Taiwan and abrogating its mutual defence treaty with the island.

Nevertheless, the U.S. has declared that it will "maintain the ability to come to Taiwan's defence" while not committing itself to do so. This is the policy of "strategic ambiguity". China, on the other hand, is committed to pursuing peaceful unification but retains the right to use force to achieve the objective. This is its own version of strategic ambiguity.

The PRC has pursued a typical carrot and stick policy to achieve the reunification of Taiwan with the mainland. It has held out the prospect, indeed preference for peaceful reunification, through promising a high degree of autonomy to the island under the "one country two systems" formula first applied to Hong Kong after its reversion to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. According to this formula, Hong Kong would retain its free market system and its political and judicial institutions and processes for a period of 50 years, thus enabling an extended and gradual transition. The same was promised to Taiwan, but with the added assurance that it could also retain its armed forces during the transition period.

### Economic links

With China itself adopting market-oriented reforms since 1978 and becoming, over a period of time, a significant economic and commercial opportunity globally, Taiwan business entities have invested heavily in mainland China and the two economies have become increasingly integrated. Between 1991 and 2020, the stock of Taiwanese capital invested in China reached U.S. \$188.5 billion and bilateral trade in 2019 was U.S. \$150 billion, about 15% of Taiwan's GDP. By contrast the stock of Chinese capital invested in Taiwan is barely U.S. \$2.4 billion although investments through Hong Kong may be considerable.

Taiwanese attempts to reduce the island's economic exposure to China have not been successful so far. China hopes that the considerable economic benefits that Taiwan business and industry enjoy through a burgeoning relationship with China would weaken opposition to unification. By the same token, China is capable of inflicting acute economic pain on Taiwan through coercive policies if the island is seen to drift towards an independent status.



### Taiwan's politics

Taiwan has two major political parties. The KMT, dominated by the descendants of the mainlanders who came to the island along with Chiang Kai-shek in 1949, remains committed to a one-China policy and does not support the independence of Taiwan. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), on the other hand, is more representative of the indigenous population of the island, and favours independence.

However, faced with aggressive threats from China and lack of international support, the demand for independence has been muted. China feels more comfortable with the KMT and is hostile to the DPP. Ever since the DPP under Tsai Ing-wen won the presidential elections in 2016, China has resorted to a series of hostile actions against the island, which include economic pressures and military threats. These actions have escalated since the re-election of Tsai Ing-wen in the 2020 elections. Public opinion swung in her favour as China adopted a series of headline policies in Hong Kong, abandoning the 'One Country Two Systems' formula promoted by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. China could no longer pretend that the model was relevant in any sense to Taiwan's future under Chinese sovereignty.

One important implication of this development is that prospects for peaceful unification have diminished. Sentiment in Taiwan in favour of independent status has

increased. The escalating military threats against Taiwan, through daily violations of its air defence identification zone (ADIZ) and aggressive naval manoeuvres in the Taiwan Strait are currently deterrent in nature, aimed at heading off any move towards independence and its closer military relationship with the U.S.

### The U.S. stance

While the U.S. does not support a declaration of independence by Taiwan, it has gradually reversed the policy of avoiding official-level engagements with the Taiwan government. The first breach occurred during the Donald Trump presidency when several senior officials, including a cabinet-level official, visited the island. The Joe Biden officials have continued this policy. The Taiwanese representative in Washington was invited to attend the presidential inauguration ceremony (Biden), again a first since 1979. Reports have now emerged that U.S. defence personnel have been, unannounced, training with their Taiwanese counterparts for sometime. In a new incident last week, a U.S. nuclear-powered submarine reportedly ran into an "unidentified object" while in the South China Sea. China has objected to these U.S. actions vociferously.

The latest statement by Chinese President Xi Jinping on Taiwan on October 9, on the eve of Taiwan's national day, responds to these developments. Mr. Xi said that unification should be achieved peacefully but added that the Chinese people have a "glorious tradition" of opposing separatism. Mr. Xi added, "The historic task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled and will definitely be fulfilled."

These statements are somewhat less aggressive and impatient than his earlier ones on Taiwan. This may be related to the recent telephone conversation between President Joe Biden and Mr. Xi when

Mr. Biden reportedly assured Mr. Xi that the U.S. would abide by the "Taiwan agreement", that is, the U.S. would not overturn its one China policy.

Is China prepared to carry out military operations to invade and occupy Taiwan?

In March this year, the U.S. Pacific Commander, Philip Davidson, warned that China could invade Taiwan within the next six years as part of its strategy of displacing U.S. power in Asia. He appeared to suggest that Chinese military capabilities had been developed in order to achieve this objective. Other analysts argue that cross-strait operations would be extremely complex and pacifying a hostile population may prove to be long drawn out and costly. China may, therefore, be content to head off Taiwan independence while continuing to build its capabilities and await a further relative decline of U.S. power and its will to intervene in the defence of Taiwan.

### Impact of alliances

These calculations may be upset by accident or miscalculation, and the recent submarine incident is a warning in this respect. The recent crystallisation of the Quad, of which India is a part, and the announcement of the Australia-U.K.-U.S. alliance, AUKUS, with Australia being graduated to a power with nuclear-powered submarines, may act as a deterrent against Chinese moves on Taiwan.

But they may equally propel China to advance the unification agenda before the balance changes against it in the Indo-Pacific.

For these reasons, Taiwan is emerging as a potential trigger point for a clash of arms between the U.S. and China.

In pursuing its Indo-Pacific strategy, India would do well to keep these possible scenarios in mind.

*Shyam Saran is a former Foreign Secretary and a Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research*

# A lengthening shadow of Tamil nativism

As a player in Tamil Nadu's residual vote share space, the NTK's political offering could hurt the State's social fabric



KARTHIK RAM MANOHARAN & VIGNESH KARTHIK K.R.

A recent public conference on the theme, "Tamil or Dravidian?", was organised by the Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK), featuring NTK leaders, a couple of veteran Tamil nationalist ideologues, and a hotchpotch of largely non-descript speakers. The points raised were that Dravidian politics had duped the native Tamil castes, led to an influx of immigrants, and was responsible for the troubles that the Eelam Tamils faced.

The common point for all was that Dravidian politics had to go and be replaced by a nativist form of Tamil nationalism. The main speaker was the coordinator-in-chief of the NTK, Seeman, who, among other things, invoked Adolf Hitler to bolster his anti-Dravidian rhetoric. This is not the first time he has referenced Hitler positively.

### Public image

Mr. Seeman's route to fame was through public speeches at meetings organised by Dravidian collectives in the 2000s. He initially claimed to be inspired by both Periyar, and the chief of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Velupillai Prabhakaran. However, after Sri Lanka's military defeat of

the LTTE in 2009, Mr. Seeman abandoned the former for the latter. To Mr. Seeman, Prabhakaran is a leader not just for the Eelam Tamils but Indian Tamils as well. The NTK was floated in 2010 and claims to have popularised the image of Prabhakaran in Tamil Nadu, often making up apocryphal stories of friendship between Mr. Seeman and the LTTE leadership. However, the image that NTK is trying to cultivate is that of Mr. Seeman as the sole spokesperson of Tamils the world over.

### Leader identification matters

The NTK pursues a programme of nativism in identifying its leaders. Apart from Prabhakaran, it identifies Tamil kings of yore, and a pool of modern Tamil leaders such as Iyothey Thass, Bharathiyar, Immanuel Sekaran, U. Muthuramalingam, M.P. Sivaganam among others, as its inspirations and icons. To the NTK, the Tamil identity of these figures plays a greater role than the ideology they professed. The NTK's targets for attacks are leaders of the Dravidian parties, especially C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi, often on the spurious claim that they belong to non-Tamil immigrant castes. Some in the NTK play lip service to E.V.R. Periyar, but they consistently try to downplay his central role in modern Tamil politics, owing to his irreverence for any form of itinerant parochialism. The NTK seeks to foreground only those who can claim to belong to a Tamil native caste, determined by birth in a Tamil clan (*kudi*) - their



very definition of Tamil identity is based on this.

### Nationalism and politics

Chauvinistic Tamil nationalism has historically had a marginal place in modern Tamil politics. For the good part, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) contained extremist Tamil elements and promoted a composite and pluralist approach to politics and identity. Even during the anti-Hindi agitations, neither caste-elites nor Hindi speakers were harmed. The conflict was on ideas rather than identities, as laid out by several Dravidian ideologues. The camaraderie between Periyar and Rajaji is also a testament to the same. Likewise, once they captured power, the Dravidian parties have maintained Tamil Nadu as a State free from major communal or ethnic conflagrations. Post the 1960s, Dravidian rule has also prevented the rise of violent movements threatening the sovereignty of India.

While Tamil Nadu's legislature is the most diverse in terms of caste representation across the country, localised caste conflicts

of course are quite common in Tamil Nadu, with sections of Dalits usually being at the receiving end of atrocities. Likewise, of the more than 250 backward castes (<https://bit.ly/3ymyfgQ>), quite a few have minimal or intermittent political representation.

Both the NTK and Bharatiya Janata Party have tried to mobilise such caste groups that have been articulating their grievances by promoting leaders from the said communities in their party ranks. The target for both is Dravidian politics, specifically the DMK.

While the BJP tries to unite such castes on the religious plank, the NTK tries to do the same on an ethnic nativist plank. The NTK's Tamil nativism addresses the grievances of these castes with theories of a Dravidian conspiracy to secure the dominance of non-Tamil castes and a global conspiracy against the Tamil identity. Normally, such conspiracy theories are humorous, but when they are backed by a political party that secured an estimated 6.6% vote share in the recent elections, they are potentially dangerous. The inability of progressive governments to contain the class disparities generated by the current economic order engenders the proclivity for such parties.

Mr. Seeman's sympathisers are very active on social media, especially YouTube, characterised by conspiracy theories, abusive language and aggressive machismo, and rooted in an aggravated sense of Tamil victimhood. It is not unusual to spot them making threats

of violence that they would unleash should they come to power. Their key targets of attack, apart from linguistic minorities in the State are Dravidianists, leftists and feminists.

For long, several political parties and activist groups in Tamil Nadu have expressed solidarity with the Tamils of Sri Lanka and have supported calls for a just political solution for their crisis. The NTK has capitalised on a grave issue to promote its own chauvinistic variant of nativist nationalism.

### A danger

The NTK continues to operate in the residual vote share space. Though the elections have become more competitive with the NTK's participation, the two Dravidian alliances continue to garner 85% of votes. However, the NTK's leader's rhetoric has become shriller and the followers he inspires are restive. The NTK's political offering could hurt Tamil Nadu's composite social fabric especially when the current regime is attempting to cover more ground *inter alia* in empowering marginal backward castes, Dalits and women, reducing caste-class disparities, and upholding the federal ethos of the country.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### Wheels of justice turn

But for the *suo motu* cognisance by the Supreme Court of India, the wheels of justice in the Lakhimpur Kheri case may have never turned soon (Page 1, "Union Minister's son arrested after 11 hours of interrogation", October 10). As is the wont of the political class, the efforts to create an alibi for the main accused are deplorable.

A. JAINULABDEEN,  
Chennai

The orchestrated attempts to browbeat the farmers into submission by some political leaders of the ruling party have ended. The unflinching

determination and the steadfastness the farmers displayed to go ahead with their agitation under challenging circumstances must be noted. The brazen attempts to suppress democratic protests with brute force and ministerial clout deserve to be condemned by all.

ABDUL ASSIS P.A.,  
Kandassankadavu, Thrissur, Kerala

### China at the border

Going by the large-scale build-up of troops and infrastructure by China along the Line of Actual Control, and India being forced to keep pace with the Asian giant, it is regrettable that

despite a series of diplomatic and military level talks aimed at disengagement the situation continues to be dangerous; there is also another harsh Himalayan winter around the corner (Page 1, "China is here to stay, says Army chief on Ladakh", October 10). It is now evident that with most countries upping the ante against China for various reasons, Beijing views democratic India as a potential threat to displace its importance.

China is emboldened by the fact that even with those countries that are locking horns with it today, it is still linked with them

economically, technologically and financially, and also enjoys veto-wielding permanent membership of the UNSC.

NALINI VIJAYARAGHAVAN,  
Thiruvananthapuram

It is not only Ladakh but also the entire length of the border that India needs to

watch like a hawk. Decades of talks have failed to bridge trust deficits and misperceptions. The outcome of China's hard stand and its wolf-warrior policy on the border and with other neighbours are beginning to be felt. That China is adept at protracting negotiations only to buy time

### CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

An infographic titled "Tata in the sky" that accompanied the front-page story, "After 68 years, Tatas win back Air India with ₹18,000 cr. bid" (October 9, 2021), erroneously mentioned October 2020 in the last item in the timeline. It should have been October 2021.

In the story titled "I-T Dept. officials search office of Ajit Pawar's son" (October 8, 2021), the last few paragraphs regarding an IT department's press release did not pertain to the story.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: [readerseditor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in); Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturji Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com)