

An unnecessary move

Handing back land to the Ram temple trust has no justification at this juncture

The Centre's request to the Supreme Court to allow it to return the "superfluous land" it had acquired around the disputed site in Ayodhya in 1993 is not innocuous; nor is it justified at this juncture. The court had ordered that the status quo be maintained on the entire extent of 67.7 acres acquired in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Behind the apparently equitable argument that an extent of land not in dispute can be given back to its original owners is a barely concealed political motive. BJP leader Ram Madhav has said, "In view of the strong popular sentiment attached to the Ram Mandir, it is the least that the government could do." The sense of anxiety among the supporters of the Mandir cause over the delay in the adjudicatory process is palpable; but it is also indicative of an unreasonable expectation that the government should somehow facilitate the construction of a Ram temple regardless of what the court's decision is. It is to address this anxiety and mollify elements that are unhappy with the progress of the judicial process that the government wants the court to vacate its status quo order. It is a move fraught with the risk of reigniting communal passions at a time when the appeals against the Allahabad High Court's verdict in the title suits have reached the final stage of adjudication before the Supreme Court. The Centre's argument is that the Supreme Court, in Ismail Faruqui (1994) had itself said that once the objectives of the acquisition have been achieved, the superfluous area should revert to its owners. It has also contended that the status quo was required only till the disposal of the suits, which ended in 2010 when the Allahabad High Court decided them.

Is the issue really so simple? The court had noted that the adjacent area had been acquired so that the party that succeeds is not denied the fruits of its success by those in the adjacent areas through denial of access. It had said the status quo was required to avoid "reigniting communal passions detrimental to the spirit of communal harmony". Further, the trial court's decision in favour of a three-way partition of the land has not satisfied any of the parties, and the entire suit is once again open for adjudication. The time is hardly ripe for altering the status quo. Beyond all this, the idea of giving back 42 acres of land to the Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas, a trust dedicated to the cause of constructing a temple to Ram on the site where the demolished Babri Masjid stood, will be needlessly provocative. The trust had obtained its lease in 1992 in the run-up to the campaign to demolish the mosque, from the Kalyan Singh government, whose actions were demonstrably anti-secular. There is a case for reconsidering the lease, but nothing at all for this organisation to be given the opportunity to gather its resources in the vicinity of the disputed site.

Gold rush

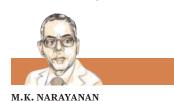
Tightening monetary policies in the West and supply factors led to the spurt in gold prices

old is shining once again. The price of gold in the Indian market reached its highest-ever level, hitting the ₹33,800 mark in Mumbai on Tuesday in the midst of increasing demand from buyers and lagging supply in the global market. And it is not just the rupee that is witnessing a fall in value against gold. A similar trend has been seen in the price of other major emerging market currencies as well when their worth is measured against the yellow metal. In fact, many emerging market currencies have already hit, or are quite close to hitting, historic lows against gold. Against the U.S. dollar, however, gold is still priced well below its all-time high of over \$1,500 that was reached in 2012 even as it has shown some appreciation against that currency in the last few months. The increase in the price of gold worldwide should be seen against the backdrop of rising uncertainties that threaten to derail the global economy. Western central banks have been tightening their monetary policy stances for a while now, leading to increasing fears that this could put an end to the decade-long recovery since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The U.S. Federal Reserve has been at the forefront of the current tightening cycle. The resulting flow of capital from emerging markets to the West has put further pressure on various emerging market currencies. The rupee, for instance, has depreciated significantly in value against the U.S. dollar in the last year alone. This probably explains the divergence in the performance of the dollar vis-à-vis other emerging market currencies against gold. The U.S.-China trade war and the lowered rate of Chinese economic growth have added to fears of a global economic slowdown. Furthermore, as stock markets around the world continue to trade sideways with increased volatility, investors seeking financial safety have turned to gold and boosted its price. Many central banks have been trying to hoard gold to restore confidence in their currencies.

Apart from these short-term influences, there are probably other long-term secular factors at play as the price of gold looks to shoot up towards new highs. The fall in price after 2012 led to a fall in capital spending by gold miners, which has meant that supply has failed to keep up with growing demand. This is typical of all commodities that see years of oversupply that lead to a price slump followed by years of under-supply that leads to a jump in prices. The depreciation in the value of national currencies against gold is also an indication of the increase in inflationary pressures across the globe. What could put a premature end to gold's rally is the easing of policy by global central banks. While this will restore investor confidence in the global economy, it carries with it risks linked to debt-fuelled growth.

Stormy weather awaits India in 2019

The country faces a difficult external and internal situation. It needs to show more dexterity on the diplomatic front



s India prepares for the general election this year, all signs point to 2019 being a difficult year. Whether this would directly impact the poll outcome is uncertain, but the country needs to remain alert to unexpected developments

As we enter 2019, the world outlook looks gloomy. Global disorder is the dominant imperative. A global leadership vacuum is leading to chaos concerning rules governing the international order. U.S. President Donald Trump's utterances and actions are provoking strong counter-reactions, especially from China and Russia. U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's attack on China, in October 2018, has signalled, according to many world leaders, the beginning of a new Cold War. Mr. Trump has threatened to pull out of a major arms control treaty with Russia. Russia has also been talking of building stronger deterrence. Cold War 2 seems for real now.

On different trajectories

Nations are today working at crosspurposes across the globe. Russia is vigorously pursuing its pivot to Asia and for greater influence in Eurasia. It has deepened its partnership with China, and enhanced relations with Japan and South Korea. Growing tensions in the Sea of Azov (following Russia's seizure of Ukraine's ships) could well lead to a major conflagration between Russia and the West.

China is consolidating its position in Asia. In addition to its strategic partnership with Russia, China has mended fences with Japan. Its Belt and Road Initiative has become the most potent weapon in China's armoury, with Vietnam

and Japan endorsing this concept. India finds itself increasingly isolated in Asia as a result.

Economic portents during 2018 for most of the world proved highly daunting. The most challenging was the spectre of an all embracing U.S.-China trade war. This had triggered highly unsettled conditions, and the situation was further aggravated by signs of a weakening Chinese economy. At the beginning of 2019, it is amply evident that politics is conflicting with business across the world. Hence, normal economic calculations are getting disrupted.

A decline in Britain's financial assets and of the pound sterling following Brexit, as well as signs of increasing fragility of China's economy, are newer concerns. The likelihood of the U.S. moving into a period of slower long-term growth, one that is likely to continue for a fairly long time, is aggravating this situation. India cannot hope to remain insulated from

Ties with Russia, Japan

Coming to India's foreign policy concerns, relations with Russia and Japan could see a reset. The strengthening of the Russia-China strategic relationship and the recent warmth in China-Japan relations could impact India's relations with both countries. Notwithstanding the warmth displayed in public by the leaders of India and Russia, and India and Iapan, the character of our relations with these two countries could undergo a change. To what extent, is yet to be seen. What is evident, however, is that India will need to expend a great deal of its diplomatic capital to ensure that relations do not decline to any considerable

Managing relations with China will be India's top priority. India-China relations are marked by a surface calm, but this masks an intrinsic struggle for influence in Asia and even beyond. The Wuhan Spirit, notwithstanding, little has



changed as far as India-China relations are concerned, except that there has not been any major Chinese incursion across the disputed India-China border.

China's outreach

In 2018, China had initiated certain moves to create a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor on the lines of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Chinese Navy is also poised to challenge India's position in the Indian Ocean. Chinese submarines already outnumber India's here. China is preparing to outflank India by seeking control of the Kyaukpyu Port on the Arakan Coast in Myanmar, and planning a canal (the Kra canal), connecting the Andaman Sea with the Gulf of Thailand. Together with China's existing control over the Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) Ports, if China were to succeed in its attempts, it could give it a stranglehold across the Indian Ocean Region. India's capacity to counter such moves in 2019 appears extremely limited.

This year could see a further consolidation of the 'all weather friendship' of China-Pakistan. During 2018, Pakistan facilitated China's involvement in Afghanistan (and also succeeded in co-opting Russia to be a party to talks with the Afghan Taliban). The CPEC having weathered quite a few storms in 2018, seems well set to progress this further in 2019.

The prospects of India-Pakistan relations improving on the other are extremely limited.

Cross-border terror attacks are likely to continue, as also sponsorship of terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammed. Where India will face even rougher weather, is in Afghanistan, where the Afghan state is perilously close to imploding. India has been kept out of talks with the Afghan Taliban by all countries concerned, including the U.S., China, and Russia, apart from Pakistan. This is making India's position here highly invi-

Mixed challenges for India The outlook for India in the rest of

South Asia is also mixed. Towards the end of 2018, India could retrieve its position in the Maldives. It also succeeded in re-establishing its influence in Bhutan. The return of Sheikh Hasina as Prime Minister after the general elections in Bangladesh has been a welcome relief. Yet, India will need to work harder in 2019 to check China from weaning away its neighbours, including Nepal as also Bangladesh, with offers of economic and military aid. India will also need to use all its resources to assist Bangladesh to limit the influence of radical Islamist groups there.

Internal security, for the better part of 2018, remained on a relatively even keel. There were fewer Pakistan-sponsored terror attacks. but this is hardly an index of what lies ahead in 2019. Left extremist violence went up marginally in 2018, but the movement remained circumscribed within a core area in Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha and Jharkhand. Ideologically, the movement has remained vibrant, and in 2019, both ideological and militant aspects will need deft handling.

The more challenging internal security problems will be Kashmir and the Northeast. In 2018, the situation in Kashmir sharply deteriorated, and the year witnessed some of the highest levels of violence since 1989. There was again a sharp spurt in the number of sekilled, alongside targeting of their families.

The deadlock between the Jammu and Kashmir administration and militants is unlikely to be resolved. President's rule has made little headway in sorting out the conflict-prone situation. Militant outfits, the JeM and the Hizbul Mujahideen, appear energised by the turn of events and can be expected to become still more active. More educated locals are joining militant ranks. Disclaimers notwithstanding, the presence of the Islamic State is also in evidence. The consequences of this as far as 2019 is concerned could be considerable.

The other major internal security threat that India faces in 2019 is the resurgence of ethnic sub-nationalism in the Northeast. This has been simmering for some time, but now threatens to boil over, following the enactment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill. The Bill has given rise to fears that it would drastically alter the status quo in the region. The Amendment has helped unite vast segments of people across the entire Northeast. The divisive potential of the recently enacted Act, will have special resonance in an election year. It will demand sensitive and careful handling in 2019.

Two other issues that kept the nation on the edge in 2018, i.e. farmers' and Dalit unrest, still remain unattended as 2019 begins. Both can ignite fires, specially in an election year. There is little evidence, however, that the causes for the unrest are receiving careful consideration.

Considering the difficult external and internal situation, peace in 2019 may prove elusive. On the diplomatic front, India will need to be more dexterous. The internal situation will require to be dealt with far greater understanding.

M.K. Narayanan is a former National of West Bengal

Behind Trump's retreat

It is unlikely the U.S. will go through another crippling shutdown as the President has limited options on border security



SRIRAM LAKSHMAN

T ast Friday morning as the U.S. federal government shutdown entered its 35th day there were reports of mounting flight delays in New York City's LaGuardia airport, as an unusual number of air traffic controllers had called in sick. If the government had been open, they would normally have received their paychecks on Friday, but for weeks their representatives and union leaders had warned that they were distracted at work - worried about how to put food on the table. Delays spread to other airports, including to the Washington DC area and to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, one of the world's busiest.

The tension - and now danger – in the air was captured that morning by the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, who tweeted: "Stop endangering the safety, security and well-being of our nation. Re-open government now!'

Shortly after 2 p.m., Mr. Trump announced that the government would be re-opened for three weeks, until February 15, by which time, he said, the sides would have either agreed on a deal or he would declare a national emergency and build a wall on the Mexico

While we may never know exactly why Mr. Trump flipped and the moment it happened, unless he tells us (this assumes he knows it himself), one can posit that a combination of several factors in decreasing order of importance made him blink in this war of

The politics and more

First, and most importantly, the President saw that his plans were losing appeal to Republicans in Congress. Two Bills that were tested back to back on the floor of the Senate on Thursday last week failed to get the required 60 votes on the floor (where Republicans have a 53-47 majority). The first Bill had \$5.7 billion in border wall funding and the second, which was Democrat backed, had no funding.

Just prior to the vote, Republican Senators reportedly met with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence to air their frustrations over the shutdown. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was reported to have said that the government should not have been closed in the first place – a change from his initial position of not wanting to forward any bills to the Senate floor that the President would veto.



Also on Thursday, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross did a television interview in which he said he did not "understand" why furloughed workers were heading to food banks. His comments, along with those of Mr. Trump's daughter-in-law Lara Trump, who had also asked workers to "stay strong", painted a picture of an administration increasingly removed from and insensitive to everyday realities faced by many American workers. These are also likely to be some of the same struggles faced by Mr. Trump's core support base.

In addition to Congressional Republicans starting to tug at the rug under the President's feet, were his falling approval ratings. This is likely to have been a second factor that caused the President to

change tack. There was an increase of about 5 points in the percentage who blamed Mr. Trump since the earliest polls after December 22 when the shutdown began, and a 2-point increase in the percentage who blame Congressional Democrats.

with a 3-point decrease in the percentage of those who blame them according to statistical analysis website fivethirtyeight.com.

Importantly, independent voters, a key component of Mr. Trump's victory in 2016, were increasingly (by 7 percentage points) blaming him for the shutdown.

Clearly, the President had painted himself into a corner by Thursday evening last week. After the two Senate Bills failed, he made an offer for a prorated down-payment on the wall to keep the government open for three weeks; this was rejected by the Democrats.

Friday morning's flight delays were a high profile event in a high profile city which also happened to be Mr. Trump's hometown. Understaffed air traffic control was also putting people's lives at risk: La-Guardia may have been the straw that broke the camel's back.

What next

It is unlikely the government will shut again on February 15 – that has proved to be an expensive exercise, costing the economy some \$11 billion (as per the Congressional Budget Office) and approval ratings for some parties to the standoff. Bills are also being introduced to fund the government in the event a deal is not reached.

Yet building a wall is one of Mr. Trump's foundational promises to his constituents and so he is likely

Republicans on the Hill fare better to do whatever he can to deliver

Lynn Sweet of the Chicago Sun-Times told CNN on Sunday about a recent luncheon Ms. Pelosi had attended. According to Ms. Sweet, Ms. Pelosi, gesturing at flowers on the table said, "President Trump could look at these [planted along the border] and he would say, 'This is a wall'."

However Ms. Pelosi meant it, the statement provides a hint as to how the next three weeks may go. Mr. Trump has already attempt-

ed to back away from the need to have a 2,000-mile physical wall, for instance by talking about a "smart wall" - a concept floated on the Hill by House Majority Whip (Democrat) James Clyburn. That Democrats are willing to spend on border security and surveillance cameras, drones, and funding for more border agents may be where the compromise is found. For that compromise to take place, Mr. Trump will have to convince himself and his core supporters that this is indeed the wall" he promised. If he does not take that way out, he may resort to declaring a national emergency and that is almost certain to be challenged in court, where he may or may not win. Time will tell how things pan out. If a week is a long time in politics then three weeks is an aeon.

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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.

George Fernandes

With the passing of George Fernandes, India has lost a very sincere politician who dedicated his life to the cause of the nation. He was frank and forthright and, at the same time, very simple. There are many political anecdotes to prove that he stood by his principles. He K.V. SEETHARAAMAIAH,

■ India has lost a bold, daring and much loved leader. Honest and forthright, he fought for the rights of the poor and the downtrodden and won many over with his brilliant oratory skills. He shone as a Minister. The west coast will remember him as a far-sighted leader

instrumental in the Konkan Rail project becoming a M. PRADYU,

■ Goodbye George. With his passing, an era ends where politicians were sincere, simple and accessible. His tenure as Union Defence Minister will remain etched in our minds. In the end, George Fernandes was simple to the core and always accessible to the common man. It would be no exaggeration to call him the poor man's politician.

■ It can be rightly said that he was the last true socialist leader our country has

R. SEKAR,

produced. He was also a self-made man, with a number of anecdotes to prove this. His strong principles and values will be remembered for long. K.M. DIVAKARAN,

■ George Fernandes has left an indelible mark on public life with his dedication and selflessness, outstanding political acumen, administrative abilities and sagacity. As a brilliant and veteran parliamentarian and a true leader of the people, he fought for the rights of the underprivileged. He enriched parliamentary proceedings with his passionate espousal of public causes. In his eventful public Hyderabad life, marked by disarming

simplicity, there is no doubt that he earned great affection and respect. NIRANJAN SAHOO,

■ India has lost a fiery leader and a visionary. The Konkan Railway project can be counted as one of his greatest contributions to public life. C.K. SUBRAMANIAM,

■ While it was painful to read about his passing, it was even more distressing to have very poor coverage on the great politician. Most news channels had the news only as part of the scroll. Didn't he deserve better? ABID PASHA,

Basic income Universal Basic Income

makes for good politics, but

bad economics (Editorial page, "Think universal basic income", January 30). And it is almost sickening that the rhetoric of eliminating poverty makes the rounds every election year, even decades after Independence Instead of a dole for the poor, the state must empower them by focussing on human development through education, health care and vocational skills. Universal Basic Income is an escape from the responsibility of providing essential public services. Indians voters have been responsible and dutiful constituents. They deserve

an equally responsible government. SUDHAKAR SINGH,

Sports coaching Why should the sports

authority recruit coaches from foreign lands when we already have some of the finest athletes who are willing to coach here? They understand the language, ethics and culture of the Indian sports setup. The authorities must support institutes set up by talented sportspersons like P.T. Usha (OpEd page, 'The Wednesday Interview', January 30). Y. MEENA, Hyderabad

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