A parting note

The BSP's resolve to go it alone in the U.P. by-polls does not come as a surprise

The Opposition appears to be in meltdown mode following the BJP's sweeping victory in the Lok Sabha election. Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati announced on Tuesday that her party's alliance with the Samajwadi Party stands terminated for now, and that it would contest the coming by-polls in 11 Assembly constituencies in Uttar Pradesh on its own. The SP and the BSP were rival poles in U.P. politics until the 2017 Assembly elections, when the BJP wrested power with an impressive majority. Ms. Mayawati and the Yadav family at the helm of the SP had a long history of mutual animosity, which also mirrored the tense relations between Dalits and Other Backward Classes, their respective social bases. With their very existence under threat from the BJP's ability to aggregate a host of populist issues around the Hindutva theme and woo Dalit and OBC caste groups, the BSP and the SP buried the hatchet to form an alliance, which included the Rashtriya Lok Dal, ahead of the Lok Sabha election. The alliance appeared to be doing well with victories in three key by-elections, but the general election results came as a rude surprise for them. They won only 15 of U.P.'s 80 seats, while the BJP took 62. The vote share of the alliance was significantly lower than the combined strength of the individual parties in 2014.

It should not have come as such a surprise. The collapse of backward caste politics has been in the making in U.P. Voters had begun to view the BSP, the SP and the RLD as cabals for good reason. Numerous members of the two families had captured power using the SP and the RLD as vehicles of personal profiteering. Slogans of social justice could no longer hide the emptiness of their politics. Transfer of power from generation to generation and laterally to a host of relatives did not merely mock the ideal of social justice but also questioned the public's common sense. With voters waiting for an opportunity to shake them up, the SP, the BSP and the RLD were no match to the BJP's ideological, organisational and monetary might. Ms. Mayawati rightly pointed out that Yadavs, the core base of the SP, did not rally behind it this time. Similar was the case with Jats, the RLD's core base. The appeal of the BJP's Hindutva and the welfarism agenda cut across castes, but the degeneration of backward caste politics enhanced it. Ms. Mayawati has not ruled out the possibility of an alliance with the SP in future. The dominance of upper castes in the BJP is too glaring to be missed, and caste fissures could return. But in their present form the SP and the RLD do not inspire trust among erstwhile supporters, though the BSP cadre is relatively more committed. The rising tide of Hindutva has challenged long-held assumptions in politics and the churn could last a while.

Low tactics

India and Pakistan must cease targeting each other's diplomats and their guests

India has issued a public statement of protest over the harassment of guests attending an Iftar party hosted by the Indian High Commission in Islamabad on June 1. Guests were allegedly intimidated and stopped by Pakistani security force personnel from attending the event. Those who did attend reportedly had their cars towed away. Describing the action by Pakistani security forces as "against all notions of civilised behaviour", India has asked the Pakistan government to conduct an inquiry into the incident. This development follows alleged actions by Indian security agencies in stopping guests to the Pakistan High Commission National Day function in New Delhi in March, as well as at its Iftar party on May 27. On both occasions, the Pakistan government had protested in similar terms, terming the behaviour of the security agencies towards invitees as being in "blatant disregard of traditional eastern values" and violative of the Vienna convention for diplomatic protocol. It is clear that regardless of how undignified the actions appear, both governments are following a tit-for-tat approach to ties, targeting even diplomatic missions. Last winter, for example, Pakistan authorities refused to give clearances for gas connections for heating in the Indian High Commission's residential complex in Islamabad, despite the biting cold; while Indian authorities reportedly blocked construction workers from entering the Pakistani residential complex in New Delhi to undertake urgent repair work. Other forms of harassment that plumbed new depths included ringing the doorbells of diplomats at late hours of the night to intimidate them, and even tailing cars ferrying diplomats' children from school.

This cycle of undiplomatic behaviour simply vitiates an atmosphere already fraught with tensions, and must end. Post-elections, the Indian Air Force has removed airspace restrictions, and Pakistan has begun to open airspace routes to and from India that it had closed after the Pulwama attack. Such positive steps need to be augmented. Earlier, Pakistan granted former External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj permission to fly over its territory, and India made a similar concession to Pakistan's Foreign Minister. India and Pakistan have extremely serious issues to resolve. The harassment of diplomats and their guests is a diversion from the issues at hand. With a new government assuming charge in India, and a possible meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation next week, it is likely that both sides will try to turn the page in bilateral ties. The new External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, is a former diplomat himself and should reach out to his counterpart in Islamabad to raise the level of engagement above the petty point-scoring that such harassment of guests at diplomatic functions represents.

The immediate neighbourhood

SAARC still has the potential to become a platform for South Asian interests and shared growth

SUHASINI HAIDAR

The government has shown its commitment to its strategy of "Neighbourhood First" by inviting the leaders of neighbouring countries for the second time to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's swearing-in ceremony on May 30. . The focus will continue this week when he makes his first visit in this tenure to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, something that has become tradition for all Indian Prime Ministers.

The obvious difference between Mr. Modi's invitations to his taking office the first and second time is that in 2014 they went to the leaders of the eight-member South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), while in 2019 they went to leaders of the seven-member Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). BIMSTEC includes five SAARC members (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka), and Myanmar and Thailand, while leaving SAARC members Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Maldives out, due to the geographical location of the Bay of Bengal.

Subsuming the other

However, to extrapolate from this that BIMSTEC has replaced SAARC, or that the Modi government is in effect building the foundations of BIMSTEC over the grave of SAARC is both illogical and contrary to the founding principles of these organisations. SAARC, as an organisation, reflects the South Asian identity of the countries, historically and contemporarily. This is a naturally made geographical identity. Equally, there is a cultural, linguistic, religious and culinary affinity that defines South Asia. Therefore, just as rivers, climatic conditions flow naturally from one South Asian country to the other, so do the films, poetry, humour, entertainment and food.

As a result, since 1985 when the SAARC charter was signed, the organisation has developed common cause in several fields: agriculture, education, health, climate change, science and technology, transport and environment. Each area has seen modest but sustainable growth in cooperation. For example, from 2010, when the South Asian University began in Delhi, the number of applicants for about 170 seats has more than doubled. SAARC's biggest failure, however, comes from the political sphere, where mainly due to India-Pakistan tensions, heads of state have met only 18 times in 34 years; it has been five years since the last summit in Kathmandu.

BIMSTEC, on the other hand, is not moored in the identity of the nations that are members. It is essentially a grouping of countries situated around the Bay of Bengal, and began in 1997 (Bhutan and Nepal joined in 2004), a decade after SAARC. The organisation did not even have a secretariat until 2014. While it has made some progress in technical areas, leaders of BIMSTEC nations have held summits just four times in 22 years. With India's growing frustration over cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan, it hopes to build more on BIMSTEC's potential. But the organisation is unlikely to supplant SAARC for a specific reason.

One of BIMSTEC's two founding principles is: "Cooperation within BIMSTEC will constitute an addition to and not be a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation involving the Member States." Its official literature describes it as "a bridge between

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South and South East Asia" and a "platform for intra-regional cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] members." It is significant that two of the leaders at Mr. Modi's swearing-in on Thursday – Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena – have also emphasised that BIMSTEC would not replace SAARC.

India's SAARC aversion

What explains the deep resistance to SAARC in India? Terrorism emanating from Pakistan is clearly the biggest stumbling block cited by the government. Mr. Modi cancelled his attendance at the last planned SAARC summit in Islamabad in 2016, after the attack on the Indian Army's brigade headquarters in Uri. Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Bhutan followed suit.

This principled stand by India, however, doesn't extend to other organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), into which India and Pakistan were inducted in 2017. Unlike SAARC, which has never presumed to resolve bilateral issues of its members, the SCO is a security-based regional organisation that is keen to work on conflict resolution in the region; it even organises military exercises between members. It is difficult to reconcile the staunch opposition to attending a SAARC summit where India is at least the largest country, with the acquiescence to the SCO, where Russia and China take the lead. Both Moscow and Beijing have made no secret of their desire to facilitate talks between India and Pakistan, and it remains to be seen how successful they will be when Mr. Modi and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan attend the SCO summit in Bishkek (June 13-14). The SCO summit is hosted by rotation, and is likely to be in either India or Pakistan next year, which would mean that Mr. Modi would either be required host Mr. Khan, or the other way around, something the government has refused to do at SAARC.

Another reason offered by those declaring SAARC becoming defunct is the logjam because of Pakistan's opposition to connectivity projects such as the Motor Vehicles Agreement (MVA), energy sharing proposals and others such as the South Asia Satellite offered by Mr. Modi. However, such agreements have not made progress in other groupings either: the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) grouping has failed to implement the MVA due to opposition from Bhutan, and India has held up for years cross-border power-exchanges that would allow Bhutan and Nepal to freely sell electricity to third countries such as Bangladesh. India has rightfully held Pakistan responsible for holding up the South Asia Free Trade Area agreement and refusing to reciprocate 'Most Favoured Nation' (MFN) status to India. After the Pulwama attack this February, India also withdrew MFN status to Pakistan, but New Delhi must admit that in other regional groupings such as the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), it too is accused of stonewalling free trade regimes. In BIMSTEC, one can imagine similar logjams.

Going forward, SAARC could adopt the "ASEAN minus X" formula – members who are unwilling to join the consensus can be allowed to join at a future date, while members who wish to go ahead with connectivity, trade or technology cooperation agreements are not impeded.

Some of the resistance to SAARC has to do with the organisation's history: Bangladesh's former military dictator Ziaur Rahman, who was known to be inimical to India, conceived it, and was suspected of trying to constrain India by tying it to its smaller and much less developed neighbours. In the 1990s, when India was beginning to see its role as an economic leader and an Asian power with a claim to a permanent seat at the UN Security Council, the SAARC identity may have seemed irrelevant. Even Pakistan's elite establishment, which often looks to West Asia, was less than enthusiastic about the SAARC grouping where India would be "big brother".

However, over time, India began to see the benefits of leading SAARC, where neighbours became force multipliers for India's power projections. Some such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka even outstripped India on growth and human development indicators, leading to more opportunities for engagement with them.

For a revival

There remain other possibilities. In a region increasingly targeted by Chinese investment and loans, SAARC could be a common platform to demand more sustainable alternatives for development, or to oppose trade tariffs together, or to demand better terms for South Asian labour around the world. This potential has not yet been explored, nor will it be till SAARC is allowed to progress naturally and the people of South Asia, who make up a quarter of the world's population, are enabled to fulfil their destiny together.

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Decolonising the Chagos archipelago

India can play a pivotal role in bringing about an agreement among Mauritius, the U.S. and the U.K.

PINAK RANJAN CHAKRAVARTY

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voted last month by a huge majority (116 out of 193 members) to demand that the U.K. "withdraw its colonial administration" within six months over the Chagos archipelago in the Indian Ocean in favour of Mauritius. The archipelago is better known for hosting the U.S. military base at Diego Garcia. The non-binding vote was a rebuke to the U.K.

Coercive measures

For several decades the Chagos archipelago has been the cause of a dispute between Mauritius and the U.K., over the decision in 1965 to separate Diego Garcia from the rest of the archipelago for setting up the military base, in collaboration with the U.S. Mauritius, a British colony, achieved independence in 1968 but the U.K. refused to return the Chagos archipelago, claiming sovereignty over the islands. The U.K. depopulated Diego Garcia by expelling all its inhabitants, to facilitate the building of the military base, paying just £4 million as compensation to Mauritius. In contravention of international human rights laws, from 1967 to 1973, the U.K. forcibly moved around 1,500 Chagossians to Mauritius and Seychelles, and prevented them from returning to their homes. The dispute festered over the decades, with Mauritius, as per its Constitution, rightly claimed sovereignty over Chagos and challenged the U.K.'s stand.

In February this year, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had ruled that the U.K. had "illegally" detached Diego Garcia from the archipelago and split the islands. The ruling, also non-binding, observed that the decolonisation of Chagos was incomplete and the U.K. had the obligation to complete the decolonisation process. The court rejected the U.K.'s argument that the ICJ lacked jurisdiction and the matter was a bilateral issue.

The U.K. had invented a new category called the British Indian Ocean Territory and argued at the ICJ that it had sovereignty over the Chagos. The U.K. also stated, in support of its position, that the military base at Diego Garcia was essential to provide maritime security against terrorists, organised crime and piracy. The U.K. did not act on the ICJ ruling, compelling Mauritius to take the case to the

FILE PHOTO/REUTERS

UN, which has now accepted its sovereignty over the whole archipelago. The ruling highlights the isolation of the U.K. and the U.S. on this issue.

The U.K.'s decision to depopulate Diego Garcia was an egregious example of human rights violations. The U.S. and the U.K. have often wagged their fingers at developing countries on human rights violations and now find themselves in the dock for the same at the UN.

Mauritius is naturally elated and Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth has welcomed the UNGA resolution. The African Union, which has backed Mauritius to the hilt, has stated that it was unthinkable that in the 21st century parts of Africa are still under colonial administration.

India has played an important role, away from the public glare, in this whole affair. India's relations with Mauritius are unique and it was a foregone conclusion that India would solidly back Mauritius's claims, given India's active role in decolonisation. The U.S. and the U.K. tried to influence India to restrain Mauritius. Both countries conveyed to Mauritius they could not hand over the Chagos as long as it is required for defence purposes. The realistic view is that nothing will change but some accommodation or agreement can be worked out. India is likely to play a not too insignificant role in working out a modus vivendi.

Though India was a strident critic of military bases in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War, geo-strategic changes in the last three decades have thrown up new challenges, with China making inroads into the Indian Ocean and occupying islands illegally in the South China Sea. The increasing footprint of China in the maritime domain has led to countervailing measures in the formation of the Quad, a loose formation of Australia, Japan, India and the U.S., and the renaming of the U.S.'s Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command.

Resolving Diego Garcia

India-U.S. defence ties have also progressed significantly with the signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, which provides mutual access to the armed forces of the two countries to selected military facilities. The other significant bilateral agreement is the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, which facilitates encrypted communication between the two militaries. These developments have a bearing on Diego Garcia and India's more nuanced view on this military base.

Eventually, the issue of sovereignty will have to be finessed by agreements that allow continuation of the military base at Diego Garcia with guarantees that Mauritius will retain sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago. Mauritius will agree to lease out the island for a long period to the U.S. for maintaining the military base. The U.K.'s role is more problematic in the aftermath of the ICJ ruling and the UN resolution. It would be best for London to step back and hand over sovereignty to Mauritius and simultaneously work out the leasing arrangement with the U.S. India can play a pivotal role in bringing such an agreement to fruition.

Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty is a former Ambassador and Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs; he is a Visiting Fellow at the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation. The views expressed are personal

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.

Language issue

The crisis caused in non-Hindi speaking regions as a result of the draft education policy has been defused. But it cannot be termed a complete reversal (Page 1, "Mandatory Hindi goes out of draft education policy", and Editorial, "Crisis defused", both June 4). Insistence on one common language for the country is impractical. Apart from the mother tongue, English functions well as a link language. Considering the diverse nature of our country, it would be ideal to have only the two-language formula – mother tongue and English. However, this should not prevent individuals from learning other languages.

D. SETHURAMAN,
Chennai

■ One cannot discount the fact that Hindi is culturally alien to the south. In such a situation, it is baffling why the Union government repeatedly followed attempts to ignore these strong sentiments. The south has done well economically and culturally without the need for Hindi. Language is to be learnt out of love and necessity, not because of a policy.

ANAND ARAVAMUDHAN,
Chennai

■ Straitjacketing a linguistic and culturally rich pluralistic nation like India into a Hindi-land is wrong. The insistence on Hindi already impacts the job prospects of non-Hindi speakers in some areas of employment such as banks and the railways. The three-language formula was never earnestly implemented in the Hindi-speaking States. One hopes that this government is not pursuing what George Orwell ominously hinted at: "Control the language and you control the people."

H.N. RAMAKRISHNA,
Bengaluru

■ Any language is an asset and the south, especially Tamil Nadu, has suffered in blocking the entry of Hindi. As a result, many a youngster has missed numerous opportunities on the job front. When Hindi is important, it becomes a necessity to know the language. Considering a language as taboo is being short-sighted.

T.V. SREEKUMAR,
Puducherry

Bonhomie to end?

The possible parting of ways between the leaders of the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party, Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav, respectively, is not unexpected (Page 1, "Future of SP-BSP turns uncertain in U.P.", June 4). Their gathbandhan was not based on conviction, social welfare objectives and ideology. Their one-point agenda, of routing the BJP, did not gain any traction. Politicians may attempt to grab power using any means but it is only the intelligence of voters that will ultimately prevail. In the same way, one can expect the bonhomie between the DMK and the Congress to fade.

B.S. JAYARAMAN,
Coimbatore

Water scarcity

All of India is staring at a water crisis. Water Resource Ministers in every State should ensure that they get the required expertise to store and use the rainwater that is expected during the monsoon. Blaming rain deficiency is not what they should be doing. Instead they should, on a war footing, be ensuring that lake beds are cleared, silt removed from dams and rivers and every building, however big or small, has a working rainwater harvesting system.

G. PADMANABHAN,
Bengaluru

One of a kind

I still have a handful of dry curry leaves left in a packet which has travelled all the way from Mysuru to Delhi and guarded like treasure ('Open Page', "A plant waits for its patrons", May 26). Living in Delhi for about a year made me realise that it was neither morning yoga nor a cold shower which would refresh the mind. It was only the fragrance of those curry leaves from the kitchen that did the magic. The struggle to find those leaves in vegetable markets in Delhi was no less than a treasure hunt.

A visit to our home in Jharkhand would leave my mother fretting about the plants. She would bestow her faith in the neighbours to look after them. I would often tell her not to worry and would get the sharp answer, "It is the small things that make life good." And boy, was she right.

AASHISH BHAGAT,
New Delhi

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

A sentence in the Editorial, "Slowdown confirmed" (June 3, 2019), read: "Growth in gross value added (GVA), which is GDP *minus taxes and subsidies*, fell to ... slowdown." It should have been "*minus taxes and plus subsidies*".

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